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# Gone To Ground

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Gone to Ground: Stories

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## Abstract

*Gone to Ground* is a collection of short stories that explores the possibilities beyond the edge of the everyday. They are an attempt to peek beyond the imaginary boundaries we erect for ourselves in the name of danger or the unknown. Each story is an opportunity to see our own familiar humanity in others, no matter the accidents of fortune that separate us. Though the stories in *Gone to Ground* often touch the surreal or the magical, they are firmly rooted in what could be out there, on the other side of our walls, whether real or imagined. These are stories that resist telling the reader where they end, but where they may begin again.

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## Epilogue

“I heard he cut it off with a carpenter’s saw after the hearse crashed, right there in the ditch. Carried it around in one of those canvas Whole Foods bags for a year ‘cause it was all he had in the car.”

They were sitting in front of a row of small shacks, like forts built by children, all uneven roofs and mismatched boards. A flipped up wooden spool had been rolled down the track from the power and light substation that evening and they gathered around it like latter-day knights. It had been a long day of travel for most of them and a long tramp from the nearest active line, a Union Pacific that ran to pods of thirsty tankers in the Gulf. The setting sun made the oil-slick bayou flame with impossibly rich gradients of color, mixing wildly in the stagnant water behind a levee that followed the old rails. But no one noticed the evening falling, or the sad beauty of the landscape, they were all looking in toward the fire in the center of camp, peeking between the bowed and cracking boards, watching her.

“That’s shit,” another piped in. “Why the fuck would he just be driving around with a saw on the way to a burial? Now the way I heard it, from this old ‘bo in Nashville—”

“What’s a ‘bo?”

“Are you fucking kidding me junior?” an ancient, wild-eyed man raised his voice. “You still on your mama’s tit little boy?” he spat through stained and gritted teeth.

“No.”

“It’s short for hobo, genius. Now shut up and maybe you’ll learn something.” He elbowed a hump of shredded cloth and mangy skin next to him that shook and wheezed

what sounded like a laugh as the man continued, “I swear, these goddamn kids, think this is the fucking mall.”

“They’ll find out soon enough, go easy on ‘em. Anyways, as I was saying, Ol’ Nashville Jack told me it weren’t his wife at all, just some kid he came across dead in a coal heap under an old tipple. Body was so rotten he tore it off with his bare hands.”

This drew some looks of ire from the more romantic in the crowd and inspired a quick reply of “Naw, naw!” The crowd turned to listen to the challenger, a young woman with short, matted hair and a rough-looking shepherd dog panting beside her in the humid air.

“That doesn’t fit at all. He was tortured by it, cut a man’s nose off, flush with the bone for stealing it once. Poor flat-faced bastard lives up in Ontario now like a hermit. Take the ACR to Hearst and then hitch up to the old Ernestown Station and ask around for Phil Spivey. He’s got a leather eye-patch cut to cover the hole, looks like a pig. Makes this wet, flushing sound when he breathes. So gross. Now, you tell me why he would mutilate someone like Phil there if it wasn’t someone important in that sack?”

“Because he was goddamn crazy!”

“It ain’t that simple, no way.”

The sun fell further and paled against the horizon as the conversation shifted from person to person, story to story with ease. They sat on their bundles, shoulders pressed together, each slightly sagging frame of thin muscle and heavy bone supporting the next, and they were having fun. It had been a year since many of them had been this far south and back through this camp. The fancifully painted facades and graffiti-tagged walls of the old

make-shift bungalows reflecting the passing of lives and the emerging aesthetics of a new generation of travelers. It was a kind of life-sized diary to be read by their larger-than-life consciousness.

“It doesn’t matter whose it is,” a new voice broke in “because whoever’s head is in that bag, he took it down to New Orleans and tricked a voodoo queen into possessing it, said he needed to talk to it, one last time. But then he trapped her in there. That’s why it’s so powerful and that’s why they never caught him. She can’t let him die until he releases her and her body can’t die while her soul is still tethered to this mortal bullshit.”

There was a low rumble around the table since, to many listeners, this was a new twist on the tale. Rustling packs among the younger tramps produced weathered notepads and fat, shiny fountain pens that scratched out the details so they could tell it later, in other places. The old timers, wrapped in dirty coats and old rags, chided them gently for their short memories and passed a bottle as they fell into a debate about Homer and the fade of the oral tradition along the rails. Most present were just stopping for the night and had come from the chill of the far north, so they were warm and happy, in no mood to fight. The spool was fresh carved with scrawling charts of the travels that brought them here, zagging lines like broken arrows connected the names of places; Spokane, Minneapolis, Augusta. They moved quick this time of year, like skittery snowbirds that took flight at the first shaking of the trees, stopping off here and there on their way to warmer nests, enjoying the chance to swap stories and philosophies. But tonight, there was only one topic of any interest, and the day was nearly spent before someone finally stopped dancing around it.

“That voodoo doesn’t explain her though.” whispered a young man who had been sitting so quietly everyone jumped a little to hear the sudden strangeness of his voice.

He had listened for hours, moving around the edges of the camp from group to group, closely watching a lone figure that others stole glances at from time to time, but no one dared approach. He'd been searching for her story all afternoon, but just like before, as soon as someone spoke of her directly, eyes fell away from each other and the tales fell into silence, broken only by the eventual shuffling of bodies as the circle dissolved into solitary points scattering across the dusty earth. His frustration welled, made him anxious and rash. He looked again toward the sun as the bare trees reached up with a thousand rough fingers to pull it from the sky. The day was coming down fast, and there, right in front of them, was one of the legendary stories of the great hobo age. An age that had passed long before he took to the rails to escape the suburbs, the lecture hall, the padded life so perfectly arranged. He stared toward the lean figure basking in the flames and took a last drink from an old blue bottle before rising and stepping out of the thickening shadows, into the light.

She was the youngest girl in camp that night, by several years, and it showed in her size and the curve of her silhouette. That afternoon had been ninety-five degrees and though the daylight was nearly gone, only the outlines of a few scattered clouds still visible, the humidity thickened to preserve the oppressive atmosphere of the place. As he approached her, the last of the day vanished and, in its place, a jet-black sky salted with stars covered them as people joked and roared about in the decommissioned railyard, sweating through the faint evening. A blazing fire at the center of it all. There was always a fire. It was tradition, and generally considered by the younger crowd to give a sort of finishing ambiance to the gathering. A drum of old oil, syrup, or other industrial gloop punctured here and there, sometimes in the design of a sun or star, let the flames look out across the sparse grass and rust of abandoned industry. A dusty, trough-beaten ring around the barrel was a testament to the thousands of people, and dozens of barrels, that had burned up there



before. But tonight, she sat alone, as if she were the only person left in the entire world, and stared into the twisting orange heat. He noticed she had her back against a few rotting rail ties. *Back to the wall*, he thought. She had one hand resting gently on the round hump of a stained burlap sack tucked close beside her on the ground.

“Mind if I join you?” His voice was loud and a little too projected, as if to throw the words on the ground in front of her, a warning of his approach. He leaned over with his whole body, loping as he brought his face even, if sidewise, to hers; submissive.

He had spent a lot of time with the dwindling spirits of the old timers and knew this affectation still seemed out of place in this world, but it was a hallmark of the young crop of millennial hobo. The gnashing teeth and random menace that filled his notebook was a dying way of life. There were only a few of the last generation left, surviving off good genes and sheer meanness but he was wise enough to understand, despite her youth and skinny arms, she was the dog lying in the corner, he, for all his fringe affectations, was prey. It made him sad to think how toothless the world had become.

“Sure.” she replied, “But I can’t promise you won’t regret it.”

His casual friendliness seemed to amuse her as she glanced up and considered him briefly. He was decked out in skinny jeans, thin, long sleeved shirt and a porkpie hat with a smiley patch he picked up in Seattle from a woman who tipped him off about this place. Cost him the last dollar in his shoe. But it had been worth it.

He was feeling braver than he knew he should, but he’d left home because he said he wanted something real, and this was it. Stories were the currency of this generation, but generally no one cared if they were real; craft was as respected as truth, maybe more. But he, along with the last of his parent’s wormwood, wanted to hear only one story tonight. A real

story that he'd never heard before, one perverted in a million different ways by philosophers and art majors, hell bent on their own ego.

He stooped to sit beside her, next to the bag, watching for a reaction. She cocked her head, ever so slightly, and he quickly readjusted, crossing his legs like a ballerina and tossing himself down in the dust across from her, the fire snapping in the barrel between them. Her chin straightened back up, a bemused grin on her face, eyes locked on his and his on hers. He was bold, but not stupid.

“So, I hear you’re royalty.” he said eagerly, his arms holding his knees, bouncing slightly with nervous energy.

“Is that right?” she replied. “Well now, who would have told you something like that?” She craned her neck to the side, almost shouting this last question so that it rang off the hard sides of the rusting boxcars and echoed through the trees of the swamp. A deep quiet filtered through the dusk until the katydids rose to hold concert over the scene.

He looked around quickly to see faces glance hurriedly away, hurtling back into conversation amongst themselves. He turned back, a serious expression on his face.

“They believe them all you know.” he began again. That last exchange had been unnerving, the power in her voice, but it was also exciting. He felt his reflexes jitter and his mouth begin to ramble, eyes wide in the darkness.

“Every single one,” he continued. “They think it’s the Bible and Darwin all rolled up, where we come from and where we’re going, and we’ve smoked it all down to the roach. Put it on the highest pedestal we could find. Fuckin’ legendary, you walking around like a beating heart in a jar. Venerable as shit.”

He slapped the ground, raising a cloud of dust and breathing it in with an exaggerated bliss, like an ecstasy of faith.

“I take it from this little satire,” she leaned forward and blew some of the remaining dust cloud into his face, “that you would deny me?”

“Hey, I don’t know,” he coughed and wiped his nose with his sleeve, “but here you are, sitting in the dirt with that bag and you ain’t seven foot tall, I don’t see demons coming for me, and I’m not bleeding—”

“Yet.”

“Ha, yeah,” he stammered, clearing his throat. “So...so maybe then the truth is somewhere in between all that bullshit and the skin on your hands.”

“Is that why you’re here? The truth? Or just a bottle full of curiosity?” She motioned toward the bottle of absinthe, now empty, that he still clutched by the neck. “Watch how you answer, I can tell if you’re lying, my son.”

“Fair enough,” he flipped the bottle over his head and into the bayou where it landed in the water with a plonk. “Surely you wouldn’t begrudge a lame man his crutch, would you? If I wasn’t interested in the truth, why would I be sitting here about to piss myself?”

“So, what can I do for you, —?”

“Jeremiah. Jeremiah Fletch.”

“Seriously?”

“No. It’s Sam. Sam Foster.”

“Told you I could tell,” she said, “My name’s Ellie.”

“You got a last name?” he asked, feeling looser now.

“Legends don’t have last names.” she replied, “and why would you need to know anyway, tinstar?” she punctuated that last word with a cold, biting tone as she reached for her pocket and he felt the danger of this slip in etiquette.

“Hey hey, no way man! You’ve got it wrong, I’m no tracer! I’m no one, swear to God!”

“It’s good you’re on speaking terms with him.”

It had become common lately for some of the more well-to-do families to hire young detectives to grow out their beards and travel the jungles searching for runaway heirs. He had heard there was a bounty on her, but it wasn’t much money and, according to the stories, she didn’t have any family left, so he figured it was all made up. But her reaction now told a different story. He noted it and kept pleading, waving his palms in surrender.

“Seriously I’m not after anyone. Sorry, please just forget I asked,” he shook his head, lowered his eyes and got his muscles keyed up to run if it came to that.

“You should be more careful,” she offered. “I believe you, but if I didn’t, you’d be using that hat to carry your guts back to Berkeley.”

“That’s not...yeah, thanks.” he was glad to be sitting on solid ground again and was in a hurry to get back to a more pleasant topic.

“Okay, this has been fun, but I’ve really got to get back to staring at this fire now,” she said.

“No, wait, please. I just want to hear it from you,” he pleaded. “I mean, if you’re really you then this is not an opportunity that comes along every day. Aren’t you ever hungry to tell it?”

“Maybe I am. Who knows? I’m an enigma,” she deadpanned as she poked at the ground with a rusty rail spike.

“Come on,” he whined. “Why not?”

“So *you* want a story?” she asked with a tired sigh “The fuck is that to me? Why should I care what you want?”

“You shouldn’t care, but if you tell me I’ll spread it thick,” he offered. “You of all people should know how much reputation is worth out here. There’s a reason I’m the only one with the balls to sit here.”

“I’ll tell you what slim,” she began. “Why don’t you tell *me*? I’d be curious to know how dangerous I am.”

“And your dad?”

“I know how dangerous he was.”

“Was? You mean he really is—?”

“Tick-tock big shot. Tell me a tale of the old times. Make it good or you’ll need a new little sack to hold those brave balls of yours.”

“Ha! Okay, well how about the Canadian Pacific crash ten years ago?”

“So? Made all the papers, everybody knows that one.”

“Story goes a big pine fell on the engine, knocked the whole thing over. Goddamn train blew to cinders and piles of cars mangled up for miles behind. Only you and your old man walked away. You, without a scratch.”

“Sounds right,” she agreed. “Dumb luck.”

“Thing is,” he continued “some say they found several other survivors of the crash. Hobos. Like us. They managed to crawl from the cars before the rest caught fire. But then something beat them to death.”

“You don’t say? What’s the theory on that one?”

“Bigfoot! Or, feet, I guess. They say your dad was friends with a Bigfoot so they let you go, but the others were punished. The tree didn’t fall, it was dropped as a salvo in a great Sasquatch rebellion. Homeland Security covered it up, of course, and hunted them down. Some escaped back to Canada though. You know they’re protected up there by secret government order, right? Used to be friends with the native populations before the Europeans came and fucked everything up, and now they stage occasional cross border attacks on us before retreating back to the safety of their Canuck refuge.”

“Oh, hell,” she covered her eyes and shook her head “They’ve added the Canada bit since the last time I heard it.”

“That’s the story. I heard it just like that a month ago in Saskatchewan. Sounds like a tin hat wet dream to me but those northern riders swore by it.”

“They swear their dicks are divining rods. What else you got?”

“Okay, okay. Well then what about those bulls in Santa Fe?”

“What about them?” she replied carelessly, leaning back with her arms behind her head, clearly enjoying the performance.

“Oh. Come. *On!*” he insisted. “That one is so badass! You, your dad, and twelve bulls on the switch track. You guys had warrants out in fifty states, goddamn FBI wanted a piece for that assassination attempt on Senator So-and-So, and you were cornered. Backs against the wall. Your dad took out eight of them single handed! You were only ten years old, but the old man had taught you well. You gouged out one of their eyes but got knocked into the ribs of a coal gondola as the last three of those red-eyed devils ringed you and their boss pulled out a gun just as dear old dad threw the switch that sent the 10:25 off course. Took all three out! There was blood everywhere, like a Pollock made of nightmares! But you and him walked out of it, shining with blood and guts all over your bodies. They say you took one of their hats for a trophy. After that, the feds pulled the warrant, didn’t want anyone else dying on their conscience. You two were declared a force of nature and they shredded all the evidence. But everyone knew. Sam Twist himself said he saw the whole thing and that bag right there swinging from your daddy’s hand.”

With that final line he motioned to the burlap sack tucked in next to her. She looked down at it, indifferent, then back, as she coldly replied.

“Now what would the big, bad federal government want with a poor old homeless man and his little kid?” She was talking down to him now, a hint of contempt creeping in around pursing lips as her fingers spread out slowly over the bag. “You seriously gotta stay away from the paint huffers, you’re getting soft in the cabeza, eh?”

“Oh yeah, so you’re calling ol’ Twist a liar then?” he replied, no hint of letting up. “Twist is straight as an arrow and you know it. He’s like your Godfather or something isn’t he? Traveled with you guys up to Oregon? Right up to when you—”

“Enough.” She was calm, but her gaze had turned crazed and hard. Anyone with sense would have stopped right there, but he was more than drunk and getting careless.

“What? You gonna pretend that’s not true? I’ve got a police report right over there in my roll that tells the whole thing, fact for fact. I guess there’s nothing in here either then?”

He lurched forward and reached for the bag. Just as his fingers brushed the coarse burlap weave her hand flashed from her side with a sharp snick, clack, click as a shining, chrome butterfly knife came down on his arm, pinning it deep into the dirt. He screamed in terror but was quickly silenced as she tagged him with a short, snapping punch in the jaw. His body twisted sideways and slammed onto the dirt with a muffled thud.

“No one, ever, touches that.” There was dominion in her voice.

Stunned, he lay there for a moment, mouth open in silent fear. His head managed to turn toward the punctured arm and he could feel the flat coldness of the blade resting against the veins of his wrist. The knife had pierced the cloth just next to the skin and nailed the shirt to the ground before she laid him out. He was unhurt, relatively, and as the panic and adrenalin eased, he began to breathe again, panting. Slowly he raised himself back to sitting, one arm pulled out in front of him like an offering.

“Well—at least that story is true,” he said. “I was starting to doubt it myself.”

“You don’t know anything about that story,” she started, then pulled the knife from the sleeve, shearing a button off his cuff while flicking it closed.



When he reached for the bag everyone had scattered in all directions. They did know the stories, word for word, and as he said, they believed them. And though she used to live in the shadow of the man who took his name from that very bag, it was hers now. She was the keeper of it, the flame that protects the ember that fuels the fire.

The first rule of the road is “I didn’t see nothin” and they all knew she was within her rights to kill the boy in all his youth and foolishness, right then and there. But she didn’t, and eased back into her seat, something pinching at her eyes.

“Tell it to me,” he said, clicking his jawbones back into line. “I bet it’s been a while.”

“Why do you want to know so bad?” she asked with a tired sigh. “You’re just another fucking tourist. You think it’s goddamn romantic, all that blood. But you’ve only ever tasted your own. You’ve got no idea.”

“I’m sorry, okay?” he said with a serious expression. “That was clearly out of line, I meant no disrespect. I just wanted to get your attention.”

“You’re drunk.”

“I’m drunk,” he admitted, “but I really just want to talk to you, the real you. Not the “you” wandering around in the shadows of the world with that weight, feeding the whispers of the past, all alone. You’ve spent so many years being a myth I think maybe you’re not even real to yourself anymore.”

“Philosophy major, eh? That figures. Between that and the sermon earlier I’m gonna guess...Georgetown?”

“Not bad,” he replied. “Your perception is as sharp as your jab.” He tapped his jaw and winced. “Thanks for not stabbing me by the way.”

“Anyone can tell you’re no kind of real threat. Doesn’t take the daughter of the devil to see that.”

“I don’t believe he was a devil,” he mused, “even if the stories are a little—”

“He was a maniac.” She said it with a smile, pausing briefly, letting herself feel it before it faded. “But he tried, he really tried to make it mean something,” she looked down at the stained burlap as if it was her own hand. “And I guess I am too; in my own way.”

He sat motionless, letting the quiet of the empty night creep around them. This time, he would not be the one to disturb it. She lifted her gaze from the fire and her pupils narrowed, adjusting to the distance of the clouds passing over the moon, then through their breaks and further as the firelight washed her face in shudders of orange and black. After a while, she began to speak, moving only her mouth, eyes as still as if made of glass.

“He cried,” she began. “I was only four, but I remember him crying so hard I thought he would break in half. That whole next week I watched TV all day and he would hug me through hours of cartoons and gibber softly to himself. Then at night he would tuck me in bed and disappear, but every morning I woke up with him beside me, arms wrapped around like a blanket. I was sad, but more for him really.”

“For him?”

“Yeah,” she said. “It was like sometimes I would remember and it would feel like someone was hitting me, but he was always right there. Putting himself between me and the pain.”

“Did that work?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “I don’t think I ever really cried after she was gone, so that counts for something doesn’t it?” She wasn’t asking him, or even really speaking to him at this point, so he sat, listening.

“It was only a week until the funeral. I remember waking up the morning after we buried her and he was there, just like always, but his clothes were covered in mud and the smell was horrible. And behind him on the bed, was the bag, and from there, well, you know the rest.”

“Yeah,” he said, “but that’s not really what I was looking for.”

“What then? You wanted the grand origin story, didn’t you?”

“What about her?” he asked. “She must’ve been more to you than, that,” he nodded gently toward the dark-stained and worn sack, glowing under the deepening moonlight and the fading fire.

She blinked, and looked down at him from the endless sky, eyes widening with the narrowed distance between them.

“That’s the story no one ever tells,” he continued. “Who was she before? Do you even remember?”

“Yeah,” she looked surprised. “I do.”

“Tell me.”

He grew so quiet that he melted into the shadows at the edge of the wilderness. The others had long since tumbled into their bedrolls or shacks and all around was still and empty. She stared into him as if he were a tree or a mountainside, a place where she could

tell herself the story she lost long ago, that meant as much to her as anything in the world. She looked through him for another long moment before raising her eyes once again to the sky.

“I remember feeling warm...” Then, as time passed, forward and back, the memory of her mother filled the air and, for just a little while, like a good story always does, she could see her again, tears on her face, reflecting what light remained.

## How We Move

It was a nice, ordinary studio apartment. The kind people generally end up in if they still have enough spring left to bounce off rock bottom. It had been over a decade since Paul lived on his own, but he was starting to feel he still had a knack for it. The one window was framed by the brick of the old hat factory that used to be here, but with the permission of the landlord he had painted the other walls in what the purple haired woman at Home Depot called “warm neutrals.” A phrase that he felt really captured the whole vibe he was going for. There was a tidy kitchenette complete with one of those bowls of fruit from all the color sample books. Except without the plastic grapes. These were real. Real. Fruit. He remembered that was important to her.

He grabbed a red-and-green-flecked apple off the top of the pile and took a sharp bite, surveying the ten-by-twenty space that made up his entire world. Everything was perfect, there was even a pile of brand-new toys over in the corner by the couch. It was like a life you’d pick up at the store, all ready to use, just add family. And that is entirely what he intended to do; starting today he was New Paul! Every bit as wonderful and essential as everyone thought Old Paul had been.

*Stupid Old Paul. What an ass. New Paul would never have put up with that kind of behavior.*

In addition to fixing up the apartment, he had recently constructed a dividing wall between his past and present as well. All the better to prevent the kind of backsliding that landed him here in the first place. He tossed the apple core in the compost (New Paul cares

about the Earth), did fifty pushups (New Paul was a temple), and read a short story on the New Yorker website (New Paul was erudite, even when no one was looking).

As self-improved as he could get at the moment, Paul stood, reluctantly, and trudged over to the apartment's single window for the fifth time this morning. Though he couldn't resist turning it into a chase halfway across the floor. He felt that old, velvet flow of his body and gave himself permission to enjoy it, only for a moment.

The window was covered by new fake-wood blinds and still had the shiny warning tag on the strings about how babies will strangle themselves if you give them half a chance. He studied the lumpy, neckless child as the snake-like strings floated around where the neck should be, ready to squeeze the life out of it.

*Symbolic. So much like our own personal struggles, and the endless potential of the human spirit to confront our problems and create positive change.*

New Paul had been seeing a therapist.

Though, despite that potential, right now he was simply pulling the string. Opening and closing the blinds, over and over. He puffed out his upper lip, a look of hapless irritability on his face. He had taken control of his life but hadn't counted on the weather. He yanked the blinds open again and left them there.

Outside, there were broad-leaved oaks and wide-open grass in the park across the street, but his focus was on the huge white banner over the entrance with bright red letters reading "Welcome to Picnic in the Park!" Red, white, and blue balloons tied to the gates bobbed and stuttered in a pouring rain. He watched them struggle under the weight of a battering sky and tapped his foot along to make a rhythm of the rain on the window.

This was to be the day, *the* designated day. A sunrise created entirely to serve as the unveiling of his new apartment, his new self. It had taken months of planning and pep talks. He watched a video online to learn how to use his phone's calendar and then marked it in bright yellow. *Important!* After the picnic he could invite them all over for juice boxes and elevated conversation, and how could she refuse? It was so close! This rain was ruining everything. There was supposed to be a motherfucking family picnic today, but now it wasn't working out and he could feel himself start to slump like one of those old movie robots that had been fed a paradox on a punch card. His eyes lost focus on the banner as he drifted back, through a crack in the wall, to Old Paul.

It had been only a year since he came home late for the last time and six months since they'd agreed to a trial separation. She took the kids and moved out of the city to live in her parents' condo on the peninsula. As she walked out the door, he peppered her with desperate questions; "Weren't they both the same people they had always been? The same people that married each other, went on trips? Had these kids? People never really change, so how is this happening?" Then later, alone, "How did this happen?"

He had visited his daughters a few times since then, after they had settled in at his in-laws. *Nothing had to change there*, he convinced himself. He was as much their father as he had ever been. But it was strained, awkward. His two little girls, who had always demanded extra hugs and kisses at bedtime, now looked at him like they looked at the doctor, as if he might be hiding something behind his back that would hurt them. After he would leave, his chest began to burn, his heart raced and before he knew it, he was crawling in from the club at 4am and calling in sick to work, again. In a few months he lost that job, quickly followed by the apartment they had made a home. Then, there was nothing left to lose.

A long rumble of thunder across the city shook the window. The park was a swamp. Puddles joined together to form a sea dotted with picnic table islands. There was even a little bouncy castle the parks department inflated optimistically this morning while the rain was only a sprinkle. The wind whipped it back and forth. Then, a sudden gust pulled out the tent stakes, sending the entire kingdom tumbling down the street in a cartwheeling orange and yellow blur.

At that moment, at the far end of the park, a figure appeared. They skirted the edge of the grass, wrapped in a thick black raincoat, camouflage pants pulled over floppy boots. The hood on the coat was up and the only part of them Paul could see were the hands, poking out of the stiff vinyl shell of the coat. One holding what looked like a fat coil of rope.

Paul wandered to the bathroom to floss (after every meal now, even snacks) and returned to the window to see the person still down there, wandering around in the storm. Occasionally stopping to lean out, lurching from the chest. They were yelling something but whatever it was got lost in the din of the storm.

After meandering into the park and out again, into the street and up the alley, the figure came to the bench below the dripping picnic banner and sat down, folding over arms hanging heavy across their legs. Paul pursed his lips one more time to see if he could think of a way to salvage the day. He could not. So, he grabbed his umbrella out of the closet and headed down the stairs.

“Hey!” As he crossed the street, the greeting was cut out by a roar and the sudden battering of rain on the umbrella. It felt like someone was trying to beat it out of his hands. The person on the bench remained slumped, head hung, letting the water stream off the vinyl hood in a circle of rivulets onto the bricks below.



“Hi there!”

The head twisted up like an owl. Paul was met by eyes of twisted red veins, wincing at the impact of the falling water but still blazing up at him. It was a harsh face, with a grizzled beard growing in patches through a weave of dark tattoos.

“What are you doing out here? Did you come for the picnic?” Paul asked.

His socks were beginning to soak through and Paul lifted his leg to flick away the water. He hadn’t considered that he was still wearing his dress shoes, slacks, and shirt.

Still no response.

“It’s cancelled I think,” Paul continued, determined to keep up the only thing he had going for as long as he could. “It’s raining.” He bobbed the umbrella up in the air and couldn’t help doing a little capering dance from his wife’s favorite musical. He had pulled out this move back when they were dating. It wasn’t quite his style, but she had loved it back then. Water splashed up and pooled in his pant cuffs.

The man on the bench dropped his head again and held up a coil of old grey rope. It ended in a frayed loop at the end. Paul noticed the camouflage pants peeking out from under the raincoat, pieced them together with the vaguely Celtic tattoos, and made some assumptions based on an evening he spent in an alley a few months ago.

“You—I-looking for someone?”

“Yeah!” The man leapt to his feet as he spoke. “Why you bothering me? Have you seen a dog?”

“Nope, sorry. And I’ve been watching out here all day,” Paul was startled and stepped back. But still it was good to be chatting with someone. Even if that someone was clearly not glad in return.

The man scowled for a long moment, working his lips, but failing to coax them into words. He turned away, walking toward an alley that cut across several streets leading toward downtown. Without realizing it, Paul started jogging after him, splashing through overfull drains along the curb.

“I can help you look though!” Paul blurted out when he had nearly caught up.

“Don’t you have anything better to do?”

“No.” Paul bobbed the umbrella up again and shrugged an outsized shrug.

At this, the man extended a dripping hand, pink with patches of crisscrossing scars. Paul extended his own past the edge of his umbrella, soaking it in solidarity.

“I’m Paul.”

“Sam.”

“What’s the dog’s name?”

“Marbles. Black mutt with a white strip down her chest. Kind of like a pit bull, but with a little Lassie face.”

“So, smart and fierce. Just like I like my women, am I right?”

“Are you hitting on my dog man?”

“Oh, no... What?”

“Anyway, this is the third time this month she’s run off.”

Paul said that it was a shame, feeling the water squishing between his freezing toes with each step.

“I always find her though,” continued Sam. “I think she’s just a free spirit. But this time, I don’t know. Melody’s worried and she usually has a pretty good sense about this stuff. Come on, I need to check in.”

Paul was about to ask who Melody was, but realized he didn’t really care that much. This was just a distraction anyway. He fumbled with his phone that was still sending him alerts about the picnic. New Paul was supposed to be a tech wizard, though all he had managed to do so far was switch it to vibrate.

They walked through a high walled labyrinth of brick alleyways in a steady rain yelling “Marbles!” with hands cupped around their mouths then wiping the water off their faces and onto the shrinking patches of dry cloth on their clothes. The wind kicked up again and was blowing showers under the lip of the umbrella. Paul had just discovered an unexpected desert in his armpit when Sam stopped short.

“We’re here.”

They were facing a solid concrete wall. A hundred feet above, the space between buildings was so narrow that the light barely slipped through. As his eyes adjusted, Paul could see a grease black door set into the wall covered with large rivets and metal slats. Sam hammered on it with his fist then stepped back. They stood shoulder to shoulder, waiting.

“So, you were going to the picnic?”

“Yeah.” Paul said. “It was going to be great, I had this whole plan. Look I even had candy in my pocket.” He pulled out an orange Tootsie Pop and held it up.

“Okay—You, uh, got kids?”

“Two girls, five and seven,” Paul replied.

“Well, I bet they’re pretty disappointed,” Sam grabbed the sucker and popped it in his mouth, folding the wrapper into a swan and setting it adrift on a little stream running down the gutter.

“Yeah. Me too.” Paul sighed.

Finally, a plate slid open across the top of the door and two swollen eyes peered at them through thick glasses. A great, pained screech vibrated through the door.

“Where’s Marbles, Sam? You know we’re down eight percent without her?!”

“Let me in man, I need to talk to Melody.”

“Who is this?” the eyes flicked over to Paul who felt he was dressed like a bible salesman next to Sam. He gave a weak wave. “You bring your Dad, Sam? Your Dad a cop? Fuck you, cop!”

“Show him,” Sam nudged Paul’s shoulder and Paul looked back in utter confusion. “You know,” Sam did a little mocking jig of Paul’s earlier dance with the umbrella.

Paul hesitated, then after a bob of encouragement from the eyes behind the door, Paul began to bounce up and down as he worked the umbrella side to side. It twirled, shedding water like a yard sprinkler. He finished with a spin onto one knee, arms spread to the sky. There was the sound of metal scraping as the door opened to reveal a giant man,

bowed over to accommodate the narrow passage beyond. He wore coveralls spattered with deep red stains.

“He’s got skills does he? A graceful one, yes. Grace is a wonderful commodity. And he reeks of respectability. That can really bring in some coin. Enter, sir.”

Paul followed Sam through the doorway under the gaze of the giant. He was continually pushing his glasses back up his nose as they slid down from his hunched over position. Paul could hear him mumbling numbers under his breath as his arms, thick as cinder blocks, wrenched the iron door shut again behind them. Sam and Paul descended a flight of gritty, concrete stairs into dim tunnels, lit only by the occasional camping lantern hung from bent strips of rebar. A loud, steady pounding echoed all around them.

“What was that?” asked Paul as he closed his umbrella to navigate the path.

“A pretty good performance is what it was. Takes a lot to impress Frank. I’ve seen that flick, but you’ve got your own style. Could be great on weekends. You dance before?”

“I used to, quite a bit,” Paul fiddled with the ring on his finger.

They crossed an opening to a side passage, where the pounding noise was coming from. In the distance Paul could just make out a gaunt figure in a long dress swinging a sledgehammer into a wall, again and again. Dust from the pulverized concrete swarmed around their body with each blow, covering them like delicate lace as they grunted with effort.

Paul kept close to Sam. They passed through rooms filled with couches of every color and fabric. Sleepy faced people sprawled across them; only a few looked up as they passed. The walls were painted with beautiful murals of drums, violins, and even a lonely

saxophone, all interwoven with the curves of bodies in motion which almost seemed to follow them as they walked. Reaching out from the walls of the twisting labyrinth before dissipating again into the gloom. A heavy-set woman in a hardhat and red rubber gloves unrolled a thick spool of cable as she squeezed past them. She began threading it together with an exposed wire yanked down from a hole in the ceiling. All around, a sudden burst of blinding light was followed by a series of clicking fingers and whistles.

“Let there be light motherfuckers!” yelled Sam to a series of hooted replies.

Soon they reached another heavy door and Sam pushed it open to reveal a small courtyard hemmed in on all sides by fifteen stories of red and grey brick. It was full of hardscrabble flowers poking out from piles of rubble and long grasses that bowed at the edge of an old stone path. Paul looked up and could see the grey sky above like a single bright pixel lighting up a dark screen. It felt outside of everywhere. Lonely. In the center, a small gazebo had been erected piecemeal, some elements of which Paul recognized from around town. A leering stone heron from the riverside poked its grey beak menacingly at them from its new perch on a beat-up interstate exit sign that served as a roof. Beneath, a girl with puff ball pigtails sitting cross-legged on top of an old, rusting safe. A red sharpie twitched in her hand as she wrote in an oversized book. It had the word “Ledger” stenciled into the leather cover in gold with pointed, gothic letters. She gnawed the cap of the pen between her teeth.

“Hey Melody,” Sam waved.

“Where’s Marbles, Sam?” she asked without looking up. She sounded weary, as if he was the child and she was reminding him for the third time to pick up his socks.

“She’s a free spirit, Mel. You got to respect her journey.”

“Self-actualization makes for a thin supper. These numbers don’t lie. We’re down eight percent. Nine if you count the foot from last time she ran off.”

“Hasn’t slowed her down though, eh?”

She sighed and sat the book aside, capping the marker and tucking it into the spine to keep her place. She examined Paul. It made his neck itch.

“Who’s this?”

“A sad man I picked up this morning, said he wants to help find the mutt,” her eyes flashed at Sam, then narrowed back onto Paul.

“Wants to find...what has he lost?”

“I think—” Sam started.

“Not you,” she unfolded her legs and leaned forward, pointing one small finger adorned with a neon green Halloween spider ring at Paul’s chest. “You can’t find if you haven’t lost. What did you lose?”

“Everything,” he finally said.

“Hm. Dramatic,” she replied.

She turned and picked up a flowerpot, dumping it on the wooden pallet floor of the gazebo. The rattle of tiny bones mixed with the metal tick of rain on the roof.

Melody studied the scatterage of bones and picked out the small skull of a bird that had landed upside down. She turned it in her hands to look deep into the large, empty sockets.

“Are you sure?” she asked it, barely a whisper.

“Squawk!” she replied in a high pitch as the skull joggled up and down.

“Your bird got any word on Marbles?” asked Sam.

“No,” replied Melody “but he likes your friend.”

A police scanner sitting in shadow behind her crackled to life, glowing like a goat’s orange eye.

*Animal Control, please respond. 261 at Pike Place, pier side. Suspect is canine, grey, female. Approximately 100 lbs. Missing one ear, one foot, and tail. Advise caution.*

Melody looked up at Sam, the bird did too.

“We better hurry,” said Sam.

Sam sprinted through the back of the courtyard, Paul close behind and through a rough hole made in a stone foundation. It opened into a large room with charred timbers scattered across the ground. Thin vines of dark green leaves snaked through the ruins and up the walls to an open sky. The rain pattered on the wide leaves and splashed into a marble font, clasped by carved angels.

“You must really love this dog,” Paul remarked as Sam kicked down the plywood that covered the old entrance to the church.

“Meh. She’s more Mel’s dog at this point. Kid ain’t got much else”



“What do you mean?” Paul asked. “You’ve got some kind of crazy-person commune down there. And I think she’s a witch.”

“I remember our Dad used to do this thing where he would chase me around the house like a monster every morning to get me down to breakfast. Marbles would get all worked up and nip at his feet the whole time. Mel was barely walking then, but she’d get the biggest kick out of watching that dumb dog chase us around. It was fucking hilarious.”

“Sounds like a good dog.” Paul had squeezed between the sheets of plywood and was sucking a splinter out of his finger. He couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“If that mutt was any good, she’d quit losing body parts all over the damn city. She’s like a fucking leper. People aren’t as generous if your dog is too ugly. Makes me look negligent.”

“Well, Mel looks like she’s got all her parts,” Paul offered.

“She does,” Sam lit up and started off at a trot, toward the market.

“So, you’ve been watching after both of them? All on your own?”

“Nah. Like you said, we’ve got the freak show down there scrabbling for coin to keep everyone fed and Mel can’t really remember anything before we brought the troop together. But she’s a spooky kid. Sees something when she looks at that dog. Something I sure as hell can’t.”

“So how did you two end up out here?”

“I don’t like to dwell on the past, bad for my chakras.” Sam said.

Canopies jutting out from apartments and storefronts provided the only break in the storm as they paced down, down, drifting away into themselves, through the streets and alleys of memory to some faraway country they used to inhabit.

When they reached the market, it was bustling, even with the bad weather. The jostle and hum felt good, almost warm, as Paul pushed into the crowd. Fishmongers barked their sales and the rank smell of a churning sea filled the gaps between customers. At that moment, a faint yelp cut through the thrum and babble. It was an irregular, but constant, bark. Sam whipped toward it.

“Is that her?” Paul watched Sam’s eyes open wider and wider, taking in the sound.

“Only one way to find out, pop.” Sam sprinted ahead, Paul close behind. Stall after greying stall lined the shorefront, worn smooth from years of salt and sea wash.

They shoved through rows of damp jackets and heavy shopping bags until they saw an open ring around two figures. One was thick and straight-backed, silently looking down at a short, angular man holding up one hand, shouting curses that occasionally cut through the din and enrapturing the crowd that had formed to watch. Paul could see a wide stream of crimson flowing from a rag wrapped around the shorter man’s hand. Off to the side of the circle, tied to a piling by a short rope, was a black-and-white dog barking and growling.

“Marbles!” Sam blurted out but was hushed by Paul immediately. He could see that the quiet figure was a cop, all decked out in his saran wrap rain gear.

“We’ve got to be smart,” Paul whispered. “Let’s walk up slow, to the side.”

Sam nodded, and they began to slip casually down the row, keeping close to the market fronts, blending into the crowd. They reached where Marbles was tied and knelt

down without incident, though now, they were exposed. None of the shoppers wanted to risk getting too close to the gnarled and agitated animal so there was a wide-open circle around them. Sam set to work on the knot, but the rain had soaked the rope and the fibers had swelled up. Marbles stopped barking and bounded to Sam, nearly knocking him over while he continued to struggle.

“Is this a goddamn bowline? On my dog?”

Paul watched the men. The cop was holding up his hands, trying to calm the bleeding man which only seemed to make him more agitated, hopping from foot to foot, waving his bloody hand in the air.

“Hurry,” Paul whispered. “We gotta go.”

“I can’t get it.” Sam was panicking. “It’s too tight. God...dammit.”

Marbles hopped into Sam’s lap and began to lick his face, whining and yipping, trying to play. Sam huddled over the rope, tearing at it with slippery, wet fingers. The bleeding man turned to show his hand to the crowd behind him then suddenly shot out a finger.

“Hey!”

“Showtime.” Sam stood up. “Just get the mutt, I got this.” He stepped away to face the men and cracked his neck back and forth.

“What? No, let me do it,” said Paul, “you need to get back.”

Sam reached down to grasp his ragged camouflage pants and tore them away in a single, swift motion. Ripping Velcro revealed shiny white satin beneath, a silver stripe slid down the side like a serpent. He slipped out of the raincoat revealing a matching sleeveless tank and long muscular arms.

“You’re not bad,” Sam said “but this is my party, and you ain’t got nothing on me. Promise me you’ll get her back to Mel.”

“Okay,

Sam turned half-way on the tips of his toes and raised an eyebrow.

“I will fuck you up old man, let’s hear some enthusiasm!”

“Yes, okay! I promise.”

“Good enough.”

Sam ran straight toward a stall selling shellfish and grabbed a large, red crab laid out on some ice. From there, he leapt onto a crate then leveraged himself lightly off a counter and spun onto the roof. The tin and wood popped and creaked under his weight. The crab seller yelled and the crowd began to pull out their phones as Sam ran down the line of roofs, the huge crab swinging from hand to hand in rhythm with his steps. He ricocheted off walls and poles, sailing across the distance with feet that looked as delicate as fog in a ruffling breeze. Paul watched him, mouth hung open as Sam took one last step and performed a marvelous grand jete down onto the planks in front of the advancing police.

Sam yelled, right in the cop’s face, “What are you waiting for?!”

Paul's eyes darted around and he reached out, grabbing a long-handled cleaver some careless fishmonger left impaled in the side of a half-cleaned yellowfin. He pulled the rope taut and in a single motion sliced firmly, smoothly. Cutting it in half in an instant.

He looked up and saw Sam, tackled to the ground. The heavy police officer kneeling on his back, struggling to click the wet cuffs over his wrists. The thin man bounced and yelled and pointed at Paul who had scooped up the yelping Marbles in his arms.

Paul fled across the hollow thump of the planks toward the exit as his pursuers disappeared into the excitement Sam had created. As he stepped past the last row of stalls, out of the corner of his eye, a dayglow orange turret bobbed into view and out again. A flapping blue banner on top. Ahead, an animal control van pulled to a stop, doors opening. More plastic covered golems lumbering into view. Paul turned and fled down the pier, slipping on wet and slimy boards, nearly dropping the squirming dog and the umbrella hooked over his arm.

There, at the end of the pier in the water below, was the bounce house. It had blown down to the bay and was floating only a few feet from the end of the pier as the wind and waves lashed it back and forth on the chop.

“Okay, let's jump.” Marbles whined. “Don't be like that,” Paul replied.

He leapt, out over the rough water, landing on the roof of the castle, ripping through the thin fabric, and landing with an uncomfortable amount of jostling in the festive raft.

Marbles immediately wrenched herself free and started running in circles, sliding into the puffy, inflated walls and barking gleefully as she fell again and again on the stump of her missing leg. The bounce house bobbed irregularly in the bay and threatened at any time to

snag on the puncture on the ragged supports of the dock. The wind that had been raging in every direction, settled into a steady eastern bluster as Paul stuck his umbrella through the ripped hole and opened it.

They began to drift away from the dock, the wind pulling them deep into the bay, until a faint outline of high-end condos began to appear through the fog along the edge of the peninsula.

The rain beat down on his head, his shoulders, it sloshed around the floor. Paul couldn't even feel it anymore.

*I wonder how far I could drag this thing?*

Then he looked back at the dock, the market. No one had followed him. The market shrank away, and the red and blue lights of a police car headed back up and into the city. He followed it until he could see his apartment building, high up on the hill. Then, the barely noticeable ivory thorn of a church tower poking up out of the gloom.

He reached down to scratch the scampering Marbles behind a fleshy, pink gnarl that had been an ear before turning the umbrella to catch a fresh crosswind away from the peninsula, and back to the city.

Paul thought about Sam, and felt his muscles try to mimic some of those wild steps that entranced the crowd. A mix of classical and modern moves that defied any distinction between them. It was wonderful. He wanted to learn to do it, just like that.

## Bait Dog

“Feels like a couple of cracked ribs this time. Nothing too serious, but you’ll definitely need eight ounces and a few days on the couch.”

Peter pulled his shirt back over his head and worked it down by inches over the deep purple swell across his chest. He noticed how tidy the examination room was and wondered how many hours he had spent in here. The doctor clacked away at her computer in silence.

*Déjà vu*, he thought. In fact, except for how clean everything was, even the clinic itself was exactly the same as the ones they’d had in prison. The floor tiles lined up in the shape of the national crest, a four-pointed star inside a circle.

“Okay Peter, you’re all done. I’ll get your pass and you can head home.”

“Thanks Doc.” Peter’s feet kicked from his perch on the exam table. The doctor rose from her chair, but paused.

“Are you aware that you’ve been in this office twelve times already this year?” Dr. Edvin asked.

“No, my memory gets a little fuzzy when I’m on the juice. I figured it was like, a lot though. Bad luck, huh?”

“Does it never occur to you that—”

At that moment, a nurse knocked and entered the room without waiting for an answer.

“Here’s that pass you printed doctor,” she said.

Dr. Edvin took the thin, plastic sheet from her outstretched hand and signed it with a flourish before peeling off a bright yellow band and sealing it around Peter's wrist. As he felt the smooth slip across the veins in his wrist, Peter let out a sigh.

"Remember," the doctor said, "yellow is good for three days. If you wake up and still have pain, come back immediately so we can see about getting you an extension."

The nurse ushered Peter out the door, the brisk clicking of her shoes pushing him on.

"I certainly hope you enjoy your days off," said the nurse cheerily. "Any big plans?"

"Nah," replied Peter, "I mean, I'll be under most of the time, so...maybe some TV though?"

"Oh, that sounds nice. Wish I could get a three-day weekend."

She laughed too loud when she said it and he winced at the pain as he zipped up his vest jacket.

"Well, yeah. But I got beat up."

"Poor dear," she opened the door to the clinic to admit a new patient being wheeled in. He was slumped over on one side, both eyes swelled shut, and ringed in blood like too much eyeshadow. Peter began to panic and turned back to the nurse.

"Hey, my Blue, Doc didn't finish—"

"It's waiting for you, of course," she said, turning on her heel. "Remember, you are very important to us," she called into the air without looking back.





Courtesy shuttles lined the street outside, drivers puffing lazily on their cigarettes and blowing smoke out the open windows. There were always a few here, ready to help anyone get to the pharmacy and back home again. The shuttles were bright white, freshly scrubbed like the hospital's floors and, really, everything else in the city. He remembered how when he first came over, only a few months after the invasion and before the wall went up, there were no shuttles. After getting shot by an anxious soldier who mistook him for an enemy, he'd had to struggle home on crutches.

Down the block, municipal workers were repairing the street where the big troop transports and tanks rumbled from the docks to the gate. Peter noticed the new, pink wheelchair ramps at the crosswalks.

*Those guys must've been in for something pretty bad to get a job that hard,* Peter thought. He had received ten years for holding a few grams. Well, kilos by the time the cops finished searching the car. So when the offer came, an easy detail slinging drinks at a grunt bar across the ocean, Peter felt like he'd won the lottery.

Early spring in the city still held a hint of winter, but there was warmth carried along in the wind that made him wish he could jog the distance to the pharmacy. It was only five minutes away and he had always loved to run. A runner's high was a euphoria that even The Blue couldn't match. He would often time his jog so he would hit the wall just as he entered the new sculpture park commemorating a great victory in the Southern Campaign. During the offensive, the papers had reported particularly fierce resistance near Tampa and the glorious gold statues and towering tributes to the fallen took on an inspiring, psychedelic quality as his brain surrendered control to the crude, chemical commands of his body. Last he heard, a new border fence was being dropped down there now. Another toehold in the

campaign. He passed the shuttles and stepped off the curb with a hop. Pain flared through his body as his foot hit the pavement. *Nope, no running today.*

He could walk though, passing several other citizens on the way, along with a handful of soldiers and officers. He flinched at the sight of the lower ranks, in their thin, drab uniforms. But everyone seemed to be in high spirits, laughing and chatting. Still, he made sure his left sleeve was rolled up so that the bright yellow cuff poked out from underneath. Before long, an officer, with several medals on his chest and epaulets on both shoulders stopped to shake Peter's hand.

"I want to say how sorry I am for your injury. We appreciate all that you do." The officer threw his shoulders back and spoke with the sort of grave compassion that Peter had seen in speeches on television. He was flattered to have the same voice used to address him. For the next block, Peter could still feel the tingle from that handshake and forgot about the cracked body beneath his tender flesh.

There was a queue inside the dispensary and Peter examined them as he took his place at the end of the line. All were broken and twisted in various ways. At the front, there was a young man in a full-leg cast, wearing an orange band. He was tottering on a single crutch as he signed his receipt and took the paper bag from the pharmacist. Peter felt a little jealous. A load bearing fracture required a week to mend and Peter frowned at his meager three days. The orange man swung his body aside from the counter as the next customer, an older gentleman in an arm sling and a yellow band, like Peter, limped forward. Peter heard crinkling paper and looked over to see the man with the crutch leaning into a corner near the door, a blue bottle poking from the top of the bag. He nearly fell trying to work the cap and keep his leg up.

“Hey!” yelled the pharmacist, an old man with grey hair and severe looking glasses.  
“Not in here. Not on the street.”

“But it hurts—”

“No ‘buts,’” replied the pharmacist firmly. “Go grab a shuttle and get home. I don’t want any trouble.”

The pharmacist pointed out the window to where three more of the shiny white shuttles were lined up. The man on crutches slid the bottle back into the bag and hopped toward the door like a chastened child. “Sorry,” he mumbled, “sorry.”

After the man in the sling there was a woman who had what looked like a bad rash all over her neck. Peter could make out the shape of individual fingers in the bruise. The woman rasped through the exchange and left the counter holding her bag by the arm adorned with a white cuff. She’d be back at work in the morning.

“Next!”

Peter stepped up and scanned his ID under a matrix of red lasers that bathed the whole front of the counter.

“How do you feel?” The pharmacist squinted as he looked up at Peter.

“Not too bad,” Peter replied, “Better soon, right?”

The pharmacist grunted and headed toward the back of the little space behind the counter. Different size bottles of the milky Blue were lined up next to a pyramid of syringes for those too damaged to drink it. “You’re cleared for sick leave through Monday. Add that

to the weekend and you've got a three-day vacation. I'll go ahead and throw in a little boy for Monday morning, just in case you're not feeling one hundred percent."

"Oh no," said Peter, "that's okay. I'm hoping to go for a jog Sunday night after I've healed up. So you can just save it."

The pharmacist's back stiffened. He turned back around and walked, slowly, to the counter.

"You'd do well to take your medicine, boy," the pharmacist said raising the paper bag and sliding it across the counter. It sat for a moment under the scattered red lights until it beeped.

The pharmacist adjusted his glasses, taking on an avuncular air. "You've earned a good rest."

Peter stepped out the door and turned the corner toward home when he heard quick steps approaching him from behind.

"There's Goddamn trash all over the street today," one of them growled.

Peter cowered and threw up his hands. The yellow cuff leapt into the air and slid down onto his forearm.

Two men, at least a decade younger than him, loomed above him in their fatigues. Peter looked up to see them snap a crisp salute at him and speak in practiced, bombastic unison. "Please accept our apologies, citizen!"

Peter lowered his hands and stood tall, returning the salute as the soldiers continued on their way. He had planned to walk home as well, but adrenaline and fear made his body

shake, aggravating his ribs, so he grabbed a shuttle and watched out the window as a convoy of trucks, loaded with soldiers passed them, headed toward the gates out of the city.



He spun cuff absently around his wrist, liking the way it tickled the hair on his arms, and thought about when he'd first arrived. The city was built on a peninsula and, with completion of the wall, it became entirely inaccessible by any land route, apart from the road through the gates. This was to protect colonists from the desperate violence of the resistance as well as to provide a safe space to stage fresh infantry. Peter had helped fight off several guerrilla attacks alongside the soldiers in the early days. He assembled Molotov cocktails for the troops outside the bar once, but as soon as the last massive section of wall fell into place from the aerial cranes, all was peaceful. Bombings and gunfire inside the city ceased. Then, a week later, the military introduced the cuffs.

Even with the wall closed and the sea ringed with warships, tensions were still high. A new recruit had beaten a civilian to death in the street, screaming that he was a terrorist. There had been a large crowd present, but no one spoke over the thuds of a corpse being beaten in broad daylight. A public assembly was announced and the General himself made a rare public appearance.

“The lives of all our people are sacred to us,” he boomed from the podium. “And we will protect them from any threat, without *or* within. Incidents like the one yesterday will not be tolerated.”

Everyone clapped as the General raised a ring of yellow plastic. He explained that the new soldiers were raw and full of fight, but these cuffs would help remind them who they were fighting for.

“If any soldier so much as touches anyone wearing this band,” he continued as two officers dragged a hooded, struggling figure onto the stage and pushed him down onto his knees, “then they are traitors in the eyes of this republic. Long live us all!”

He strode, grim, across the stage and whisked off the hood, revealing the terrified face of the soldier from the incident. Without hesitation, the General drew his service pistol and fired into the back of the man’s head as raucous cheers erupted from the citizens. They rattled the barricades as the soldiers stood stoic and silent.

The shuttle pulled up to Peter’s apartment building, but he didn’t move.

“Here ya go,” said the driver. “Pal? Hey, asshole! You okay?”

“No. Well, fine actually. Just a cracked rib.”

“That’s not too bad. I had a guy in here earlier with no teeth and a broke nose. Looked like a goddamn goblin.”

“How long did he get?”

“Three-week pink, and enough blue to fly up to heaven and ask God whose side he’s on.”

“It’s war,” Peter said, “everyone’s doing their best.”

Peter stepped out of the shuttle and walked up to the front door of the complex. A man he had never seen wearing an old-timey doorman uniform opened the large, glass entryway and welcomed him home.

*Well now, that's new*, he thought pleasantly.

The halls had just been repainted and a big rotary carpet cleaner was running at the far end of the corridor. A thick extension cord snaked over the floor until it reached a short, stocky man, with a thick ring of smoke circling his head like a crown. He waved to Peter, grimacing to keep a tight grip on the short stub of cigar jutting from his mouth. Peter gave a nod and headed to the elevator.

He eased himself onto the couch, the paper bag on the table in front of him. He took off his shirt with some effort and turned on the TV with a thirty-minute timer. It never took more than thirty minutes. He had just opened the bag and pulled out the bottle of Blue when there was a knock at the door. He wrapped himself in a blanket off the back of the couch but didn't move.

The knocking became a banging.

“Pete, you pitiful bastard! Open up. Don't tell me you drank the goddamn juice already. What are you fucking five? Baby need his bottle? Open up!”

When Peter opened the door, the man was still smoking his cigar. Now so short it looked as if his tongue was on fire when he puffed. He helped himself to a seat on top of the abandoned blanket, rummaging through Peter's medication.

“Hey Carl, how's it going?”

“Wonderful! Ain’t you seen the new sorry sumbitch they got opening the door now? Just off the plane this morning. And I thought I had it bad scrubbing the shit from you ass-dragging junkies off my nice carpet.”

“There’s a lot worse than being on maintenance detail,” replied Peter, sucking in a pained breath as he lowered himself into the chair opposite the cozy nest he had made on the couch.

“Maintenance? I’m a goddamn cleaning lady Pete. Fuck you man. Do you even know who I used to be?”

Peter knew.

“I was the fucking Mattress King. You want a mattress on the peninsula? You see The King baby.”

“I know Carl but really I’ve got to—”

“Do you know how easy it is to get laid when you own your own mattress store? Dear God, you got no idea do you? I could give you something to dream about while you’re out, juicehead.”

“My ribs are broken Carl.”

“Yeah? Well, whoop-dee-doo. You see this?” Carl pointed to a thick, pink scar across his neck just below the line of his close-cropped hair. He showed it to everyone. Four years had gone by and it still looked like a strip of raw bacon. “They tried to take my fucking head off! I was held together with a goddamn belt. Head flopping back and forth like some crackhead puppet. You jailbirds got it easy though. Lots of fresh air, a little good-natured



horseplay, and then a week unconscious with pay. You know how much I gotta pay to get myself unconscious? Fuck.”

“Sorry Carl,” Peter desperately wanted to sleep and was kicking himself for answering the door.

“No, no, I interrupted. You go ahead, tell me about your poor little ribs. No, I’m listening, go ahead.”

“Okay, well I was closing down the bar and—”

“Fucking animals these newbies. Get a little drink and they think they’re on the front lines, heroes of the homeland and all that shit. Hope they killed my sister’s husband though. He’s a piece of shit.”

“So, I was closing the bar—”

“That’s a bad job. You’re like right in their sights while they’re getting turned up. No future in getting your ass beat, Pete.”

Like many convicted criminals in the old country, Peter had applied for the program to come to the new territory for a fresh start. A second chance in exchange for supporting the war effort. Peter actually thought himself fairly noble for it, but he knew better than to start waving the flag around Carl.

“It’s better than prison,” Peter said.

“Psh,” Carl unzipped his coveralls, freeing his paunch with a groan and exposing the light red, sleeveless shirt he, and all the sympathizers within the walls, were required to wear

at all times. It marked him as someone to be trusted, but never too much. He leaned back on the couch, looking thoughtful and scratching deep into his armpit.

“You know Pete,” he said “You’re a good kid, but this city? This ain’t your home, and it sure as hell ain’t mine anymore, no matter how shiny they polish it. It’s is worse than prison. This is a fucking grave.”

They both sat quietly for a moment, Peter watched Carl’s anger soften into a simmering melancholy then, in an instant back to a tight grin. He spoke, but kept his eyes cast toward his feet.

“Hey, did I ever tell you why they let me stay in this paradise?” There was no waiting for a response this time. “So, here I was, mattress magnate from here to the burbs. You want a good night’s sleep in the metro area? You call The King.” Carl paused to take a drag off the cigar and itch himself in several places. “So, it was the run up to President’s Day. *The* most glorious goddamn holiday of the year, let me tell you.”

Peter often wondered if Carl did this to anyone else in the building, or if he was somehow special.

“Anyways. I had just rolled out the giant George Washington head from storage when Major General Fucknuts drops out of the sky, busts in my door, and demands quarter for two dozen snot faced kids holding machine guns. Well what could I do? I sure as shit ain’t going to start quoting the 3<sup>rd</sup> amendment at them.” He paused a moment. “I did give them the shitty, cheap pillows though,” his eyes shined with mischief. “But they didn’t care. Philistines decided I was a sympathizer.”

Peter just wanted to get to the bottle of Blue that glowed in front of a now quietly sobbing Carl.

“They locked me in here, Pete. I had a family—”

“Hey,” Peter said, trailing off. He was sympathetic. But that sympathy was dulled by the pain of his injury and the countless times he’d heard the same story, though sometimes it was Abe Lincoln’s head, sometimes scratchy duvet covers instead of thin pillows. “As soon as I wake up, why don’t you tell me again how you met your wife?”

“Oh God,” Carl started to laugh again, making a big sucking sound up his nose. “It was love at first sight. That was right when they came out with that new memory foam. Super plush. But the chafing! My dick was like an old radish the next day.”

“She tried to tell you you weren’t in,” Peter smiled at him. “But I want to hear the whole thing okay? I’ll be back on my feet Monday, okay buddy?”

“They’re still out there, Pete. I know they are.”

Carl wiped his nose on his coveralls and gave Peter a big one-armed hug before heading down the hall. He crushed the cigar into the wall as he went, leaving a coal black streak along the fresh paint and belting out an old song Peter sometimes heard people here sing about a man and a dog and a boat on the sea. Then he was gone, the hall smelling like cold embers.

Peter locked the door, grabbed the big bottle and drank it down, licking the moist edges of the lid for every sweet drop. It was thick, like pudding, but when it hit the mouth, turned both thinner and heavier, rushing down his throat faster than he could swallow causing him to choke more than once. Just then the TV timed out and it was so quiet he

could hear his own heart slow as the coma kicked in. He lay down, wrapped in the cigar smoky blanket and drifted off thinking how lucky he was. He would have had twenty more years to go on his sentence if they hadn't invaded these people, given him this chance, and he was grateful. He closed his eyes. The orange glow of the streetlamps clicked on outside his window, the veins of his eyelids casting dark blue cracks across the world.



When Peter woke, the light coming through the window was dim, also as expected, but it was from the east. Sunrise, not sunset. There was a soreness in his chest that he didn't expect and it intensified with each panting breath. He lifted his shirt. The bruise was pale now, but not completely gone. He pushed into it and felt a slight twinge, then harder until he let out a yelp. He knew it wasn't a dream, the pain felt different in there. Shouting erupted outside and he walked over to the window.

“Oh, God.”

A couple of patrol soldiers were stumbling down the middle of the street, clearly drunk, and jabbing Carl along with their riot batons.

*What the fuck are you doing outside, Carl?* Peter thought as he struggled to tie his shoes. His chest burned and he slipped the little bottle into his pants pocket.

“Hey!” Peter shouted as he busted out the door, knocking the doorman aside and throwing on a light blue parka with a big star-and-circle across the back. He ran across the plaza yelling and waving his hands.

The two soldiers stopped pushing Carl and turned toward Peter in unison, fog streaming through their clenched teeth.

“You Blue guzzling shit,” one of them said, pointing a finger at Peter while the other grabbed Carl by the scruff of the neck. “You better watch how...how you talk...D’you know who we are, Convict?”

“Please, sirs, he’s a sympathizer. He lives right here in this building.”

“I don’t see no pass on him.” He seized Carl’s left arm and wrenched his bare wrist into the air.

“No, it’s not like that, he’s exempt! He’s a sympathizer!” Peter stepped forward but was stopped short by a large hand on his chest as the other soldier twisted Carl’s arm harder, making him to howl in pain.

“So you know this trash?” His face now close enough that Peter winced at the mist of whiskey spattering his face. “Because we found this guy doin’, some...some sneaky shit down by the wall.”

Peter couldn’t think, he was still weak from the medicine.

“And if he is a spy, and you’re his buddy—” he stabbed Peter with his finger. The soldier’s eyes got wide and he grinned a crazed grin at Peter, drawing a long knife out of the inside of his coat.

“You’re goddamn animals!” Carl yelled. “Colonialist cucks! You can lick the crease up my balls!”

The soldier grabbed Peter by the collar as the blood drained from his face. In an instant Peter yanked his sleeve and held out the yellow cuff causing his assailant to stagger back as if blinded by it.

“My apologies, Civilian,” the soldier snapped to attention and gave his best salute, slicing the air with his knife as his hand flew up. “We appreciate all that you do for the effort.”

“I got your salute right here, you pussies,” Carl grabbed at his crotch with his free hand. He laughed then coughed as a heavy boot hit him in the back. He collapsed onto the pavement.

“Hold him, I said!” The soldier turned away from Peter and walked to where Carl lay flat on his belly, both arms now bent behind his back and held high into the air, only a breath away from snapping.

Complete silence filled the street as light tipped over the edge of the sea and spread out over them.

“You want to see something?” the soldier remarked carelessly over his shoulder.

The sun was in Peter’s eyes, and the three men like shadows, struggled, merged into a vulgar silhouette. Peter looked around for help and saw only the doorman, watching silently from his post.



Peter banged open the doors of the clinic dragging a sputtering Carl over his shoulders. He could feel fresh blood soaking through his shirt.

“Did you see?” Carl asked. “They got my piss all over their boots. I win again, Pete! Oh, oh fuck me, I think I’m dyin—”

Two nurses rushed out and helped put Carl on a gurney and rolled him into triage. His eyes had closed and head lolled as they shifted him onto his side to suture wounds and stretch sterile dressing over bright, raw patches across his body. Peter stood trembling as they worked, staring at the mangled flesh on the table and twirling his wrist cuff again. Several nurses fussed over Peter and asked if he had been injured, checking him for fresh cuts or bruises that would require documentation.

Peter tried to tell them about his ribs, how he must've gotten the wrong dose, how he shouldn't even be awake yet, but no one seemed to be listening. A quiet figure in a dark uniform which Peter had never seen, stepped into the room and hovered in a corner, watching. One nurse became clearly agitated and broke off to lead Peter toward the door as another stepped in with an injection of pure Blue, jabbing it behind Carl's ear.

"He'll be fine now sir," the nurse said to Peter, "you should go home. Enjoy your weekend."

"What? No, I'll stay with him."

"Sir," the nurse said, slow this time, her eyes twitching as the dark uniform slid past them and into the hall to speak with three similarly outfitted men who had just arrived.

"He'll be fine. Please go home."

Peter's temper flared and he raised his wrist cuff again.

"I'm not leaving. You want to make me?" He stepped toward her and she retreated a step back in return.

“The doctor will be in shortly.” She pursed her lips and spat the words at him as if hoping they were acid. Peter slipped over to Carl and stood facing the door, his back against the gurney. He heard Carl’s breathing, now steady, but weak.

“Hey.” Peter turned to see Carl, one eye open, his fingers pulling a white paper from the pocket of his cut open coveralls. He winced with every tug and as he tried to hold it out to Peter, it fell onto the floor. The stark white of the paper was smudged with congealed blood where it had been pinched between his fingers.

Peter picked up the paper and closed his fist around it as Dr. Edvin paced in reading a file. She breezed past Peter as if he weren’t there.

“How are you feeling Carl?” asked Dr. Edvin.

There was no reply, Carl had succumbed to the deep coma of the injection. Peter could already see a cut along his shoulder begin to harden and pale.

“You’re a good man to bring him in, Peter” said Dr. Edvin, “but you should go home.”

Peter didn’t move.

“It’s okay. You’ve got your pass. Look at it, look at your arm. It saved you both today.”

The yellow cuff was stained with blood.

“Why?” Peter asked. “I don’t understand, we’re all in this together, aren’t we? They wanted to kill him. Me too!”



“They know they can’t do that,” mumbled Dr. Edvin as she scribbled with visible agitation in Carl’s file.

“But they would! They would if they could get away with it. If it weren’t for these damn things.” Peter began to frantically claw at the pass wrapped firmly around his forearm. It was still good for another twenty-four hours, but it had begun to weaken. He was crying and tearing at it with his fingernails, managing to get a little bit loose, until he felt a prick and saw the doctor injecting a dark pinkness into his bloodstream. Peter stopped clawing, for just a moment, and felt the panic subside. He took a new breath and it was like vinegar in his lungs. But the burning eased in less than a minute and he calmed, aware of every speck of light in the room.

Dr. Edvin capped the needle and slipped it quickly into her inside jacket pocket, turning back toward the cabinets to gather fresh boxes of gauze.

“You like animals, Peter?” Peter couldn’t speak, and she continued as if she really hadn’t expected him to. “When I was a little girl, we had many animals; I loved them very much.”

Peter’s eyes flashed every color he had ever seen.

“Now my uncle, he had dogs, nothing else. Dozens and dozens of them,” continued Dr. Edvin “but he did not love them.”

“Then why did he have them?” Peter found his voice, but it came out as a faint croak.

The doctor stopped for a moment and looked back at him, then went back to her work.

“Some, he had for fighting. Have you ever seen a dog fight, Peter?”

Peter shook his head.

“A terrible sight. Once dogs begin to fight they are all teeth and frenzy, a snarling, snapping brutality. Their mind is gone.”

“What were the others for? You said ‘some’ were for fighting.”

She looked up at Peter and smiled a large, toothy grin. “Ah. Good boy, Peter.”

“I think I want to go home.”

“Enjoy your weekend, Peter.”



Outside, Peter opened the blood-sticky paper Carl had passed him to see an address with the star and circle scrawled beneath it. It was different, however, in that the points of the star were slightly longer, piercing the edges of the ring.

He arrived, late in the afternoon at what turned out to be an abandoned bus terminal. The convenience shuttles were the only allowable public transportation and the dozens of buses that connected routes to the old suburbs and exurbs outside the wall sat in rows around the building, rusting. There was no one around, the street swept by a thick carpet of vines and moss that had found purchase in cracked asphalt and around the rails for the old commuter train. Behind all this, the wall loomed fifty feet high. A government approved horizon.

He walked around the building, and saw a row of large, green and brown colored steel dumpsters covered with debris from rain and years of falling leaves. There was one,

however, that sat apart from the others, flat against the wall. The too big star and circle scratched lightly into the paint like patriotic graffiti.

Peter opened the lid, slowly, and as he peeked over the rim he saw that it was empty save an oil-stained square of plywood leaning against the back wall. It was nothing. The fear and anger from earlier grew again and he shook the dumpster it with all his strength, until he felt the pain tear through his side and shook harder, not caring about the loud metal clang ringing out in the desolation. The flap of plywood fell over with a soft slap and he saw a large hole in the steel; a slight, shivering light sifting through from somewhere beyond.

He climbed inside and poked his head into the hole. The sharp edges of the opening had been smoothed over and there was a tunnel through the inside of the wall the texture of melted aluminum. Overwhelmed by curiosity, he crawled through and when he came out the other side, he was inside a thicket of brambles. Their tiny spring leaves just starting to bud and reach for the sun. Briars clawed at Peter's exposed arms and made tiny papercut slices in his skin. He saw the edge of the old rail line running up to where the wall had been dropped. The mangled remains of a train engine remained there as a testament to the desperation of the early resistance effort. It barely made a dent.



He took short, halting step down the tracks, reaching a junction as the loud growl of a motor bore down on him. He dove into the thick bracken that followed alongside the rails, thorns jabbing him like bees as a troop transport lumbered by on the road. Traffic, it turned out, was fairly constant, but he could walk a bit, duck down, then walk some more and in a few hours he passed far beyond the wall and deep into the countryside. He began to whistle Carl's tune quietly to himself. Around a bend in the tracks several abandoned boxcars sat

lined up on a siding and he crouched and slid beneath one of them as another convoy passed on the road. Finally, it was quiet again.

Night swept over the landscape, Peter thought about walking through the night, but trembled in the cold. He tried laying down to rest in the tunnel between the rusted wheels of the train but spied a gap in the floor of the boxcar overhead. The crisscrossing beams of thick metal had corroded into spikes, like a pile of old daggers. Peter carefully placed his palm flat onto one of them until it bent out of the way. He continued, one by one, until all their jagged teeth pointed into the coal black interior of the car. His shoulders pinched between them as he struggled up through the hole, every movement clanging back into his ears from a hundred angles. He was free.



Peter awoke to a sharp knocking sound. Dozens of tiny suns pushing through the holes and cracks in the train car. He lowered himself back through the ring of spikes and onto the gravel between the rails, catching his sleeve on one of the rusty teeth and nearly tearing it all the way off.

He looked around, but could see nothing except scattered tufts of mist climbing the far hillsides. The noise came again, more of a popping now and less distant than before. Peter recognized that they were gunshots. Several firing right on top of each other and a few breaking through long silences like hiccups after a held breath. Peter knew his only choice was to cross the road and continue down the tracks. Every other direction was open field. The guns were firing ahead of him, but away from the tracks, beyond the thick woods that grew up along both sides of the embankment here. He looked, saw no vehicles before reaching up to bend back each rough, rust-sharpened spike to hide the hole he had made. It

was more difficult to pull them back down and he tore off his dangling sleeve, wrapping it around his hand for protection. The last blade snapped off, leaving him holding a fat sliver of brittle steel. He looked at it for a moment and then slipped it into the pocket of his parka. The shots ceased and birdsong from migrant flocks filled the silence. He walked for a while, just listening to the birds and noting each new flash of color and flick of tail in the trees.

“Turn around!”

The voice was so close, so loud that his hands shot up, yellow band dangling. It was Monday, and it had begun to disintegrate. Thin layers flaking off and drifting to the ground, but it still held firm.

“Hurry then,” barked the voice again. “Run!”

Peter squinted in the direction of the voice and could just make out several figures through the trees and brush. They were dashing away, across a field until a dozen guns fired in near instantaneous succession, then went quiet. The runners had disappeared, and for a moment, the world was ringing.

Peter heard men laughing. He crept over the rails, sliding low down the trunk of a great dead tree which had fallen across the abandoned rails. He squatted down behind its cracked-off stump at the edge of the field.

A line of soldiers was pulling prisoners from the back of one of the transport trucks he'd seen passing that day. Mostly men, but there were also women and even children among the group; all wearing worn fatigues or torn and dirty flannel shirts. Each soldier led one person by the arm to the center of the field as they struggled to get free. The soldiers with children pulled two. One in each hand.

“Turn around!”

Each soldier wrenched the shoulders of those they had been facing until the captives looked out over a field strewn with bodies. Some were close, a few feet away, but most were farther away. The cries grew louder but the officer continued, the same as before.

“Run!”

The line of captives stood motionless for a moment, so he raised the pistol from his coat and fired into the air over their heads several times until they began to break for the trees across the wide field.

At first, the soldiers only watched, but began to fidget as the fastest of their quarry passed halfway to the trees. Then, in unison, rifles raised and began to fire. Soon, only one runner remained. He had been with the soldier at the end, who was visibly agitated as the officer held him by the shoulder, whispering into his ear. Just as the man reached the far edge of the field and began clambering over the knot of dead lined up like a tumble-down stone wall, the officer raised his hand. Less than a second later, the climbing figure grasped his leg and fell forward over the bodies, out of sight. As the ringing from the shot faded, Peter could just make out slight movements as the man crawled into the woods and began to work his way up the hill from tree to tree.

“Goddamit Pinkett, you know what happens if he gets away don’t you?” yelled the officer, holding out his pistol to the soldier.

Pinkett dropped his rifle and took off with the pistol at a full sprint. He ran across the long field and vaulted into the trees.

By the time Pinkett returned the other soldiers were loading into the trucks. He stopped to remove his helmet, wiping the sweat from his forehead and Peter knew him instantly. It was the young soldier who had broken his rib four days ago. He had the same broken smile.

“Pinkett!” Peter watched the officer approach again, dragging another disheveled looking prisoner along by the back of his neck. He struggled fiercely, painting the sky with curses, and getting in a couple of good kicks as he passed the other soldiers. Watching him fight made Peter feel jealous, and a certain admiration toward him.

“This one was hiding in the back,” said the officer as another soldier struggled to tie the man’s arms and legs. “That last bit was some poor shooting soldier. Get some practice in.”

“Yes sir!” replied Pinkett as he handed back the pistol and picked up his rifle again.

“Good, we’re going to do another sweep to the west and we’ll be back at 1800.”

The other soldiers and the officer piled into the back of the trucks and drove away through the field until they were back on the dusty road and out of sight. Pinkett swung his helmet by the strap and struck the kneeling man in the head, knocking him to the ground.

“Get up you trash,” snarled Pinkett. The man remained sprawled in the thick grass and spit through the dirt on his lips. Pinkett laughed and dragged him up to his knees again, placing the tip of his rifle against the man’s temple. “If you rats would just die, I could go home, you know?”

“This is my home,” said the man.

“Well at least you get to die here,” growled Pinkett. “You’re doing better than—”

The rest was lost as a sliver of rust-pocked steel severed his trachea. Pinkett dropped the gun, clawing at his throat and Peter's face as the two men fell together. When Pinkett stopped jerking, Peter felt the skin on his fingers prickle and tear as he pulled his fingers away from the blade. The struggle had sliced through the thin, shirtsleeve handle and his own blood mixed with Pinkett's.

“Hurry, friend. There's still time.”

Peter looked up at who he had saved, no longer on his knees but struggling to stand on wobbly legs. He was sure he could hear the faint sucking of the earth as it swallowed down all this blood.

Peter untied the man's bonds. “Come on,” the man motioned with his head toward the hill, “and grab that rifle. We may need it.”

They walked through the carnage and toward the hill until they began to pass the bodies and bones of the fallen. Peter looked at each one as they walked.

“There's a camp a few ridges over, to the west like they said, but it's a long drive around. If we cut across these hills, we can warn them.” The mist had lifted enough that Peter could see a higher ridge rising beyond the first one.

“You're going to be a hero when I tell everyone what you've done here,” the man remarked as they passed the still figure of a man wrapped tightly around the child he had tried to protect.

“Those murdering pieces of shit. Well there's more of us than them, we've just got to keep it up.” He turned back to Peter, falling behind, steps slowing to study each face.



Hey, let's go," the man called. "Camp is only a mile. We'll get everyone moved and plan our next move. We won't give up. We can't."

"No."

Peter was sweating. The man stood ahead of him at the base of the first hill, just short of stepping over the dead and into the forest beyond.

"Where are my manners?" the man said sighing, turning with a faint smile washed in tears. "I'm Ettis."

Peter's mouth went dry. He saw every face in that field at once and his own among them.

"No."

Peter raised the rifle, firing a single round. Ettis staggered onto his knees again, then farther.

It was quiet. Evening came on and there was no one on the road as a light rain fell. He reached the wall just before daybreak and scrambled back through the tunnel, trudging for miles across empty streets. It was Tuesday, Peter was due back at work in a few hours. He looked at his wrist and saw the yellow cuff, disintegrating into thin flakes and blowing away. As the dark sky faded to light gray, he passed into a neighborhood with bright streetlights lining the sidewalk. His clothes were torn and dirty, smeared with blood, fingers sliced raw where he buried the knife in Pinkett's throat. He heard loud voices come around the corner ahead and fished out the little boy from his pocket, drinking it down, feeling it spread out. Like old times. The last of the yellow cuff flaked free and tumbled away in the

breeze and Peter stepped out, at just the right moment. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he blubbered as everyone staggered back to their feet.

Peter glanced around to see who would come at him first and there it was; the flash in the eye like a coin catching light, shining up through trembling water. He hung his head, closed his eyes. Waiting for it to come.

## Penultimate

The quarantine was considered an absolute triumph by any standard. Military strategists and the CDC made the rounds on twenty-four-hour news giving each other verbal high fives. Ratings soared. Reporters pleaded to hear the story again and again.

“It went off like clockwork,” they would say. “Procedures were followed to the letter—Airtight perimeter—Full containment.”

They would lean back in their swivel chairs and declare, with a look that was practically post-coital; “Neutralized.”

This was Sunday. The outbreak had started the previous Wednesday, just before lunch, at the third largest chicken processing facility in Nebraska. One of the faceless, masked workers on the evisceration line threw up, which in itself wasn’t unusual. The sight and smell of thousands of pounds of intestines, not to mention the occasional nicked open bowel, caught up with everyone eventually. The recovered security footage showed the worker sitting in the breakroom, the only fresh air for miles around piped in from tanks in the basement. His head hanging, pale and quivering. A line manager, in white shirt and tie, was pacing the floor, raving about quotas and throughput. Then, suddenly, he stopped. Thick blood was pooling like honey on the floor beneath the slack form of the worker. They looked up in shock and tried to speak, but it was a low, grumbling gibberish that slipped out through blackened lips.

At this point, investigators had to switch to the hall cameras as the manager stepped briskly out of the room only to be approached by another worker from the packaging line, who was complaining of feeling flush, even in the chillers. The report noted that he took a full five seconds to adjust his tie. In later interviews he described how, looking into the face of

another of the hundreds of nameless butchers in his charge, he noticed a small bead of crimson rising out of her ear. He unlocked the breakroom, shoved the worker in, and rebolted the door from the outside. Other witnesses would corroborate that he ran, screams echoing down the hall, toward his office overlooking the plant floor where the pendulous, yellow flesh of hanging birds swaying silently over the sick and dying. In a final administrative act, he locked down the plant remotely and called the police, who called the hospital, who called the governor, and so on, until there was a mile-wide perimeter through the empty cornfields around the plant, cut stalks lying at all angles, paling in the sun. The TV footage showed men with guns, looking like ants scattered in a wide circle while helicopters circled above.

~

“You know Sammy from packaging?”

“Who?”

“Sammy. Big guy, buck teeth.”

“Oh yeah, has that wolf tat on his hand, right? Dude’s always talking about the time he got laid at that Metallica concert in Omaha.”

“Yeah, Well, he went blind and collapsed at breakfast. The King’s Men hauled him away before it got gross.”

These kinds of conversations quickly became routine around the quarantine facility. Those that survived the initial outbreak at the plant were loaded into trucks by rows of faceless white hazmat suits, each one pointing an automatic rifle at their heads. Once they reached the facility, helicopter footage showed the survivors stumbling over those who died in transit.

Several hours later, when everyone was settled in and wearing their white paper gowns, death was losing its shock. Dying at breakfast meant someone got an extra sandwich at lunch and if you bled to death alone in the night, your pillow was missing before the doctors did morning rounds. They even began referring to the people in the suits that continued to drift among them, cleaning up after the dead, as “The King’s Men.” They all looked the same, moved the same, and still hadn’t been able to put a single one of them back together again.

~

Frank was in his cell, a comfortable sized rectangle with a bed and a table, sitting on his newly acquired chair cushion, watching The King’s Men mop up the drizzling trail left by a sheet covered gurney as it rolled by. The gurney likely carried his neighbor John, now off to the furnace.

“Head—fine.” Frank reported to himself.

“Kidneys—okay.”

“Eyes—focused.”

The list was a self-diagnostic the doctors had given them when they arrived. It was like a mantra and helped to ease panic during the initial settling in phase.

“Blood—inside.”

At first, Frank had found the facility intimidating. On arrival, the first thing that struck him was the utter whiteness of it all. The walls, ceiling, floors, even the furniture was the same blinding shade of pure white. Each patient had his or her own cell, which the doctors called “suites.” Which everyone agreed wasn’t as charming as it was meant to be. Each suite came with a single bed and a table with a wooden chair. The difference between the rooms and a

prison cell were that there were no doors and one wall in every room was composed of thick Plexiglas that looked into a lab. Four little, black portholes held accordion sleeve gloves that dangled into the room.

“Looking good today Frank.”

Startled, Frank looked up to see one of the doctors had appeared behind the glass, speaking in a rote monotone without looking up from his clipboard. “How’s your stool?”

“Everyone says it flushes into a little room under the toilet and you guys pick at it with tweezers.”

“Forceps.”

“What?”

“They’re called forceps,” the doctor replied with heavy eyes and a sigh. “Lift your arms please.”

“Those are just science tweezers.” Frank had tried this line several times, but no one ever laughed. In his old life he had been remarkably wry. Everyone said so. Several ex-girlfriends had remarked on it. Now he’d become one more inevitable mess for someone to clean up.

It wasn’t all probes and doom however. Every day there was a new treatment or procedure, or experiment. Because everyone tested positive for the infection, there was nothing to lose. Any hypothesis was cause for hope. Every pill a long-shot ticket home.

On the first day, they were given a powerful antibiotic. Given the symptoms, shortness of breath and complete cardiovascular rupture, that were the most visible effects of the disease,

it was assumed to be viral in nature. In each paper cup, mixed in with their dose, was a horse-pill sized capsule of Echinacea. The herbal supplement industry had immediately mobilized truckloads of dusty capsules. Each ground up ounce of earth a potential noble alchemy.

At roll call the next morning the doctors counted fifty-seven dead of the remaining two hundred patients. As the King's Men burned bodies and the survivors looted the untended suites, it was agreed that there was no sense in dwelling on it.

The next four days consisted of a cocktail of rainbow-colored antibiotics, antivirals, and opioids that seemed to possibly slow the progress for some, though thirty more were dead by the end of the week. In the end, it was determined that some people merely had higher or lower resistance to the still unidentified infection. All those pills had really had no effect whatsoever.

After that came radiation. Large tumors had begun to grow on the skin of several of those that resisted a swift death. The malignancy of these growths was such that hands and feet began to swell and fuse like a lobster's tender claws after the molt. For the sake of expedience, everyone was placed on the strongest chemo regimen possible. A week later, they were all bald, sicker than ever, another sixty dead. Whether from the infection, or the effects of excessive radiation no one could say for sure. The treatment was scrubbed and no one from the medical team spoke of it again.

There were just a little over fifty people left.

At this point, it had been almost a month since the trucks brought them here and the dwindling population that roamed the halls found little comfort in the screens in the cafeteria and throughout the halls announcing "a new treatment" followed, inevitably, by the maxim: "Never give up hope!"

No one seemed to benefit from such empty optimism any more than they did from medical treatment. But the scores of dead left a lot of empty cells and the patients decided to use these open rooms to make a town in miniature. There was a library, with books slipped in to them with meals and a meeting space where disagreements could be arbitrated by a neutral third infected. There was even an art room with pencils, paper, and some paints given to them after the chemo debacle –by way of an apology.

Most popular, by far, was the sex room. As it became more and more evident that nothing was helping, patients began to seek what reprieve they could from the nausea and terror of waiting to die. The room was one of the few with a door, built by one of the maintenance men from the plant with pieces of chairs and cots. This room was occupied so frequently that it was always humid when you walked in and contained an overpowering musk, as people fucked, masturbated, or even just passed by to catch a whiff of pheromones.

“It’s an outbreak, from their pants,” one of the hazmat suited workers remarked smirking through their plastic helmet window as he refilled the tub of condoms beneath the bed.

And so, in this way, the not-dead-but-dying passed the time, eating, fucking, reading, sleeping. A few more people bled from the ears, or eyes, flesh dissolving into puddles at their feet. Men with mops and carts scrubbed the memory of their existence and time marched on. Another month passed and when Heather appeared in the cafeteria, Frank realized he hadn’t seen another person in several days. He’d been keeping odd hours. It was three in the morning and he was completely alone in the cafeteria. Empty tables filled the room, their hard surfaces echoing the sound of his fork on the tray as he ate a slightly stiff pile of spaghetti he found left on the counter from last night’s dinner. He saw movement out of the corner of his



eye and knew who it was instantly. She had fashioned a bandanna out of a pillowcase and wore it long in the back like she used to back when she worked in the plant and still had hair. Her noticed that her eyebrows had just started to grow back in.

“Hey,” she said.

He didn’t look up.

“Looks like it’s just you and me huh?” She sat down. “I wanted to say sorry about the other day. You know we’re dying and all and I just didn’t think it mattered that much to you.”

“Don’t worry about it, it doesn’t matter.”

“Bullshit,” she said, touching his cheek. “We’re all we have left, and we’re going to die, so let’s not waste time on this.”

“But Bill? Really?” he asked. “You know he’s the one that trapped us all in the plant, don’t you? Maybe we could’ve escaped.”

“Escaped to what?” she asked flinging her arms wide. “Look around Frankenstein, we’re all that’s left. No one escaped, and no one will. We’re fucked sweetie.”

“Yeah, but we, you know, the day before we—”

“Yeah we did, and it was great, but for some reason I wanted to ride that big bald bastard just once. Life’s too short not to get off on whatever you can Frank.”

“Was he better than me?”

“There’s no better, no worse,” she laid a hand softly on his. “And you know what? He cried after. Cried for his wife, his kids, and six hours later he was dead.”

“He deserved it.”

“Okay, this jealousy thing?” she sat back and crossed her arms. “Very unattractive. You may be the only dick left in our little world, but you are seriously hurting your chances at being my rebound.”

“But, I love you.”

“Love me?” she laughed a wild laugh. “You’re really taking this dying thing hard. Okay, fine. I love you too.”

He smiled, because he knew she was right. This was absurd. They sat together for a while and told stories about Bill, and Manny, and Four-finger Joe and the Gizzard Boys—all gone now. The food shutters had risen for breakfast before they realized it.

“So what now?” asked Frank.

“Fuck room?” she suggested.

“Alright guys,” came a booming voice over the intercom, “the next treatment is ready. Head over to Room 12 please.”

They looked at each other with resigned bemusement.

“Rain check?”

“Jinx.”

It had been days and days since the last attempt at treatment. The King’s Men had been muttering that the medical team was running out of ideas and were focusing on a “data collection” endgame. Indeed, after what happened to Manny during the plasma therapy, the doctors seemed to have lost their appetite for even the routine daily check-ups.

Frank and Heather ambled down the long hall toward Room 12. It was a large, circular expanse, more like a concert hall than a hospital room, and when they entered, they immediately noticed that unlike every other room in the entire facility, this one had been painted entirely black.

“Please wait.”

It was the voice of the Director over the loudspeaker. He had been a constant presence at the facility, overseeing all aspects of treatment and observation. But a few weeks ago, he vanished. There were rumors that he was off meeting with practitioners of alternative medicine in his search for a cure.

The King’s Men were busy positioning a large, angular stone in the center of the room. It was tall and lean, hard edges narrowing to a sharp point at eye level. In the faint light of the room it seemed to shimmer. Slightly green, then blue, then darker.

“Sir, move to the left please.”

Frank walked over to the side of the room where a diagnostic monitor was set up next to a circle of light that shined down like a stage light from somewhere in the dark above. He was hooked in, his vital signs beeping along as a round cage was lowered onto his head until it rested on his shoulders. It looked like the head stabilizer from an MRI machine, like the one they had used the day everyone arrived, to get a baseline on their internal structure, but unlike the light plastic one, this seemed to be made of iron and smelled of old earth. His knees buckled a bit under the weight.

“Try to stand still sir.”

Across the room, Frank could see Heather's face, bisected by the narrow tip of the shimmering stone. She had been outfitted in the same way and he could see now that the helmet looked like a very tall, cylindrical birdcage rising a foot beyond the top of her head.

"You look ridiculous!" he yelled out, but his words seemed muffled as if sucked into the dark vacuum beyond the narrow ring of light.

"Please remain calm," came the voice over the speaker.

After several minutes of silence, while their vital signs beeped in echoing concert, the voice came again.

"Okay you two, we're going to try a simple transfusion today. We'll be starting in a moment."

Two figures entered wearing the standard hazmat suits, though these were colored black to match the room. They approached Frank and Heather separately and began to fumble with the IV equipment with their huge fingered gloves, pulling tubes up from coils laid beside them on the floor.

"Wait," said Frank, turning his head from side-to-side in an attempt to see through the bars of his helmet. He tried to look down where his wrists were being shackled to his sides only to discover that his head cage was tethered to the rattling clank of a metal chain. "Transfusion with who? We're the only two here! What good is this?"

He could see that Heather was also struggling against her bonds, he could faintly hear her yelling something he couldn't make out, her voice like the ocean from the deep curve of a seashell.

Then the Director's flat, tired voice came over the intercom again. "Calm, please. This is going to be a bit unorthodox, but understand that we are trying everything we can to save you." There was a pause. "We will begin in a moment."

Then, from somewhere beyond his sight, Frank felt a sting. As the needle slid into his arm he was consumed by a deep, cold dread that crept over his skin. He began to breathe in panting fits, eyes flickering around the room for something, anything that made sense. The two black-suited figures moved away from them and toward the stone, lifting the tubing as they went and inserting the end of each into the surface of the rock which appeared to give and swallow up the tips of the plastic hoses like clay. A dull shine began to pulse from the sharp angles of the stone as Frank watched his tube slowly fill with a thick blackness, sloughing toward his veins.

The clink of chain from the cages atop their heads was now the only sound in the room until a booming, baritone moan vibrated from loudspeakers and through the chamber. Frank looked up to the observation booth where the director had been standing. Throughout the bright, fluorescent lit observation theatre doctors were slumped over in their chairs and across instrument panels. Their bodies splayed in violent, strained positions, bent across chairs, arms twisted in flailing motions against the glass as if they'd been struck down as they fled. At the center, robed in darkness so pure as to defy the eye's ability to focus on it, was a giant of a man, wrapped in sable cloth and wearing a mask that revealed only the pasty white bulge of enormous, doughy jowls. He read from a black book he held in front of him with both hands outstretched as if to keep it at a safe distance. The words were impossible to make out through the low rumble of the voice speaking them.

Frank's vision began to fade. His skull felt as if it were being pulled from every side until he was overcome with a peacefulness of spirit. He stared up at the booth, at the pale mouth behind the microphone.

He did not even notice the small, creeping figure until it brushed around his legs. Looking down, he could just make out a shining, slithering shape circling him. It left him and moved toward Heather, the shape of it becoming more evident, like a tadpole dropped on the sidewalk. It reached her and began to draw, as best as he could make out, an ornate circle around her feet. The design was ringed with strange shapes and letters in random patterns. It finished and shot back toward Frank. The voice in the room became filled with a desperate force as the slithering shape stretched back toward him. Frank watched its approach and, just before disappearing below the rim of the cage, it looked up into his face.

Two rows of grey teeth, thin and sharp as spikes grinned up at him from the creature's thin lips. Yellow, diamond eyes assessed him. Frank wanted to scream. He wanted to run. All he could feel was an impenetrable calm as the creature, in finishing the conduit linking Frank to Heather, made a chittering sound. At the same moment, the thick flow from the stone reached the needle in his vein and was sucked inside. He closed his eyes against a blinding flash of pain.

When he opened them again, he was floating. One by one tiny white lights began to blink on all around him and he could sense the walls moving away. He was certain that he must be adrift in space, peacefully falling to nowhere, from nowhere. His body bobbed alone in a weightless void.

"This is death," he thought.

And it was okay, it was actually pretty good. To be past hope is to take a great deep breath and feel the most remarkable peace fill your senses.

After a while Frank heard a voice calling out in his private abyss, distant and muffled, but calling his name. He tried to ignore it, but it became louder and persisted until it began to hurt his ears. He tried to cover them with his hands but it did no good. The voice seemed to be inside his head, familiar, and he felt himself fall then, faster and faster, legs and arms flapping helplessly. The glittering stars blinked their furnace lights at him from impossible distances and he screamed into the void.

Frank's eyes shot open again and he saw the face of his mother bending over him. He was in a white room, lying down. His mother looking down upon him with relief and love.

"You're okay sweetie. I'm here," she said tracing his face with her hand and pushing back a strand of hair that had fallen from behind her ear and onto his forehead.

"It worked," he whispered. His voice was weak; he reached up toward his mother's hand. It was then he saw a single tear of blood escape the corner of her eye before feeling a tap as it dripped onto his thin paper gown.

"No. No Mom, no," he stammered.

"Oh honey, it's not your fault," she said. "No one can stop it. This is the end of all things."

With that, she lifted one arm and, with the other, ran her long, withered fingers down the length of her forearm, digging crimson painted nails into the flesh. It ripped into strips like tissue paper revealing a thick, black blood that congealed in an instant, refusing to drip from the wound.

Frank leapt from his bed and saw the door blocked by the creature with the yellow, diamond eyes. It was wavering back and forth on unsteady feet and grinning at him with those needle teeth while waving tentacular arms, curved and boneless. It began to chant his name in a hissing tone, full of menace.

*“Frennk...Frennk...Frennk...”*

Frank turned back in panic just as his mother rested her hands on his shoulders and locked onto his eyes with her own. All of her skin was now torn away and she was covered in a mixture of fresh red and the black blood from before, her eyes fading from green to grey in an instant.

“It’s not your fault,” she hissed through clenched teeth. “No one can stop it.”

A great wail rose from her throat like a siren cutting through the roar of a storm. The air trembled until the cry seemed to come from everywhere and, suddenly, he was on the processing floor again. All his coworkers, alive again, but doubling over, retching blood, crying out as they dissolved all over again, disappeared into the large chrome drains that dotted the concrete. It was happening again. The drains clogged and began to bubble. Darkness began to pool around his feet.

“I don’t know how to stop it,” his mother sounded tired. “I’ve looked everywhere.”

Frank looked back at her then, all her skin was back, but something shifted under beneath it like a body under a sheet.

“We’ve got to run,” he begged, “there’s no time. If we go now—I know how this ends, I’ve seen it! We’ve got to run!” Then quieter “Help me.”



“This is something beyond my kind and kin.” Her eyes were unblinking like and her voice was carried off above them until it began to growl; the dead and dying reaching up with slack arms toward the primal sound. Frank looked up with them and could see a great wriggling shape as the world blackened and it spoke.

“The stars themselves defy me,” it said, “what hope is there for one such as you?”

With these final words, the blood and split flesh choking the drains reached Frank’s mouth. He could feel himself drowning. Tasting the bitter iron of a life at its end. Spitting the red spray from his lips he whispered with his last breath.

“Please. No more.”

He felt himself birthed out of the heavy, warm mire to see flames and undulating mounds of shimmering goo lolling around the room. The tall cage had been removed from his head and he looked down to see Heather frantically yanking against the shackles that bound him to the machines.

“This is gonna hurt like a bitch,” she yelled just as she slid the IV tube out of his arm with a jerk.

For one more moment, pain, primal and violent, his body rejecting and aching for the thick plasma at the same time. The dark, thick liquid from the stone spewed out of the needle and onto the floor where it began to slump away into dark corners, merging with the larger swells.

The room trembled as Frank stepped free of his shackles, stumbling against her into the center of Room 12. Flames twirling from unseen corners, bits of the ceiling crashing

around them. Frank looked up at the control window to see empty space where the hulking black robed figure had stood. Even the slumped bodies of the medical team had disappeared.

“Why won’t we die?” Heather asked.

“What?” he turned back toward her to see a weak grin spread across her face, placid and empty, resigned.

“Are we so fucking special?”

White suits wielding fire extinguishers burst into the room, but Frank and Heather couldn’t look away from each other’s eyes. They were completely black.

~

The Director ordered the lights turned down in consideration of their increased sensitivity to light but, other than that, nothing about the facility changed. Still white on white, and desperately quiet as Frank and Heather sat with their heads down across from each other, thick ceramic mugs steaming in front of them.

It had been three days since the treatment and they stayed together now, always.

The Director appeared at the window to their room. “Well that was a bit of a mess,” he joked. His smile faded and he cleared his throat before continuing. “Yes, well, the results are in and it does look like you both still have the infection. Though we did get some excellent data.”

“Fuck you,” said Frank, his head rolling away from the observation window.

“Fair enough,” replied the Director. “I may as well lay it all out then. We’re out of ideas—and funding. I’m afraid that was our last shot.”

“Are we going to die soon?” asked Heather. Frank turned his head back over toward the sound of her voice. He realized he hadn’t heard it since that day.

“The contagion is rapidly accelerating in both of your systems,” the Director said, staring at his clipboard. “You should both be dead already.”

The next morning at breakfast, Heather was wiping drops of blood from her ears. She laughed and flicked them at Frank when he reached out to hold her hand.

“Looks like this is it,” she said unclipping the ID badge from her chest and tossing it on the table. He didn’t look up as a steady drip of blood pattered from his eyes onto his knees like rain off a heavy branch.

At that moment a lab tech came running into view behind the partition.

“Hey! We got something!” He was knocking on the glass and panting into the speaker, stabbing at the intercom button with his finger. “There’s this new treatment a doctor from Brussels came up with. She’s here and she brought funding, so hold on! We need you back in Room 12 in like,” he looked at his watch, “in five minutes, okay?”

With that he rushed out of the room and they were left alone, sitting in complete stillness.

“No,” Frank said. “I can’t. I’m done.”

He pulled a pair of toothbrushes from his sleeve and slid them to the center of the table. The handle of each had been sharpened to a fine point.

A thin plastic scrape echoed through the room and he looked up then, silently begging her to stop as Heather clipped the ID badge back onto the crisp paper gown, stood, and held out her hand.

“Come on,” she said. “One more try.”

## Gone to Ground

Clementine had never realized how little there was to a neck. The first time her fingers wrapped tight around the throat she discovered the thick mane of oily feathers was nothing but fluffed air. In the end, there were only a palmful of little lined-up stones to chop through and finish the job. This would be try number three, but no one had come to help. Ma and Pa both said it was a rite of passage and everyone nodded along when they did.

The rasping bird was kicking, trying to dig its legs into the stump for leverage, but she held him firm, cocking her foot up on the bird's plump belly to quiet the flailing wings and stretch out the head. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes.

"You goin' to sleep Clem?" called Edgar. He was older than Clementine by a year and had slaughtered his first chicken when Ma was still trying to get her out of diapers, two facts he never let her forget.

Clem turned her head to glare at him, but had a hard time picking him out seeing as the whole family had gathered around to watch.

"Never you mind him," said Ma. "Go on now. Get to your work."

The feel of dozens of eyes on her back unnerved her, but it had been put off for as long as it could. She hitched her up her dress, breathed deep, and swung down with all her strength, embedding the hatchet deep into the blood-browned wood. Her hands flew up and the rooster fluttered down in a rump, then fled into the brush along the edge of the barnyard.

A collective groan went up from the crowd as kids kicked dust on their way back to whatever chore they had left off. The younger ones flushed headfirst in after the rooster, cracking sticks and zig-zagging squeals into the distance.

“You’re getting’ too old for this Clem,” said Ma, she squinched up her eyes in that way that Clem had come to know preceded a long speech about growing up.

“Now Ma, she’ll do it in her own time,” said Pa gently, running his hand over the straw muss of her hair. “No good comes of pushing ‘em into things.”

“That’s not what you said about George.”

Pa stepped in front of Clem. She couldn’t see his face, but Ma’s turned to stone and the challenge in her eyes flickered, then disappeared. She stepped off with a heavy stride, mumbling under her breath.

“Who’s George?” asked Clem.

Pa turned and knelt, looking his daughter up and down. Smiling in that peculiar way that made whatever trouble she was in okay.

“Don’t pay her any attention,” he said. “Now, do you want to help your Ma get some dinner on? Everyone’s gonna be mighty hungry after all the excitement.”

After dinner, everyone gathered on the front porch to tell stories until the sun faded away. Tonight, Jay had the best one. He had come upon a pack of coyotes at the Ridge Field pond and been lucky enough to have a shotgun in his hand.

“I killed the lot of ‘em and skinned every one right there on the bank,” he said as he passed around the paws he’d collected in a tater sack. The marrow still wept blood and you

could bend the toes, just a little. As the light dimmed to the West, Clem watched the sky until the first stars roused into being.

“When do you want to go?” The voice was familiar, but distorted, as if out of a memory or through a wall.

Clem’s eyes closed as voices drifted down to her from the porch and over the scrim of children tangled in the grass; arms and legs poking out in the dusk like stubborn limbs on a fallen tree. Some were teasing each other and giggling or ripping out handfuls of grass to sprinkle in someone’s hair, but things were quiet and getting quieter. Evenings were still warm enough that the dewfall mixed with the workday dirt on their bodies until everyone was wrapped in a thin blanket of mud across arms and necks. The solitary call of a nightjar whirruped across the hills and the voice came to her again, crisp and kind.

“Clementine. When do you want to go?”

She had passed into the pull of sleep and her jaw fell open as she sighed “Maybe tomorrow.”

~

The first thing she saw was a dark eye, with a scratch of reflected light somewhere deep within, shimmering with life. There were dots of indigo and emerald glooping together around the bright slit like drops of oil in a stream. Clem could see a long tail of beautiful feathers bobbing away from her as the eye flicked around on a thin, swiveling neck. A heavy blow kicked into her shoulder, forcing her, flailing, to the ground. Then, another face emerged from the color and darkness, still strange, but more familiar this time. It wore a long black beard that bristled out below a pink, nubby nose, like a baby bird looking over the

edge of its nest. She could only hear a ringing in her ears, but her gaze was drawn down to his erupting mouth and its pale, jabbering lips.

The man pulled her up under her arms and leaned her against something rough. A tree. She could see the branches hanging down and a rifle leaned against the trunk beside her. Her head pounded. She remembered holding the gun, aiming it at an old tin plate, nailed to a fencepost, and then noise, smoke, pain. Her head lolled as Pa appeared just beyond the shady ring beneath the tree. There was yelling, but faint, like it was far away.

“What have you done?”

“She asked me to teach her...”

“I thought I told you to head to town, George.”

The bearded man tried to lift Clem up from the ground, to show that she was okay, but her shoulder was hot and bruised. She cried out in pain. Then, a flash like lightning, a second of pure white, and the sensation of being walloped in the gut. Her body flinched and she awoke mid-fall, her legs catching against the bed.

“Good Morning Clem.” Ma stood in the doorframe, voice measured as usual and her blue prairie dress brushing the rough plank floor. “Let’s get up then. Still need to milk before breakfast.”

After yesterday’s embarrassment, Clem was eager to prove herself. She had the milk back from the goat pen before anyone else woke up.

“You act like the devil himself is after you today Clem.”



“Yes ma’am,” Clem replied as she stoked the wood in the stove and put a pan on to warm for the babies, gurgling to each other in the next room. Pans clattered as she spilled some of the milk onto the griddle where it hissed in a fit of bubbles around the pancakes. She grabbed a rag to wipe it away, scalding a bare finger. She winced but snapped nipples over the bottles with her other hand. Clem was sucking the scald and noticed her mother watching out of the corner of her eye.

“You know you got nothing to prove,” Pa said, wandering in, the smell of a chill early morning trailing in behind him. “Number six had twins last night,” he said looking up at Ma as he knelt to inspect Clem’s hand. “I found her hiding under the big multiflora rose by the cross fence.”

“That’s a good sign,” replied her mother, turning to lean against the sink as she folded her arms. “Twins in the spring means plenty of rain this summer.”

“We’ll see,” said Pa, still examining Clem’s finger.

“I think she’ll live. She’s tougher than you give her credit for.”

“Nothing wrong with a little looking after,” said Pa. He kissed the tip of Clem’s finger and it felt better, but a pressure flared in her chest.

“Everybody thinks I’m a wimp,” said Clem. “I wanted to chop his head off but— Tom whittled me a pacifier and said I wasn’t fit to chew meat.”

Pa winked at her. “Don’t fret, tadpole. Besides, there’s something nice about having you here with Ma anyway, her little helper.” Pa rose to his feet and joined Ma at the kitchen counter to help cut vegetables. “It’s where I want you.” The kitchen echoed as he chopped a thick potato in half with a heavy old knife.

Clem smiled and set back to work at a steady pace watching Ma and Pa joke with each other as they finished putting together breakfast. Clem saw her mother sneaking glances at her husband like she was looking right through him, at a pleasant memory, long gone.

One by one, full-bellied children wandered away from the table, banging the screen door open and groaning as they stepped into the sun. Clem was clearing dishes when she noticed a book on the counter she'd never seen before. In thin black ink, set deep in old leather, the cover read *Exotic Birds of the World*. She wondered who was reading it. A giant peacock with a long train of glittering feathers looked out at her with the same eye she'd seen in her dream. Her fingers traced over the embroidered figure, feeling the fine carve in each feather.

The next thing she knew, she was rubbing aimlessly at the dishes in the sink. Her littlest brother, Abe, was crying and tugging her dress. Apparently, he had been at it for a while, thick snot running into the corners of his mouth. His face was red with wailing, but she hadn't heard a thing. But for how long, she couldn't say.

She lifted him and he quieted, then sat him in his highchair beneath a cross stitch next to the dinner table that read, *We Eat Together, Or Starve Alone*. Ma said it was an old saying when she was a girl. The old times were rough, and they were lucky to be rid of them. Abe started to fuss again and stick his whole fist in his mouth. Clem pulled it out and found the wiggling rear of a little stag beetle. He had tried to swallow it, but the horns had pinched onto his cheek on the way down. She scolded him as she fished it out then set him loose so she could fetch wet laundry from the machine.

The harvest last fall had been enough to splurge on a second-hand electric washer. But drying was still a hand done affair. Clem was clipping a heavy sheet to the line stretched between a couple of oaks when a breeze whipped up and wrapped the wet cloth around her face in its pure, cool scent. There, she heard that voice, calling her, again.

“When do you want to go?”

She pulled her face free from the sheet to see Luke leaning against one of the oaks, in the shade of its ancient trunk. He had one leg kicked up on the tree. The sun at his back made him disappear into the shadow.

“You look like a chicken brooding a blacksnake Clem.” he said grinning at her, a grass stem stuck out between his lips like the serpent’s tongue. “Did I sneak up on ya?”

“Well, yes you did!” she sputtered, making her face look mean and turning away. “What are you doing here?”

“Pa sent me in from the field. Mower’s busted. He and Lenny are working on it.”

“So you get the day off then? Sure be nice if the rest of us got that kind of consideration.”

“Ha! You don’t do hardly anything anyway; your hands are soft as a pig’s belly.” She held up her burned finger from this morning to show him, but the blister had completely vanished where Pa had kissed it.

“What do you want you old cottonmouth? Go bother someone else.”

“I will, don’t you worry. Pa said I should do the rounds and see if anyone needs some help. But he said I should check on you first, especially after yesterday,” Luke

snickered. "He says you're the hardest working woman in this outfit. But I think he's just soft on you 'cause you were born weak."

"Me? Weak?" she said chuckling through her anger. "Why you boys are made of mamma's lace compared to me."

Luke dusted his hands on his pants and started to walk toward the barn.

"Well, that's good then, just wanted to make sure you were still fiery. You got a long way to burn yet."

He gave her a strange look when he said that; a searching look, that made him seem lost in thought. But it was only a phantom across his face before he started down the hill into the short green grass leading to the barn.

"Wait!" Clem burst out, grasping the overalls she had pulled out of the wash basket tightly to her chest. "Who's George?"

"Couldn't say," he called carelessly over his shoulder "no George in this menagerie. Maybe it's that snake?"

She looked down, half expecting to find it coiled around her leg. But there was nothing. She looked back at Luke's receding figure, loping across the distance, arms swinging wide as he got smaller and smaller. She watched him until he disappeared into the barn then hung the coveralls on the line. Each clothespin smelled of damp wood, dug from deep beneath the earth.

Late that night, when the last of the children had been carried to bed. Clem sat in the parlor with Ma and Pa as they worked out the figures for supplies going in and out and what to expect when the calves hit the ground so they could make do until they were ready to

slaughter. Clem was listening quietly, knitting a scarf from some sheep's wool she had spun over winter when Zelda walked into the room and sat down at the table across from Pa. She was staring at Clem, jaw set, but not for long.

“You know you don't have to do that girly shit all the time, don't ya?”

Pa looked up from his work at Zelda, giving her the same hard eye he'd given the bearded man in her dream, but said nothing. Zelda was seventeen and stronger even than William, who was eighteen and the oldest besides Ma and Pa. He was strong, and fast, but Zelda had risen to the top of the pecking order when she punched a bull between the eyes to save little Lenny from getting trampled. She could carry a bale of hay on each shoulder for a mile and whipped William in a fair fight. Because of the, she was given a wider range than most. This included overlooking the occasional vulgarity.

Pa and Zelda stared each other down for a half-minute. Her eyes twinkled a challenge at him.

“Leave her be,” Pa finally grumbled into his ledger as he looked away “Clem's a good one. Last thing we need is another cock hen thinking she runs the place.”

“Ha!” spat Zelda, “You just wait, I'll get her out of that apron someday.”

Pa scowled into his papers and Ma sat quietly, grinning. Clem looked first at one, then the other, but her eyes strained to make out the shape of her father's face as he hunched over the yellowed pages in the book. The shadows seemed to be in constant conversation over his features, they wavered like the current in the river at night.

“Hey.” Zelda’s voice jolted Clem out of the silence like a gentle slap on the back. “We’re almost out of feed for the pigs. Pa said I ought to head to town tomorrow and pick up a few hundred pounds. I want you to go with me and help me load.”

“But I’ve got milking and breakfast, and all the washing tomorrow,” Clem replied.

“Not anymore, I’ve got Holden staying home to help with that tomorrow.”

“Holden? He’d never do that. He thinks it’s woman’s work.”

“He would if I told him too.” replied Zelda with a wink “Especially if I thumped him for it.”

“I saw it,” said Ma looking up with pride. “She got him fair and square. He’s got more pride than sense to take that bet. Clem, you’re with Zelda tomorrow.”

She looked back and forth at both of them for a moment. She felt afraid. Zelda stood, fixing Clem with a stern gaze.

“So, when do you want to go?”

“What?” replied Clem, blinking rapidly. She could feel her cheeks flush. “What did you say?”

“I asked you when you want to go” replied Zelda. Clem felt like her head had been fastened in a vise, unable to turn away as Zelda’s voice became so grave that Clem felt cold and couldn’t muster a reply.

“You’ve got to choose, Clem,” she said. “I need you with me, but you’ve got to decide when.”

“I don’t care!” Clem burst out, “Whenever! I don’t even want to go, you’re making me! I like it here just fine and I want to stay home. You’re always trying to make me into something I’m not and if you’re going to make me go then you just decide and quit sneaking around and whispering things at me!”

“But Clem, it’ll be fun, we can—”

“I want to stay here!”

Pa put down his pencil and raised his head. The murmuring shadows cleared and Clem could once again see the familiar contours she knew so well. His teeth gritted, he spoke.

“Zelda, you go on. Clem wants to stay. She can’t leave like this anyhow. You know that.”

“Well, we can get by another couple of weeks,” Zelda mumbled. “There’s no big hurry.”

“No,” said Pa, rising from his chair. “*You* went and made a big deal out of it. *You* go. Tomorrow.” With that final word, high winds began rattling the thin glass in the windows.

“Yes sir.” replied Zelda, lightly scraping her shoe over the floorboards. She looked back at Clem, all the good nature returned to her voice. “I’ll miss you runt, I really wanted us to go together.”

“Next time?” offered Clem meekly, peeking up at her big sister.

“Next time,” said Zelda with a nod. “For sure.”

~

Long yellow lights shone down on her from a ceiling run over with webs of wires running in every direction like the guts inside the washer. Clem was lying down on something soft, lazily tracing her eyes over the patterns they made when something pulled at her from beyond her sight, holding her still. Pa appeared, above her. His expression was grim. Her placed his hand over her eyes and she felt herself growing smaller and smaller until she was floating, curled up very tight, then bursting out again into the bright world. She heard her own strangled cry, then disappeared.

~

The next morning, Clem and the rest of the children watched Zelda drive off in the old pickup truck, its fading paint and rattling frame disappearing in a cloud of dust. None of them had ever gone to town before except Pa. The children imagined it as a place of fantastical delights. Once, Ishmael had tried to sneak into the back of the truck, but Pa caught him and scolded him severely.

“Not yet,” he said pinching the little boy’s belly. “You’re still green as a gourd, you can’t even butcher a rabbit. Town’s no place for you if you ain’t ready Ish.”

“I’ll show ya!” Ish replied. He ran to the corn crib and grabbed one of the long knives they used to cut stalks. Everyone laughed as he tried to catch the old, three-legged doe who lived under the porch, yet still managed to keep well ahead of him.

Pa stood over the children, holding one of the babies and turned back toward the disappearing truck. He waved the handkerchief that he always carried, but no one had ever seen out of his pocket. It was a beautiful cloth of deep blue, with purple and green. Clem noticed, distinct among the creases and paisleys, the outline of long, beautiful feathers.



“Where’s Ma?” asked Holden looking around.

“She’s not feeling well, needed to lie down a bit.” said Pa.

Baby Jewel started to squirm and fuss, so Pa handed him to Holden.

“Oh, gross!” Holden exclaimed, holding Jewel at arms-length and turning his face away.

Pa laughed as the other children held their noses and scrambled away from the smell while Holden ran toward them dangling a now giggling Jewel above their heads.

“Okay, okay everyone!” Pa broke in with sudden seriousness. “It’s another big day so let’s get to it.”

And with a clap of his hands everyone scattered off to their fields and animals. The air still crisp with the cold wind from the night before, blowing softly across Clem’s cheek as she watched the last of the dust from Zelda’s truck drift away on the far horizon. Clem took a deep breath and turned back toward the house, lost in thought, and ran her hip square into the rust-pocked chrome bumper of the truck.

“Jeez, Clem,” her head tingled for a moment, then she admonished herself, “better watch what you’re up to.” She rubbed her sore skin and limped to the garden to pick some comfrey for the bruise coming up under her skin.

The day was long, but by its end Clem had taught the young ones which leaves to mash for scrapes and bruises. She had also practiced her quilting, swept the garden free of hornworms and squash bugs, pulled a splinter out of Emanuel’s toe with a slice of potato, and found a nest of baby rabbits under the porch. She named them all, stroking the sleepy

mama, no doubt tired out after running from Ish all afternoon. Then, she headed in to prepare dinner for twenty.

That night, dinner was the last of the venison from the smokehouse. It steamed in the center of the table like it was still fresh peeled from the kill. Clem had made the whole meal herself for the first time tonight since Ma was still laid up. There were plenty of potatoes, corn, peas, and lettuce, with one big steak each. But when everyone had taken their share, a single hunk of meat was left on the platter.

Jane piped up. "Who's that meat for? I walked the whole fencerow today cuttin' brush, so I think I need it."

"Nuh-uh!" shot out Tom. "That meat belongs to the man killed it. Me!"

Tom popped out of his seat and threw his body across the table, stabbing at the chunk of venison with his fork while Luke held him firm by his coverall straps, just out of reach of the plate, like a fisherman wearing down a big trout.

"You may have killed it," said Luke, "but you couldn't have drug it home without me. Or cleaned it without Alice and Winston. Had to lay you down, you all pale and stumbling around with that knife in your hand."

In the end, everyone agreed that little Alice should have it, since she had done such a good job on the hide that it made four new pairs of gloves for winter. Afterward, Alice cleared the dishes sluggishly, the shine of grease still on her lips, but Clem couldn't take her eyes off the platter, repeating again and again the names of everyone at the table, adding them up.

“Not like you to miscount Clem,” said Pa “you know we can’t be wasting meat like that. Winter will be here soon enough, and we’ll need every chop.”

He watched her sternly, as if she were something he might have misplaced. She stooped over the table, still counting silently.

“You ain’t gonna find another one in there,” he said, “don’t keep looking.”

He turned to leave the room and Clem blurted out, “Where’s Zelda? That was Zelda’s meat. Why isn’t she home yet?” Pa stiffened.

“She’s right here.”

From behind his back he produced an old rag doll with linen pants made from soiled scrap cloth and hair of brown yarn with frayed bits of red weaved in here and there.

“You’re always losing your toys aren’t you sweetheart?” he said and handed her the doll, patting her on the head.

Clem stood there for a while, holding the doll until it felt familiar in her hand while he told her how she used to drag it with her down to the henhouse every day when she was just a baby. In a few minutes she was able to remember it too.

“Get to bed, girl. You seem tired out.”

Clem walked into her room to the sound of five little mouths breathing heavily. She slipped to her own mattress in the back corner and tucked herself in, hugging the doll tightly against her chest. She slept in short fits and did not dream, waking up clutching a pillow and wincing from a headache that made her feel sluggish and stupid.

There were no extra servings at breakfast. Everyone bumped and jostled their way through the eggs and biscuits, though Clem felt it was quieter somehow. After doing the dishes with Virginia, she went outside and found Ma, swinging a big canvas pack onto her shoulders.

“Where you going, Ma?”

Her mother didn’t look at her, but picked up a rifle from against the porch rail. Sunlight gleamed off the fresh oil wiped over barrel of the gun.

“I hear we’re out of meat,” she said flatly.

“You taking Ish or Ichabod or Lenny with you?” Clem asked, looking down at the ground.

Ma did this sometimes. She’d take off, unannounced, into the hills to hunt and be gone for days. She never took anyone with her, and Clem didn’t know why, but it made her feel lonely in a way she couldn’t put into words.

“Naw, heading into the mountains. No place for them boys, they ain’t got the grit for it.”

She looked at Clem with a hard, cold stone in her cheeks and bloodshot eyes.

“Soon you’ll be ready to go though,” she said. “Won’t you, Clem?”

Clem stood silent, twisting her fists in her apron, refusing to look her mother in the face.

Ma turned away and started off, mumbling something about sheep on the south slope. She slung the rifle over her shoulder and stepped off toward the distant hills. Clem

followed for a bit then stopped and watched as her mother crossed the far fields and over the split rail fence built along the tree line. She tripped over the top rail and knocked it down. Clem could hear distant cursing and stood a moment, in the perfect warmth of the morning sun, looking at the empty space where her mother used to be. The fence rail poking out of line like fractured bone. She felt tired from not sleeping well and wandered slowly down to the barn, toward the sounds of goats bleating complaints about their strained udders.

“Why does Ma leave sometimes?” Clem asked. She had come across Lenny mucking out the goat stalls with a pitchfork when she went to grab the pails.

“Goddamn if I know ya li'l pissant.”

“Come off it, shitfucker.”

“Whoa, Clem,” he jammed his pitchfork into a loose pile of trampled manure, “when did you get grit?”

She blushed, but quickly gathered herself.

Lenny was smirking at her through the hole in his teeth he got when the bull knocked him down last spring. They had to pull him out of the corral while—the back of her neck felt a pinch like a wasp sting—while Pa went after the bull and punched it between the eyes. Lenny bled all night, but the next morning he was good as new, and with a better whistle.

“Why does she always go by herself?” Clem asked. “And why does she look so sad? Hunting is fun, isn't it?”

“How would you know? You’re so far up Ma’s skirt I figure you’re gonna crawl back in someday. You’ve never killed nothing.”

“I’ll get it done next time,” she said “that old rooster is getting pretty mean. I bet the hens would appreciate it.”

“Yeah? Well go do it then,” he leaned on his pitchfork. Clem fumed, but didn’t move.

He took up his work again and started lifting the matted straw off the floor, heaving big, ragged piles into the wheelbarrow. A cloud and the must of damp hay filled the air, particles flickering through shafts of light piercing the plank walls.

“A chicken ain’t wild,” he continued, “they’re made for killing and they know it. Cutting the head off a chicken is about the same as picking an apple off a tree. That’s why folks have the young ‘uns do it. Starts them off easy. Notice how them birds go still when you hold ‘em upside down? They know what they’re for.”

Clem began to protest but Lenny flicked straw off the end of the pitchfork and grasped the handle with both hands, spinning it like a wheel and jabbing it at Clem’s face. She gasped but didn’t give an inch.

“Now a wild animal, that’s different” he began. “They *want* to live. You gotta be willing to take that from them.”

“I can do that. I ain’t scared.” She leaned into the sharp spines of the fork until they poked little dents in the thin tissue of her neck.

“You’re a number all right, Clem,” George dropped the fork and picked up the handles of the wheelbarrow with a grunt. “It ain’t the killing that’s hard, any fool can do that.”

“You’d know,” Clem snarled at him as he passed.

“I may be a fool,” he said, “but what does that make you?”

He disappeared around the corner of the barn doors as Clem seethed. He was always getting the last word and this one left her feeling mean. She clenched her fists and ran outside, but there was no one in sight. It was still two hours until lunch and everyone was busy somewhere. She stood for a moment, thinking hard, then stomped across the yard to the old corn crib. The grey wood door creaked as she slipped it open just enough to reach in and grab a long, worn corn knife off the pegs on the wall. Then she shut the door quietly and flipped the knife over in her hand. The worn, red painted handle was wrapped with canvas and tape, fitting snug in her grip. She turned the blade, black with dried stalk oil, down, pointing behind her, as she crouched and scanned the house, the barnyard; not a soul in sight. She looked toward the toppled fence rail and for a moment everything was dappled with pale spots of color. Blue, purple, green. The whole landscape blurred before her.

She broke like a deer at a twig snap, running for the fields as fast as she could, straight for the fence, keeping low. With a single hop she cleared the broken line of the tipped rail and disappeared into the woods. Her sight cleared. She heard a faint thunk of wood knocking against wood behind her and ran harder.

Clem was flying, like each step might catch fire at any moment. No one was allowed here except Ma; no one had ever dared to follow on her hunts. The other kids did all theirs on the farm; in the Ridge or West Fields. There was always plenty of game trying to pilfer

corn or young wheat, so entering this ragged wildness was not only dangerous, it was unnecessary. She passed out of a thick fen that appeared at the edge of the pines and skipped down to a stream cutting through boulders that had rolled down from the mountains above. She stopped for a moment to catch her breath on one of the rocks.

Mountains rose ahead in an arc, flowered meadows painted over the slopes. Beyond the meadows were tall, spare pines which were in turn, dwarfed by a crown of crags and steep gullies. Clem smoothed the sides of the knife across her dress as if sharpening it. The blue linen making a soft *shush* with each pass.

She considered the dozens of paths ahead. Which one had Ma been most likely to take? Which way was south, north? What if she got lost? Then, movement at the far end of one of the meadows. A small, white dot was striding through the bent grass where a wall of thin pines grew. She squinted. It was a sheep, pacing back and forth, marching in front of the tree line. Clem stepped over the stream and saw, buried in the mud, the deep print of her mother's boots, headed in the same direction. A shadow flickered through the daylight, for just a moment. She looked up. Above her was a warm, blinding sun, not a cloud in the sky.

By the time she'd crossed the meadow, the sheep had disappeared. But Clem could see a path worn through the thick bed of needles that seemed to pull the world into a deep and silent sleep. She followed the path, up and up. She was tired, the old pine filling her lungs and pulling her down with each step. With the knife, she hacked off a thick branch to use as a walking stick, keeping on until the light through the canopy was thin as moonlight. Finally, the trees thinned above her and she emerged onto a rock outcrop looking over a field, filled with mountain daisies, and saw a small cabin, in front of which her mother lay on the grass, one leg crossed over the other regarding the blueness of a clear afternoon sky.



“Hey Clem,” Ma said, sighing. “The sheep told me you were on the way.”

Clem slid down the loose rocks and into the field, popping up the short hill to her mother and flopped down beside her.

“What’re you doing up here Ma?”

“Hunting, what else?”

“You don’t look like you’re hunting.”

“Well, maybe I’m just having a bit of bad luck. Better now though. Nice to have some company.”

Ma turned her head toward Clem and grinned in a way Clem had never seen before. She forgot she was supposed to be in trouble for leaving the farm and just lay there. A cool, high-mountain breeze sifted through their hair and the quiet stones while they talked of nothing in particular all afternoon. Clem didn’t even notice her eyelids droop.

“Clem, wake up....Clementine! Goddamn it—”

*Blam!*

Clem jerked up to see her mother standing beside her, rifle firing up the hill. She twisted her neck like an owl and saw a massive stag, like a splinter of dark stone, charging down on them from the mountainside. Its eyes were bright red and thick horns rose from his head before branching into tangled antlers that bent in and out of each other in unnatural ways. It bleated in rage, a wet, strangled sound that welled up through a throat torn by gunfire. Blood ran over the hide, painting its brown coat with shining black rivers like oil-

stained cloth. It charged and Ma fired, again and again. Each shot knocking its sharp hooves back a step, then another, causing it to shake its twisted rack and scream.

“Stay near me, Clem! Something’s wrong...”

Clem flipped onto her knees and slid beneath her mother’s wide firing stance, the corn knife in her grip. She settled into a crouch, the blade sideways across her chest, ready to strike.

Two more deafening blasts from the rifle slammed directly into the beast’s eyes and nose leaving only a faint outline of a face, bones glowing white and green beneath pockets of dripping blood. Its mouth was shattered into a gaping hole of sharp fragments but still it screamed louder, piercing the sky. Clem began to shake in fear as it charged again. Ma fired once more and obliterated its last remaining eye, turning the charge slightly as it barreled the last few steps between them. The tip of one antler caught Ma in the leg as it passed, ripping her away from Clem like a roof blown off in high wind. Ma tumbled downhill beneath the trampling hooves of the beast as Clem, suddenly exposed, rose and leapt after her mother, raising the sharp blade and sinking it deep in the stag’s ribs. With all her weight behind it, the knife sliced through muscle and bone, sinking down to the handle. The stag bucked and twitched as she held the knife and wrapped her other arm through the gnarled horns of the beast, wrenching the neck sideways, pulling the sharp edge of the blade closer to the heart with every lurch of the dying animal. She held on; iron filled her mouth as her own cries faded and the great deer tried to rise again but stumbled, finally falling to the ground for good.

“We have to go, Jesus, come on Clem. We have to go, are you ready?”

It was Ma, groaning as she stood. She'd dropped her rifle, and was wincing, holding her leg with one hand and reaching for Clem with the other.

Everything around Clem grew fuzzy, like before, then sharp again, and a clicking, a whining filled her ears. It wasn't crickets, or cicadas. She didn't know what it was. Clem felt a pain run up her spine and another throb in her head.

“What’s happening, Ma?”

“There’s no time sweetie. We’ve got to go.”

“Where are we going? Home? Why is it so cold, Ma?”

Clem felt weak, she looked down at the body of the fallen animal, the knife still stuck up to the handle, steam rising off it like a shroud in the freezing air. Just beyond it, she saw a pair of simple leather shoes.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to run off,” Clem pled as she looked up into the face of her father. His eyes had a kind, faraway look that she’d seen a few times before, but now it scared her.

“You’re not allowed out here,” Ma said as she stepped in front of Clem, pushing the girl back.

Pa’s face flickered like a candle near an open window. He took a step and his whole body seemed to stretch for an instant, appearing again on the other side of the now rotting flesh of the deer. He walked up to Clem and leaned down to kiss her on the head.

“Come home, tadpole.”

Ma grabbed Clem by the shoulders, got down on both knees and looked up at the girl.

“Clem, I won’t leave without you.”

“I don’t—”

“When do you want to go, sweetie?”

There was strain carved into every inch of her mother’s face. It was so much like the look her mother so often had when she spoke to her father and she recognized it now. It was fear.

“Where will we go?” Clem asked in a whisper as a tear burned down her cheek before floating up from the end of her chin and into the sky.

“I don’t know.”

The hands on her shoulders grew heavy and began to shake. Clem squeezed them tight in her own and stepped toward her father whose body parted like mist as she retrieved the knife. Snow fell beneath a boiling sun and a full moon glowing peacefully beside it.

“I want to go, Pa” Clem said. “Now.”

The mountains disappeared. The stars flashed out and turned to dust, sprinkling to the ground at her feet.

“Where are we?” Clem asked in a voice that sounded strange in her own ears. Older. Stronger than she remembered. She looked at her hand, but the knife was gone. She looked around. So was her mother.

Nasty, burning air filled her lungs. In front of her, a long-handled axe was embedded in a wall of black windows, smashed pieces of glass, and torn rainbow wires.

“I told him you were ready.”

Clementine looked over and there was Zelda, sitting in the shadows, rocking back and forth. Grinning like a raccoon.