

Oakwood

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Published by Bryan DeWitt, 2023.

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BLACKOUT

Like most nights, they watched TV. Unlike most nights, something important was on. A few hours ago, the whole thing exploded. Apparently, an enrichment tier collapsed and triggered a chain reaction. Chase didn't know how an enrichment tier worked, nor what kind of chain reaction had been triggered, but there was the proof, smoldering six stories high and pouring inky black smoke into the sky.

The smart ones were already out doing the smart thing: panicking. The National Fuel Reserve was engulfed in flames, clear as day and for everyone to see. As literally as could be stated, the nation's oil supply was going up in smoke. Smart people knew what that meant for their way of life; it had just been replaced with a much harder one. For the not-so-smart, bewilderment superseded urgency. The television held them spellbound. They watched with open-mouthed amazement as watery black stuff gushed from the burning husk of the very important facility.

Chase fell into neither category of person. He was one of the rare, super-smart ones: a gas station attendant who, for the last two years, had been stealing barrel after barrel of gas. Avery fell gracefully into an equally rare category of person: the super-not-so-smart. She looked at Chase with shining purple eyes and asked for a third time, "What's that black stuff?"

Chase recalled a night several months earlier. The familiar, tranquilizing sounds of the mall washed over them and Avery asked, "Do you really like them?"

"Yeah, they're great. Purple." Avery tilted her head and blinked at him. She did this whenever he failed to offer the response she wanted and she did it often.

"You're just saying that."

"I'm not. I promise. They're amazing," Chase half-lied. As he looked into Avery's deep purple irises, he had to admit there was something transporting about them. "They're otherworldly and exotic."

"Really?" she looked at herself in her phone.

"Yeah, futuristic and trendy." Eerie and unsettling.

"So what's wrong?"

"Is it safe?"

"It's gene therapy. It's completely safe."

"Did it hurt?"

"It was just a shot."

"I know, but, like, did they inject it in your eyes?"

"No, right here in my arm. That's how gene therapy works." Oh yeah, of course. She held her phone very close to her eyes and they crossed. "They don't look very bright. I thought they'd sparkle."

"You want sparkles?"

"The technician says they'll get more vibrant over the next few months. It just takes time for my cells to adopt and replicate the new gene code." When Avery said a word or phrase like "adopt and replicate" or "polyamorous relationship," Chase could actually hear someone else saying it to her first. She liked to repeat smart sounding phrases like that.

Back in the here and now, her fingernails sank into his forearm. The pain registered somewhere in the back of his mind, far from the hypnotic scene dominating his attention. "What's that black stuff?" she repeated. Hadn't she been asking that forever? This time she added, "Look! Look! What is it!?" Her nails dug deeper. "What is that? That's the weirdest smoke I've ever seen! What is it!?"

The panicky shrillness of her voice rode Chase's spinal column like a cowboy spurring a horse. He leaned closer to the TV. It was like smoke, but definitely not. It was too inky, too greasy. Plumes of it spurted into the air, thick geysers of oily black water untouched by wind or gravity. "I don't know. I've never seen anything like that." He spoke flatly, chilled by the admission. His heart thumped as he absorbed the raw, unnatural strangeness of the smoky liquid which flowed upward and did not come down.

After sundown, the stuff became stranger still for the darkness of night held no power over it. Against all common logic, the massive, shimmering cloud hanging over Reservoir City could be seen and seen clearly. The lower half absorbed and distorted pale orange light from the fire which bore it. The upper half dispersed moonlight across its surface like a shattered light bulb. Stranger

still, it was in part self-illuminated, outwardly reflecting internal lights which had no clear source.

"What is that!?" Avery shrieked. The sight of the black stuff had long ago submerged Chase in a sea of horror and physical discomfort. Now, an ebbing tide of frustration swelled up from the bottom of that sea. For hours, he'd been trying to answer the question she kept asking but he still had no better an idea what a "biological metatoxin" was than when they'd first turned on the TV.

In the beginning, the intangible eeriness of it hadn't been so obvious. When the enrichment tier collapsed and the fire started, there simply hadn't been that much of it. Once the flames burned down to the fuel reserve, however, it was a different story. It's hard to describe how it feels to watch four square miles of land explode. All of Petropolis, erased in a second. All the workers and all the protesters, vaporized. Chase understood what had happened but he couldn't feel it. The loss of life was too much to process so it shrunk to a footnote below the stark, stupefying hugeness of that explosion.

That was when the quantum enriched petroleum started pouring out of the gigantic new hole in the ground and everyone got a chance to wonder how smoke could look like that. That was when the prelude of shock and curiosity gave way to the base, reptilian fear which everyone experienced fully for the rest of the evening and intermittently throughout the following months.

"Chase!" The shrillness pierced his stupor. He gradually turned his head in her direction but his eyes did not follow. His gaze was affixed, unmoving and constant, a hinge upon which his head slowly swiveled to face her. He was wholly unable to look away from the screen and that strange smoke. Her fingernails dug to their deepest and, at last, he managed to look away from the TV. His hazel eyes came to rest, fully aligned with her shining purple ones. Her lips trembled and she whispered, "What is it?"

In that moment of twinkling violet horror, he truly saw her. In a single instant, he indexed all of the time they'd spent together; every conversation, every joke and all those arguments. The entire catalog of their shared experience was laid bare and he arrived at a moment of total clarity. He knew, without a doubt, he would have broken up with her a long time ago if he hadn't gotten her pregnant.

ABOUT FIVE MONTHS EARLIER, his work keys tinkled onto the kitchen table, muted by a plastic keychain that said bluntly: "CHASE."

"Did you have a nice day at work?" she asked.

An alarm triggered. If Avery had ever asked him that before, he would eat the name-tag off his hat. "Yeah, it was pretty good. Bumped into an old friend who came in for a fill-up." He spoke slowly with lots of articulation, like a mouse would speak to a cat.

"It must have been nice to catch up!" She cheered with an uncommon enthusiasm which furthered Chase's suspicion he was being set up. He told her about the extra long lunch Tim gave him to go out with his friend and about the sandwich he got. Avery nodded throughout his recanting but offered no follow-up questions before asking if he wanted to go out to dinner.

She waited until after the appetizer to tell him. As he sat quietly digesting the news and mozzarella sticks, he felt the irreversible finality of his choices. His mother's oft-repeated words echoed from the past. *Looks aren't everything.* His first concern was money. He wasn't sure if they could support a child on his income. Come to think of it, he was sure they could not. Avery insisted she'd get a job after she had the baby but Chase thought that unlikely. Some scenarios are too hard to imagine.

The lump in his stomach remained long after the mozzarella sticks had gone. How on Earth could he afford a child? They were so expensive! The lump got bigger as he fed it dread. Beads of sweat formed on his face. His heart pounded. What if Tim found out about the panning and he got fired from the gas station? What would he do then? He ate a tasteless meal while Avery continued to tell him why this was a good idea. After dinner, they took a taxi home and the driver asked, "Did you hear about the earthquake?"

"What?"

"The earthquake! Wrecked the whole West Coast!"

Chase fed the lump again. More accurately, the lump became him. He swam out of reality. He heard the sound of the clock-out machine at work stamping his time card. His long-standing worldview had just punched out. Some coincidences were too great. The pregnancy and the earthquake sprang from the same source. The world was only an illusion masking the galactic chaos which engineered this simultaneous happening. He was afforded only a moment to dwell in his cosmic, existential terror before the lump reminded him he

would soon have a starving child. Avery and the driver spoke about the earthquake but Chase couldn't hear them. He peered out the window into the distance, trying to distinguish which lights were buildings and which were cars.

"Excuse me, miss, but are your eyes purple?"

"Yeah, it's gene therapy!"

"Is it like getting your ear pierced, or your eye tattooed, or what? That must hurt!"

"No, it didn't hurt at all! They just took some of my blood out, ran it through a computer, then put it back in. The doctor says they'll gain radiance as the new cells replicate."

"Adopt and replicate," Chase said to the window, wondering if Avery even knew how genes worked.

Since then, the months had flown by and Chase still felt as unprepared as ever. Avery's belly was getting bigger and so was the lump of dread. Last Friday, he was getting ready to go to work when there was a new development.

"I'm five and half months in," Avery said in her certain way. There were many things Chase liked about her. At times, she demonstrated a vibrant fondness for learning and she often dove into topics which Chase wouldn't think to explore. Then she reported her findings with a cheerful, infectious enthusiasm which was both educational and uplifting. He could tell she'd been doing some research this afternoon. "They should be able to tell the gender by now," she smiled.

"What about the mystery?" Chase asked.

"Oh, forget about the mystery," she said.

"Can't you think on it a while? I kinda like the idea of not knowing."

Avery smiled a smaller smile. "Okay."

When he got home from work that night, she was beaming and biting her bottom lip. She held a secret she absolutely did not want to hold. She had gone to get the sonogram anyway. He tossed the CHASE keychain on the table. "So?" he asked.

"It's a girl!" Avery shouted. She jumped on him and hugged him within an inch of his life. Chase was happy because she was happy but he really would have preferred not to know.

Here they were, only five days later, watching the explosion into the late hours of the night. Even though he had to go to work the next day, Chase paid

the hour no mind. This was an historic event on par with the moon landing except it went on forever and it was awful. In the depths of the great American newspaper companies, June 11th's paper was rolling off the presses just in time for the narrative to change. Apparently, some kind of phenomenon was occurring around the edge of the crater. The nature of this phenomenon was "completely unknown," but words swimming around it included "biological meta-toxin," "inhalation" and, most distressingly, "quarantine."

With curt, stone-faced solemnity, every news anchor on every channel announced there would be no more news from Petropolis and all networks discontinued coverage of the event. As quickly as the story had been thrust upon the hapless viewers, it was taken away. A very tight lid was clamped down on the explosion, the phenomenon and the quarantine. "Total media blackout" was repeated several times before it was unmentioned altogether. On that ominous note, every screen in the country exchanged an enormous smoke entity lingering over a fiery crater for regularly scheduled programming. In a swift, merciless moment, an entire viewership of addicts had their supply cut. Chase, Avery and America's anxiety spiked. All at once, the impending doom of the incident was no longer safely contained inside the television. Instead, it surrounded them. Chase felt uncomfortable in his skin. He stood from the couch and his knees popped, startling Avery. "Ahh!" she screamed. She looked around the room squirrelishly. "What now?"

He shook a chill out of his shoulders. He'd stood up too fast and he was seeing dots. He leaned forward and rubbed his face. What now? He glanced at the kitchen which reminded him he had no appetite. "I guess I should get some sleep. I have to work tomorrow."

"You're going to work!?"

"A lot of people are gonna want gas. The line's probably a mile long already."

"What are we going to do!?"

"What do you mean?"

"If it gets out! What do we do?"

"There's nothing we can do right now. Besides, whatever it is, they've got it under quarantine."

"What if it gets out!?"

"It's not going to get out while I'm at work."

"How do you know!?"

They repeated versions of this conversation while they got ready for bed. Chase never felt so vulnerable brushing his teeth. There was no shaking the feeling that very big things were in motion now and he was too small to see them. Unswervingly, his attention returned to Avery's abdomen and his daughter who lived there. She was in her own quarantine now. What sort of world would she be entering?

The birds were singing when they finally fell into restless sleep. He dreamed he was at work. Inky black tendrils crept into the gas station. They crawled up the walls and smeared the windows with grime, blocking the light from outside. A boy next to the coffee machine made hungry eyes at the doughnut tray. Black slime spilled from the ceiling and splashed onto the sneeze guard in front of the boy's face but he didn't see it. The slime oozed off the plastic and dripped onto his shoes and he still didn't see it. A man walked in and asked for fifty-five dollars on pump number seven. The inky slime plopped from the ceiling onto his shirt and slid down onto his jeans but he paid no attention. Then Avery was there, though Chase knew she had not been there before. She appeared instantaneously and without reason as sometimes occurs in dreams. Her eyes were purple and she was fully pregnant. Her hair was smeared with inky black slime but she didn't notice.

Chase woke up gasping, encased in an icy chill. All too slowly, the chill dissipated. Since the night Avery told him she was pregnant, this sort of awakening was common for him. It was so common that he'd come to think of the familiar sensation as his breakfast of panic. He lay staring up at the fading darkness of the ceiling, digesting his meal. Although this morning's *mélange* of discomfort included the sizable addition of yesterday's events, he'd been cooking up quite a plate even before the explosion.

As was his custom, he waited for the icy chill to melt and his heart rate to normalize. While he waited, he considered the litany of his normal stressors. At the top of the list was the responsibility of having an infant counting on him for survival. The second stressor blended with the first: the growing immediacy of the event and full understanding that Avery was to be his partner in the endeavor. She was not next to him now. He couldn't remember the last time she left bed before him. This oddity was not trivial and it exacerbated his unease. He frowned, kicking uselessly at the blankets. Right on time, he got around to remembering his third major stressor: getting fired for his panning.

PANNING

Few people gravitate to the field of biophysical chemistry and fewer still have a notion of its aims or practical application. William Isaac was one of these few, an American-born scientist who studied at the Max Planck Institute in Germany. From the beginning of his first semester, William showed a natural and unique understanding of his complex field. By the time he graduated, he had a robust foundation for what would be his earth-shattering contribution to history: quantum enrichment.

2004 was a busy year for Dr. Isaac. He returned to America, put the finishing touches on his theories and developed a technique for treating petroleum which completely revolutionized petroleum treatment. Information about the technical details of Dr. Isaac's process was extremely limited; however, everyone's extremely unlimited excitement made it easy to get the gist of it. Thanks to quantum enrichment, a new, better kind of gas was coming and a single gallon could "get you to the North Pole and back."

Everyone knew this soundbite to be a playful exaggeration, a forgivable white lie from a marketing firm, but no one questioned it because no one wanted to rain on the parade. Even if the exact figures weren't clear, Dr. Isaac's genius and the implications of his invention were nonetheless astonishing and every bit as world-changing. Quantum enrichment had everyone talking, especially those with the most to gain.

Bureaucracy has the reputation of a lumbering beast, irritatingly complicated and resistant to change. There are times, however, when key players in the system galvanize behind an item of shared interest. All branches of government leverage their synergy to craft legislation which is approved and implemented lickity-split. This was the case with quantum enriched petroleum, better known as "new gas." As conceived, the plan was to hoard a modest amount of crude oil in a central facility to undergo Dr. Isaac's miraculous treatment. Forecasts guaranteed this would provide enough energy to last the country well beyond the time needed to implement sustainable, alternative energy sources. Thus, the can would be kicked very far down the road, much to everyone's satisfaction.

At long last, the country could wean itself from foreign oil and withdraw from decades of international conflict. Everyone loved this plan, which was called the Fuel Enrichment Initiative.

In the meantime, investigators of the miracle treatment raised alarms. Their data instigated a hailstorm of anti-patriotic controversy over the potential environmental hazards of quantum enrichment. Concerned citizens took note and protests followed as the snowballing notion of Anti-Consolidation; however, before the naysayers could kill the golden goose, policy-makers pushed the decision through and so it was so. The Fuel Enrichment Initiative was the fastest-moving piece of paper in American history: conceptualized in 2006, written in 2006, submitted in 2006, approved in 2007 with plans to finish two enrichment tiers on site by 2008 and two more planned by 2010. In the same month Dr. Isaac accepted the Nobel Peace Prize, the National Fuel Reserve began construction on an inauspicious patch of dirt in Bath County, Kentucky.

The ephemeral Anti-Consolidation movement now had a focal point. Thousands of protesters occupied Bath County with a mind to stay until the project was stopped. Before long, the sprawling tent city attracted commercial interests. More than a few corporations saw the untapped value of selling essential goods to the firmly entrenched protesters. Small shops preceded permanent residences. In a few weeks, the construction workers, protesters and merchants had established a full-on community with the National Fuel Reserve at its epicenter. Given its position directly atop the huge, underground reservoir of amassed petroleum, this township was officially known as Reservoir City and unofficially known as Petropolis. This was the township that was now on fire.

And so, on June 10th, 2009, the flower of consequence bloomed for those who took the affair too seriously. They lost their lives in an unfortunate game of musical chairs and their part in the story was finished. The Jewish nuptial glass was smashed, leaving only the survivors wedded to the outcome.



LONG BEFORE NEW GAS hit the market, a law arrived which affected every gas station worker in America. The Certified Pumper Law mandated that a government-certified fuel-distributing professional be present at all fueling

events. Simply put, new gas was too valuable to allow ordinary citizens to fill their tank. The government would train an army of gas station attendants to pump it correctly.

At that time, quantum enriched petroleum was still a year and a half away but the floodgates were open. Gas stations everywhere faced an information deluge about every aspect of new gas, which was to be phased in gradually and pumped alongside old gas until the old gas was gone. Just the same, the Certified Pumper Law was in effect right away and stood for all gasses, old or new. This way, when quantum enriched petroleum reached the pumps in early 2008, all the training would be finished. If a filling station couldn't hire government certifiers to train their pumpers to the letter of the law, they wouldn't be permitted to sell new gas.

This was no problem for the big gas companies. They had the money to invest in getting their gas pumpers up to code. For Gold's Gas, a burgeoning chain of gas stations which serviced Minneapolis and the surrounding regions, the news was cataclysmic. The government pumper training was extremely expensive. To make matters worse, the price of old gas was tanking in anticipation of new gas. Every mom-and-pop gas business in America was hemorrhaging profits and that included Gold's. Fearing dissolution or the ultimate failure of bankruptcy, Gold's Gas HQ assembled their best and brightest to form a think-tank. Before long, the think-tank developed a solution: they would pay for the government training. What choice did they have? Strict adherence to the pumper law was the only way to get new gas and getting new gas was the only way to survive.

Chase worked at Gold's Gas Station #2, the most frequented of all the Gold's and therefore the most frequented mom-and-pop filling station in all of Minnesota. With the surprise announcement of the Certified Pumper Law, Chase's job got a lot more interesting overnight. Finally, he would do more than sell snacks and count the money at the end of his shift. Finally, he would pump.

During his time in the business, he'd heard plenty of stories about the old-fashioned pumpers in Oregon and New Jersey. From his place inside the station, he'd often looked out the glass doors and daydreamed about manning the pumps; just him, the nozzle, and all those undisturbed motorists. After they passed the Certified Pumper Law, his dreams came true. Over an intensive six-hour seminar, the certifiers gave Chase a thorough education in official meth-

ods of fuel distribution. They told Chase gas station attendants across the country were receiving the same instruction and assured him he was very fortunate. He was one of the chosen few who got to pump in the new era of American prosperity.

The only problem was: the training wasn't that great. Chase could see right away the curriculum wasn't written by real, on-the-ground gas-pumpers. It seemed more like it was dreamed up by tie-wearers at the top of the chain who'd never pumped a drop in their life. The men and women who designed the training likely never studied, or else long forgot, the nuances of the trade. They were completely out of touch with the realities of pumping gas.

In Chase's opinion, the handbook's most egregious error was its failure to address spillage. Though spillage was rare during the nozzle's trip into the car, it was common for a few drops to fall during its return transit, from car to cradle. There wasn't much spillage at Gold's #1. The fuel-distributing professionals there hardly lost a drop, thanks to Gold #1's humdrum, easily manageable volume of customers. Gold's #2 was a different story. At Minneapolis' most frequented, locally-owned filling station, the volume of customers was anything but easily manageable and spillage was a part of life. Even an ace team was bound to spill a bit here and there, whipping it in and out of anxious gas-holes all day and night.

By nature, Chase hated waste and the spillage peeved him. Eventually, he got so peeved he went rogue. Without authorization, he modified the government's pumping technique. At every fill-up, he laid a tin pan beneath the point of pump. He filled the tank, collected payment and sent the patron on their way. If he happened to spill, the tin pan was there to collect the drops. When the pan was full of spillage, Chase emptied it into a bucket next to the pump. At the end of every shift, he poured the contents of the bucket into a barrel behind the office. Spillage eliminated, thank you for visiting Gold's.

His peace of mind and productivity skyrocketed. Now, he could work at the breakneck speed required at Gold's #2 and without fear of spillage. All thanks to his pan. During the year leading up to new gas, Chase's team pumped thousands of gallons of old gas daily with nary a respite. Like kids voraciously consuming dinner so they could eat dessert, everyone wanted to use up the cheap old gas before the new gas arrived. Over that transitional year, Chase perfected the nozzle-to-pan-to-bucket method which he called "panning."

Superficially, the operation's name was derived from its key player: the tin pan. That's what Chase planned to say if anyone ever asked him why he called it "panning," even though no one ever did. Truth be told, he liked the name so much because he felt it captured the true nature of the operation, hovering appropriately in the suspect gray area between recycling and stealing.

When Chase's boss Tim noticed his panning, he asked, "What are you doing with that tin pan?"

Chase replied, "Catching spillage, boss. The spilt gas falls into the pan. When the pan fills up, I pour it into this bucket."

"What happens when the bucket's full?"

"I pour it in the barrel behind the office."

Tim smiled, a rarity for Tim. "Great idea." Simple as that, Chase was promoted to shift manager and Tim ordered all gas-filling professionals at Gold's #2 to start panning. As shift manager, Chase was in charge of dealing with the excess gas barrels. His system was so successful that he soon faced an enormous amount of panned gasoline. As the keeper of spillage, Chase did exactly what he said he would do. He put the gas back in the tanks.

He put most of it back in the tanks.

When faced with a surplus of any resource, it's quite common to appropriate some of the goods. So, occasionally, a barrel of panned gas went into Do-It-Yourself Storage, Unit 31. Funny thing was, Chase didn't have a car. He couldn't say why he was hoarding those clandestine barrels. Maybe somewhere deep down, he felt he was due a little profit for thinking of such a great system. After all, if he hadn't come along, the spilt gas would have just soaked into the pavement. Besides, he was only storing the barrels. There was always time to dump them back into the tanks and storing wasn't stealing.

But he hadn't put the extra barrels back in the tanks.

When new gas finally arrived, he still hadn't. Then the old gas ran out and there was no going back. He couldn't put the gas back in the tanks after that because old gas and new gas didn't mix. With no way to unload or hide the stolen gas, Chase held onto those barrels. Over time, his stash grew. Now, they were six hot potatoes, burning a hole in his peace of mind. As sure as Tim had promoted him for inventing panning, Tim would fire him for those missing barrels. Then what? How would he feed his baby without a job?

Every morning since Avery told him about the pregnancy, he'd languished in bed, losing sleep over the timebomb which was the panning. This morning was the same but it should have been different. This was the morning Chase should have realized how smart he was to have two barrels of old gas and four barrels of new, quantum enriched gas sitting in a storage shed while Petropolis lay exploded. Alas, habits are hard to break and so Chase repeated the torturous routine he'd forged for the first moments of his day. Sheet pulled up to his eyelids, he hid in bed like a mole, blind to his own genius. Instead of flagellating himself with anxiety, he should have been rolling in self-praise. Over the last two years, Chase had bravely taken steps which would save his, Avery and his daughter Margot's lives in the weeks ahead.

THE CREEP

Chase rose with the grotesque, deliberate pace of a person who'd gone to sleep as the sun was coming up. He groaned, suffering the particular malaise induced by shadowed bedroom curtains, ringed by the light of a morning that's come too soon.

The last twenty hours left him feeling undeniably gross; however, he faced this grossness head-on as he went downstairs to get breakfast. Avery sat at the kitchen table with her laptop. "Look!" she shouted, spinning it around to show him an unsanctioned live stream of Petropolis.

The situation was much worse. Yesterday had been hard to stomach but this was much worse. Until now, the undulating, gravity-defying shiny grease cloud had been no doubt terrifying in its strangeness, but it was a nearly palatable strangeness. After spending the whole night tossing and turning over it, it almost seemed normal.

Even if the smoke looked like ink, even if it ignored physics; that could easily be explained by the unknown properties of quantum enriched petroleum. So new scientific gasoline goes up but doesn't come down. No problem! So what if it has weird lights in it that have no business being there? No big deal. He could grasp concepts like these. Sure, no one knew what was coming next, but it couldn't be that bad. Could it? Ecological catastrophes happened all the time and it always turned out sort of alright. And sure, thousands had simultaneously perished in a horrible tragedy, but come on! That, too, was not unheard of in human history. Once Chase got over all that, it was easy to reduce the whole event to what it truly was; he and Avery had merely spent their night staring into a firepit and that was an experience as old as mankind.

He had to hand it to himself. Over the course of only a single night, he'd built a fine wall of rationalizations to block out his fear. Unfortunately, it was for nothing. Today, June 11th, his self-lies were moot as the scene was altogether new and twice as terrifying. Like a campfire left unattended, yesterday's megalithic bonfire was now a megalithic bed of embers. At the center, the titanium vestiges of the enrichment facility somehow remained, unassuming and

blackened. The subterranean fire still burned, singeing the reservoir walls clean. Thankfully, the flames no longer reached above the surface of the crater. Instead, something else was coming out of it. Rising from the fiery pit that used to be a town, a dreadful thing was invading their dimension.

Chase had a staph infection once. He'd seen his own body betray him, watched as his veins turned red and aimed right for his heart. The thing on Avery's computer screen reminded him of that staph infection. Yesterday, the colossal blackness ebbing from the pit at least resembled smoke. It definitely did not resemble smoke now. It was unholy and alien. A titanic, spinning column of writhing, ropery ink shackled the sky to the ground and excreted a million frayed threads of sinewy tissue in all directions. Below it, Petropolis was its beating heart, pumping poison blood through the thing's fibrous, graphite veins. The crystalline den of snakes slithered everywhere across the sky and latched onto every helpless cloud they sensed.

Yesterday, the non-biological metatoxin clouds had been normal, white, puffy clouds. When night fell, they became invisible, just as normal clouds are known to do. This morning, they were visible again and Chase wished they weren't. They were heavy, decaying sacks of ichor that had no right calling themselves clouds. They were dead. Chase had never seen a dead cloud before but he could recognize a lifeless carcass as well as the next person. The onyx needles from the pit-thing penetrated them all. The whole sky looked like a big blood drive and the clouds were donors who'd given too much. Even worse, the systematic, mercilessly efficient attack suggested a startling reality about the unearthly attacker: it was a thinking thing. It had intent. Chase's saliva glands tingled and overproduced as he fought the urge to throw up. There was no mistaking it. Today, the situation was much worse.

"So weird," Avery said. She gleamed with a joyous curiosity that was completely inappropriate. How could she be so nonchalant? Who knew what was happening up there? Why wasn't she afraid? Why wasn't she as afraid *as he was*? He turned on the TV. "There's nothing on there," Avery said. "Total media blackout." She was right. In the spirit of being a total blackout, no one was acknowledging the blackout. They weren't discussing Kentucky at all. The cloud massacre might as well not be happening. Come to think of it, the same thing happened with the earthquake. One day, coverage simply stopped. The vague notion that some serious trouble was happening out west lingered for a time

but, in the absence of constant reminders, people stopped thinking about it. Just like the earthquake, the internet was rife with speculation about the explosion. Breakfast grew cold while Chase and Avery clicked through a shooting gallery of opinions and unsourced facts.

Whenever Chase felt lost, overwhelmed, or both, he called his brother. Richard always knew what was going on. It was one of many uncanny things about the man. Chase dialed Richard's number; however, as is the habit of many a man of mystery, Richard did not pick up. There would be no answers coming from him. Instead, Chase and Avery sat elbow to elbow, hunting credible information but finding only a rumor bank from which everyone was making deposits and withdrawals.

By midday, he was tired. He was extremely tired from doing nothing and he was not looking forward to work at six o'clock. He sat on the couch, legs crossed with his computer next to him. He had one sock on while the other dangled from his toes and he had no immediate intention to finish putting it on. He was spacing hard. His mind raced through mud. That's when a person by the username `_efofo` uploaded ninety seconds that changed the world. The headline dropped casually into his feed, all capital letters and exclamation marks. "WHAT'S HAPPENING IN BATH COUNTY!!??"

The video started with fourteen wobbly seconds of jet black sky which stretched to infinity. These fourteen seconds were scored by an ominous, vaguely recognizable soundtrack. Then, the view-finder pitched down to reveal the glowing horizon above the four-square-mile pit of fire and the remnants of the Reservoir City skyline. The sight was jarring. At the edge of the crater, surviving buildings reflected golden sunlight, looking the same as they would during any other Kentucky summer. Meanwhile, black veins of evil grease pressed against the bottom of the sky. They were a layered, seething mix of tendons and muscle for the intertwining, omnipresent disc which obscured the sun but somehow did not care to block the sunlight. In the years ahead, this bizarre property of the cloud faced rigorous scientific scrutiny but it would never be resolved.

Unfortunately, this perversion of the natural rules of sunlight was only the prelude. For those with the fortitude to watch the video twice, the spooky, impossible lighting was far overshadowed by the images which followed. At twenty-seven seconds, the camera dropped to street level and stabilized, coming to bear on the scene which etched itself into the mind of every man and woman

to ever view it. Person after person lay in the street. Most of them convulsed. Some were completely still. Everyone had blood coming out of their face. The shaky, digitally-zoomed and unfocused video did not diminish the horror. Like so many others at home, Chase leaned closer to the screen to process what he saw. Like so many others at home, he drowned in base, animal fear.

The camera shook violently for twenty seconds and astute viewers deduced _efofo was also convulsing. When her spasms subsided, the focus landed on a trio of victims crawling toward the camera. Blood pooled from their highly visible faces and the vaguely recognizable soundtrack became recognizable. It was crying. It was lots and lots of crying. For eleven seconds more, the world watched the sobbing trio. They were pitiful in the oldest sense of the word. The last nine seconds of the video were the shakiest of all before someone screamed two gurgled words that sounded like "clear light."

At the time, no one outside of Bath County could imagine the full extent of the experience. _efofo showed her viewers the early symptoms like blood leaking out of the nose and mouth, but no one watching at home could know about how the veins swelled or how terrible that felt. Even in the midst of her own suffering, _efofo capably presented the violent, crying seizures; however, no videographer could properly relay the hallucinations or the "electric spine." It wouldn't be long before everyone knew all about those things but it didn't matter. At the moment, no one needed the finer details. The blood pouring from the face and heavy crying were enough to start a dialogue.

Naysayers rejected the video. It was a hoax. It was obviously made in a studio. Chase disagreed. He'd never seen any studio that good. A couple hours later, all doubt about the video's authenticity evaporated when the mainstream media broke the blackout. They turned the tap back on full force. New information gushed directly from the source and loads more came from all other directions. Official channels leapt from withholding the details to expertly spinning the flow of them, naturally and practiced. The new news was wild and varied but a consistent and vivid picture of the events in Bath County showed through.

The bulk of the new footage came from body cameras worn by a squad of marines. The gas-mask wearing troops were tasked with retrieving information and survivors and the things they witnessed grew more and more disturbing while they navigated a city in chaos. At times, the soldiers encountered swaths

of people, convulsing and spraying blood from their face. Other times, they merely glimpsed scenes which implied a horror worse left to the imagination. Chase and Avery were aghast. They'd been given neither a warning nor the power to prevent exposure to sights grislier than they'd ever expected to see.

The marines' mission was punctuated by updates from a reporter below a black sky. She also wore a gas-mask which distorted her voice while the words "BATH COUNTY UNDER QUARANTINE" dominated the lower half of the screen. "Details are scarce but experts suspect the pathogen causes arteriolar swelling, leading to facial hemorrhaging around the eyes, mouth and nose. While not all cases are fatal, the event has taken a high toll. However, authorities report they are containing the outbreak to the periphery of the crater."

Each time she repeated this handful of speculative details, Chase and Avery's fear ratcheted up a notch. If they wanted the news, their only choice was to keep watching, in the throes of traumatic shock, while the soldiers carried out their mission of rescue and containment. One noteworthy moment came when a marine encountered an old woman with her head down. She was crying in low, stuttering howls. The marine laid a hand on her shoulder and she moed like a cow birthing a calf. A torrent of crimson fluid shot from her mouth with enough power to dislodge her false teeth.

Chase's saliva glands reactivated. The puke he'd felt before finally arrived. He ran to the restroom, thankful for the respite from the TV. He did what his body instructed while the notion some things shouldn't be shown on television hovered around him, largely unarticulated. A short while later, he was back on the couch beside Avery. She showed no sign of noticing his departure. A gas-mask wearing military scientist joined the reporter for an interview beneath dead clouds. "Thanks for joining us, Major. Tell me, what else do we know about this phenomenon?"

"Phenomenon!?! That's a friendly way of talking about it!" Avery screamed at the TV.

The Major spoke atonally, matter-of-fact as a robot. "Initial reports of arteriolar swelling were correct. In some cases, the swelling is severe and the victim's body essentially turns into a blood bag after acute arteriolar ruptures."

"That's fucking horrifying!" Avery cried.

"This isn't the norm, however. More commonly, death results from dehydration. A prolonged and intense period of crying precedes fatality."

Fear overtook Avery totally. She screamed, "Oh my God!" with an unabashed shamelessness that was quite scary in itself. Something about the way she screamed, "Oh my God!" tugged at Chase's memory.

"At this time, the phenomenon has spread rapidly throughout the ruins of Reservoir City but it's not expected to breach the quarantine."

Avery's eyes glimmered with purple rage. "It's never expected to breach the quarantine! They always expect to contain it!" She paused, then added, "You fuckers!"

Chase felt loopy, detached. He kept thinking about the word "arteriolar" and how difficult it was to say. Years later, he revisited this moment and realized his attitude at the time was the most classic kind of defense mechanism. Of course he was scared. The phenomenon was the scariest thing he'd ever seen. But he had to block it out. For Avery, he had to remain understated and maintain an Olympian calm. After all, she was carrying their baby and potentially reaching dangerous levels of anxiety.

Unfortunately, his mood pendulum swung back to rationality with a tragically imbalanced dose of gusto. In a tone far too casual for Avery's liking, he said, "Well, I've gotta go to work, babe."

"What!? No! You can't go to work now! Are you serious!?"

"It's almost six o'clock."

"No! Call Tim and say you're not coming. You have to stay with me! I'm scared shitless!" Her voice carried the unmistakable warble of a person close to tears.

Chase still felt loopy. Arteriolar. Arteriolar. Crying to death. Arteriolar rupture. Blood bag. He clicked his tongue. "Okay, let me call Tim and see what he says. Sorry."

He walked to the kitchen and called Gold's #2, spacing out again while the phone rang. His mind drifted back to a day long ago. He was sitting outside of a restaurant, engaged in the familiar activity of waiting for Avery. His early days in Minneapolis were more hopeful. In those days, he'd actually gone around submitting his resume to potential employers. Near the bottom of that resume, he'd listed "superfluous punctuality" as a desirable quality he possessed.

His trademark personality trait contrasted sharply with Avery's laissez-faire approach to all appointments big and small. This often generated friction between them but not back then. Back in the budding weeks of their relation-

ship, Chase prided himself in coping with any manner of small annoyance in a productive fashion. During these waits, he often cleaned dust from the crevice where his phone flipped open or texted friends he hadn't spoken to in a while. Having just waited on Avery the day before when she absconded to browse nail polish, his crevice was clean. He scrolled to the bottom of his recent calls list with the intention of pushing the bottom placeholder to the top. Jamie Heathorn. Chase couldn't recall who that was or when he'd saved his or her contact info. All the same, he sent a message. *How's it going?*

He experienced slow, pulsing joy as the paper message on screen folded itself into an envelope and vanished into cyberspace. Lightning strike him dead if he didn't love that animation; the crispness of it, the neat folds. He wanted to watch it in slow-motion, over and over. Chase considered digging through his phone settings to find a slow-motion option for the mail-folding animation but that was sheer madness. No way they programmed that in. He looked anyway.

A few tables down, a young woman's overly loud phone voice echoed through the restaurant. "Do you think they saw the picture? Oh my God!" She carried on and Chase noticed how little attention she placed on the conversation. She glanced from TV to TV, speaking without thinking. She looked relieved. It was the same relief Chase felt when cleaning his phone. Though it arose from different activities, it sourced from the same reassurance: "I am doing something."

The sirenic drone of the nearest television called him to witness. "...the Chairman dismissed claims that treated oil could be environmentally hazardous as lies propagated by internet trolls..."

Do you think they saw the picture? Oh my God! The treated oil is environmentally hazardous. Oh my God! We're all gonna turn into blood bags! Oh my God!

The memory bubble popped and he was back in the kitchen with his phone to his ear. In the next room, Avery berated the TV. After a few more rings, his boss answered. Tim's voice betrayed none of the concern, if any, the man was feeling. He was a steel drum which played the same beat no matter how it was struck. Classically raised in the age before cell phones and the internet, he was a real Minnesota cowboy with a dad who'd been in World War 2.

"What's all that commotion?"

"Avery's a little scared about what's happening with the bloody-face-and-crying thing."

"Yep, that's scary stuff. Guess you're callin' to see if you can skip work today and stay home with her." God bless Tim. Nothing was ever awkward with him. "All the same, I think it's better if you come in." Chase held the phone. "Stay home if you like, but I think it's better if you come in. You can bring Avery if it suits her. Been a while since I've seen her, anyway."

"Okay, thanks."

Avery wasn't having it. "Go in to the gas station!?! And do what!?" She had a point. "You want me to stand around helping you pump gas while I'm pregnant with our kid!?! Are you out of your mind!?"

"You could sit in the office. It's pretty comfortable in there and they have a TV."

"I don't want to watch TV! I want to stay here with you!"

He sat down and she stood up. He did not say the thing he knew he shouldn't say. *We'd be watching TV here. What's the difference?* Instead, he said the other thing he knew he shouldn't say. "Tim says I should go."

He was weak. He was stupid. He wasn't fit to take care of a family. Avery told him as much and then told him to go ahead and go. He lingered uncomfortably, wanting to console her. He hated being a slave to the clock and his implacable sense of duty. While he didn't consider that spineless, Avery certainly did. Why didn't she understand? He made a promise to Gold's and to Tim to work today and it wasn't in his nature to break promises. Maybe the whole world was going off the rails but right now, here in Minneapolis, it was just another day and he was scheduled to work at six. They sat holding hands while people shot blood from their face. She pretended not to notice his lingering but he could tell she appreciated it. That is, until she caught him checking his watch. Now she really wanted him to go. He asked her again to come with him and she refused with a double-dose of vitriol. "Go to hell, you asshole! You're such an asshole!"

His backbone returned, bringing with it a level of cognitive function absent since the explosion. It was 5:30, the breaking point if he wanted to get to work on time and uphold his duty to pump gas. Avery was in no immediate danger and he was tired of helplessly witnessing carnage on TV. He stood up and she called him an asshole again. He headed for the door. "Love you," he said, not feeling it at that moment. Was there anything less attractive than anger?

As he turned the doorknob, a gas-mask distorted voice said, "Though it's largely thought to be caused by inhalation of enriched particulate, the true nature of the phenomenon remains a mystery."

Walking to work, Chase was too much in his own head to notice what was happening around him. He didn't see the many open garage doors or all the cars in driveways. He didn't see the minivan with the hood up or the woman running a dipstick through the oil. He didn't see the other guy checking the air in his tires. He hated leaving Avery like that. So why did he do it if it bothered him so much? His shoulders shook involuntarily, failing to shed clinging frustration. They'd always been a good couple but never a great couple. They fulfilled needs and found each other decent people. They didn't lift each other up too much, but they didn't tear each other down too much, either. Not exciting, but solid. *The true nature of the phenomenon remains a mystery.*

The golden lights of Gold's #2 shone dim and blurry in the evening fog. As usual, those lights reminded Chase of his parents. For years, they told him he'd end up as a gas station attendant if he didn't study. He'd studied and they'd still been correct. They were none-too-pleased the day he called during his second month in Minneapolis to tell them he had a job. Bank teller? Nope, gas station attendant. Even as he said the words, he felt shame. But why? Why did gas station attendants draw the ire of his parents so much? The people he worked with were good people, nice people. His boss Tim was a heck of a person, one of the finest Chase had ever met. Chase shared this sentiment with his parents a few times but it never swayed their opinion. To them, he would always be a categorical non-achiever. Paradoxically, they always approved of Richard's life and Richard was, at any moment, very likely to be unemployed. If Chase were to visit a therapist, he might easily observe that it wasn't his occupation that his parents disliked so much; it was their estimation of the potential lying wasted in him. Unfortunately, a shift manager at Gold's can't afford a therapist so the revelation would have to wait.

When he was close enough to hear the buzz of the neon sign above the station, he felt a fresh stab of guilt about leaving Avery. There weren't even that many cars in line. Tim made him come in for this? It wasn't too late to go back. Tim had said, "Stay if you want, but I think it's best you come in." *Stay if you want*, he said. Chase hadn't been spotted yet. He could still turn around and tell Tim he'd opted to stay home. Then he considered the alternative: sitting on

the couch with Avery, listening to her scream as people puked blood from their eyes. As bad as it felt to leave her, this would surely be his fate if he went home now.

So, Tim saw it all. In his boundless wisdom, he was doing Chase a favor by telling him to report to work. No, that didn't sound right, either. It was something else. Something about the way Tim said "I think it's best if you come in" contained an imperative and Tim wasn't a man who issued meaningless imperatives. Chase plodded on, finishing his penultimate journey to Golds #2, the most frequented small business fueling station in Minneapolis and the surrounding regions.



MUCH TO HIS SURPRISE, work was pretty normal. The lines were a bit longer than usual and a few people handed him some extra gas jugs to fill. Other than that, it was just another night. There wasn't nearly as much chaos as Chase expected. There wasn't nearly as much chaos *as there should have been*.

"That's the power of new gas. One tank will get you to the North Pole and back," Tim chanted tonelessly. "Guess most people feel comfortable with what they got. But I'll tell ya, most of them don't realize exactly what it is they got, yet." They worked the night away in the usual fashion, neither mentioning the explosion or the quarantine. There were no concrete details and they both had the disposition to speak little of things about which they were uncertain.

It wasn't until the end of Chase's shift, near the crack of 2 A.M., when something out of the ordinary finally occurred. Just as he was leaving, Tim stopped him. "Chase, you're a well-mannered country boy from the city. I know you've been stealing that gas." A train rolled over Chase, engine to caboose. This was it. Tim knew about the six barrels. He knew about the storage shed. In addition to his parents, Chase had now disappointed the only other person whose approval he sought. He was about to lose his job and his daughter was going to starve. "I also know why you've been doin' it. It's because you're smart. Truth is, your idea for collecting spillage prevented enough waste for you to be commended by Gold Gas HQ for the Gold Gas Gold Star. Of course, if I had recommended you for the Gold Star, they would've wanted to know why and you wouldn't

have been able to steal all that gas so I kept my mouth shut on your behalf. You did a good job. Don't be shy about it."

Chase clawed for an excuse for too long a moment before actually hearing what Tim was saying. "You're not mad about the panning?"

"What's that?"

"The gas? Stealing the gas?"

"Life's a strange place. It's full of lemons but you gotta make lemonade, you know? I know this job isn't exactly the cat's pajamas so I can understand why you wanted to get a little extra out of it. No, I'm not mad. That gas woulda just soaked into the concrete. You earned it for thinkin' up such a good plan."

"Thank you," Chase said.

"Don't mention it," Tim took a drag off his browning cigarette. "What I can't figure is why you've been takin' the gas when you've got nothing to put it in." With unexpected, brute utility, Tim folded the fresh, half-smoked cigarette into the ashtray. Then he did another thing Chase didn't expect. The rusty drawer below the register squeaked and Tim pulled out a plastic puppy key-chain linked to a single key. "Thing's 'bound to get dicey now the gas is all burned up and people are cryin' themselves to death. I admire the way you walk to work every day but I know you've got a little one on the way and life threw you a hell of a lemon. You'll be needing a vehicle soon so I want you to take the old truck out back."

Chase's emotions mixed. On one hand, he was touched and supremely grateful for the gesture. On the other hand, he didn't think the old truck out back would start. For the entirety of Chase's career at Gold's, it collected dust in the far corner of the rear parking lot. He'd never seen Tim move it. He saw some kids smoking in it once. Tim read the concern right off Chase's face. "Don't worry, there's life in it. Take it. It's yours."

Maybe due to some childhood trauma, perceived lack of self-worth or a combination of the two, Chase felt unworthy when facing generosity. He usually rejected gestures of goodwill out of habit. However, transformative days like these were no time for self-doubt or second-guessing. What Chase should have done was mechanically extend his hand to receive the key. He should've taken the truck home without a second thought. Instead, he said, "Tim, I don't know if I can accept it. Sure you don't want to think about it?"

"All the thinkin's done." Tim put the key back in the drawer. "Suit yourself. It's right here when you need it." Chase didn't know what to say so he said nothing. Tim pulled another cigarette from his pocket. He flicked his lighter and smoked the whole thing in silence. Chase's shift was over and he was exhausted but he stayed. It felt appropriate to sit with Tim while he smoked. Somehow, four silent minutes of Chase's company was payment for the truck and Tim's open mind about corporate theft.

Tim's eyes were pointed at the golden neon signs but Chase doubted he was seeing them. The Minnesota cowboy went somewhere when he smoked. It was the quiet headspace wise, old people spend their time, a place the young haven't thought to tread. Before long, Tim put the butt in the ashtray and came back to reality. "You still here?"

"I'm just leaving."

"Drive the truck home. Go ahead, take her for a joyride."

For the second time, Chase limply deflected Tim's kind offer. This insecure gesture of misplaced politeness would not be worth it. Chase absolutely should have gotten over the awkwardness of taking a free truck the moment it was offered. He absolutely should have listened to Tim and driven the truck home right then and there, but he didn't and he would whole-heartedly regret it. "I'll walk home tonight. If you're still sure about it tomorrow, I'll get it then."

"Suit yourself," Tim repeated.

Chase stepped out into the night, not knowing that was the last time he would ever see the man. He walked home in a daze. So Tim had known about the barrels in the storage shed all along. Chase had done all that worrying for nothing. When he got home, the kitchen lights were off which meant Avery was asleep. Nice and normal for 3:00 in the morning on a Friday. He crawled into bed and she put her arm around him. Avery was at times quick to anger but also quick to forget. The sun was soon to rise on the most significant day of their life but, for now, things were normal.

RUNNING

Morning found them in a familiar place. Chase and Avery lived five years together in their townhome and had likely spent most of that time on the couch. Little did they know, it was nearly at an end. Helicopters buzzed the scene, weaving through giant black pillars of the biological metatoxin as it siphoned poison into the atmosphere. More science about the thing had been decided overnight. It was confirmed; the side-effects wrought to humans whereby blood shot from their face resulted from "particulate inhalation." More importantly, the horrific condition had a name. June 12th, 2009 was the first day the world heard the term "Quantum Realignment Phenomenon." This mouthful shortened to Q.R.P. which looked and sounded like "creep," so "creep" or "the creep" was what people called it.

Marines continued their televised mission of rescue and containment in the inhabited areas around the crater. By now, their operations included the neighboring town Magnolia. It should have been obvious as soon as the creep got to Magnolia the quarantine was for shit; however, the authorities insisted everything was under control and so it was fine. Now that the shock of the explosion had faded, it was time for an explanation. It was aftershocks from the West Coast Earthquake. Yes, aftershocks toppled the enrichment tier. This raised a couple red flags for Chase. Did aftershocks come so late? The earthquake was months ago now. Did aftershocks reach so far? The earthquake was half a continental shelf away. Something didn't add up. Well, what did he know? He was no geographer.

Until now, the coverage followed a predictable cycle. The cycle went: horror, horror, commercial, horror, speculation, commercial, repeat. Each cycle lasted about two hours and, to be frank, Chase was getting bored. He was ready to suggest changing the channel when the "BREAKING NEWS" banner appeared. The same reporter with the same gas mask stood below the same black clouds. By now, she was the recognizable face of this disaster so it was fitting she was the one to utter, with zero gravitas, the two words which destroyed the country.

"It's spreading." It was the last great line of American news theater. "It's spreading," sparked months of anarchy and marked the dawn of a new age below a green sky.

Avery's head snapped around like a viper. "Oh my God!" she screeched in genuine pain. Chase blended with the couch in a paralytic, telescopic flattening of reality. The whole world was simultaneously far away and on top of him, crushing the air from his chest. At long last, he gave birth to Margot's delinquent twin. The lump of dread in his stomach expanded like a balloon. It burst through him, then contracted until he was suffocating in an icy, mindsucking panic. For an infinite moment, he basked in the terror of his creation, floating in a bubble of abject helplessness. Then, the bubble popped.

Chase became a robot. He leapt from the couch, landing halfway to the kitchen. "Get the hospital bag," he ordered unceremoniously.

"What! Why?" In his precious, fleeting moment of agency on the couch, he knew for a fact his work key was on the kitchen counter. It was not. Instead, he faced a haphazard sea of magazines. "Where are we going!?" she screamed.

The question knocked him into a tailspin of hesitation. Where *were* they going? "North!" Slick magazine paper rustled. His hands roamed for the keychain faster than his mind could follow. It wasn't there. He checked the cupboard. It wasn't there.

"Why!?" A needle of frustration pierced the blanket of fear that was smothering him. No keychain. The key wasn't where it should be and Avery was asking more questions. "Why, Chase!?"

"We're gonna outrun it! Go grab your hospital bag!"

"Can we do that!?" The needle became a knife. These questions weren't helpful. They reminded him he didn't know the answers and slowed him down. They made him angry at himself and they made him more afraid. *Could* they outrun it? "Jesus, Chase! Can we do that!? Can we do that, oh God!" Her pitch rose and rose.

Chase thought of the old woman who shot her false teeth out with her own blood. "Have you seen my work key!?" he demanded.

"Chase, answer me! What do you mean 'outrun it!?'"

"Where's the key to the station!?" he barked at full volume.

"What!?"

Magazines flew. "My key! Do you have it!?" It was the kind of ridiculous question that can only be conceived in desperation.

"What!?! Why would I have it? What do you need it for!?"

He took a deep breath, hoping it would calm him down or relieve the violent tension gripping his chest. It did neither. "Do you know where my work key is or not!?" he yelled.

"Under the magazines! Chase, what's going on!?" More magazines flew. Finally, he heard the rattle of a key chain. He snatched up the key and was suddenly running down the street. Avery hung in the door, yelling after him, "Where are you going!?"

He screamed, "Get the baby bag! I'll be right back!" Then he was sprinting the two miles to Gold's at record pace. *I know you're expecting a little one.* The words came back to him without mercy. It wasn't his intention to repeatedly imagine Avery crying blood until she died but that's what he did all the way to Gold's. *Life threw you a hell of a lemon.* He gripped the key as tightly as he could, occasionally giving it an extra hard squeeze to confirm it had not phased out of reality. It was their lifeline now and it felt so fragile.

The neighborhood hummed with nervous chatter. It was all hands on deck. Men, women and children dashed to and from their family vehicles, feverishly chucking in all manner of items both bagged and unbagged. The pattern repeated at each house with the same, cuckoo-clock consistency. Everyone made eyes at the people around them. They wanted to know who was the most prepared. Who were they going to beat out of the city and who were they going to be stuck behind? Their condition mirrored his: a fugue state, animated by the raw, base instinct of survival.

You gotta make lemonade, you know. Things 'bound to get dicey.

Chase thought again about his brother. How would Richard react to this? The man spent ninety percent of his time making lemonade. If his cup was half empty, he'd tell you it was three quarters full. If it was empty, he'd say he wasn't thirsty because he already drank the contents. One time, when they were boys, Richard saved the house from burning down. It was a poker chip he waved freely whenever it was time to decide who should take out the trash or go buy eggs. "I saved the house from burning down," Richard would say.

Funny thing about that was it worked. Without fail, their mom or dad set their gaze squarely on Chase. "He's right, Chase. He saved us all. Please take out

the trash and then mow the lawn." That's all you needed in life: one big score. Save the house from burning down once and ride the gravy train until high school graduation. Richard was that kind of person but Chase wasn't.

He saw the unlit amber sign of Gold's #2 and a line of honking cars. Tim was off today and the day guy, George, often missed work even when the world was functioning normally. Thank God Chase had known to grab the key. Thank God he'd known the office would be locked. Very Richard of him. He'd opened the door a hundred thousand times in the last four years but suddenly his work key didn't want to work. Classic. It wasn't the honking making this difficult. It was the shaking. Focus, focus. Make lemonade. He stilled his hands and turned the key. He was mere seconds from his salvation: trading the CHASE keychain for the puppy-dog one in the drawer. He was convinced the key to the truck wouldn't be there. Of course it wouldn't be there. Of course Tim took it home with him.

It was there.

He sprinted for the dirty old truck in the back corner of the parking lot, leaving his CHASE key behind forever. The door groaned as he flung it open and climbed into the dust bucket. He jammed the key into the ignition, positive it wouldn't start. No way this truck would start. It would start for Richard but not for him. It was his lot in life to start puking blood right here in this truck and never see Avery again. For the second time in the last ninety seconds, he narrowed his entire focus to the simple act of turning a key correctly. Miraculously, he managed. Even more miraculously, the truck came to life right away. It even sounded good.

The engine roared and tires squealed as Chase forced the sleeping giant from its long-standing home. He watched Gold's #2 fade in the rear view mirror, correctly guessing it was the last time he'd ever see it. He felt a tad guilty for not helping the line of honking customers but he'd left the office door wide open. Let them break the law and pump their own gas today. Chase had a family to save.

The roads were packed. He drove indiscriminately over asphalt, sidewalk and lawn, planning for a hundred potential nightmare scenarios. It was exhausting to think of solutions to problems with so many unknown variables. Who knew how long it would take to get out of Minneapolis? More importantly, who knew how much time they had before the particulate caught up to them?

By the time he was driving across the baseball diamond at the end of his street, he'd sorted it. Step One: get Avery. By now, she'd be waiting outside with the baby bag. Step Two: go to the storage shed and get all the gas. That should buy him enough time to figure out Step Three. Twelve minutes later, Chase screeched to a halt outside their house. Was Avery waiting outside with the baby bag? She was not. He honked and waited. So much for urgency. He ran inside, gripped again by the odd blend of cold fear and hot frustration.

Avery was a paragon of hysteria. The baby bag was open on the couch and in complete disarray. It took them two days to perfectly decide the contents of that bag. Why was she pulling everything out of it? "Ready!?" he asked. "Didn't you hear me honking?"

"Everyone's honking! Where are we going!?"

"North!"

"To where?"

"Just North! Away from that!" Chase accused the TV. "We'll drive the opposite way and keep driving."

"Will that work!?"

"I don't know! What are you doing with the bag!? Let's go!"

"I'm getting supplies!"

He goofily craned his neck around her to get a better look at the hospital bag. A handful of diapers lay strewn on the couch and floor. Avery had replaced them with a flashlight, some clothes and a mirror. A mirror? Running through his mind was a thought so familiar it registered only as a feeling. In their years together, he'd pushed aside this feeling so many that the pushing was now a reflex. Thus, he was able to address Avery without a hint of malice or disappointment. "Okay, let's get going."

Finally, they rushed into the truck. Avery tossed the baby bag between them on the bench seat and observed, "This truck smells dusty." A killer cloud of particulate was coming to turn them into blood bags and she was upset because the free truck he got them smelled too old. They sped away from their townhome with an appropriately dramatic tire screech and Chase had neither the inclination, nor the free moment, to wonder if yet another sentimental location was fading into the rear view forever.

The neighborhood looked different at maximum safe velocity. This truck could really move. They traversed all manner of terrain, going so fast Chase

worried the police would stop them. Another scenario joined the mental jumble of possible problems and solutions he was lining up. If they got pulled over, he'd tell them Avery was pregnant. Certainly, that gave them more right to speed than anyone else. Pregnant ladies are the bread and butter of society and they can speed if they like. But they weren't stopped. Of course they weren't. Why would the police stop anyone when the whole country was speeding? He'd liked it so much better when he didn't have anything at stake. Before the creep breached the quarantine, it was a spectacle. It was interesting, even crudely exciting, to watch distant strangers deal with seizures and biological metatoxins. Now, he was shrouded in a fingernail biting panic and it served him right.

Twenty-five minutes later, they reached D.I.Y. Storage, Unit 31. Slatted steel rolled up to reveal the prize. Six barrels of gasoline never looked so beautiful. His big score. Yes, Mom and Dad, he did know what he was doing. And yes, he was happy. Right now, Chase was very happy to be a licensed gas station attendant. He seized a nearby dolly, wearing a smile bright enough to land a helicopter on his face. Avery laughed. "Is this all the gas you've been stealing!?"

"Panning, babe. Panning."

"You panned a shitload!"

If it was possible to smile wider, he did it. It was a veritable shitload, a true testament to the value of patiently stealing little bits over a long time. Despite the horrific fate awaiting the rest of humanity, he felt great. No way he and Avery were gonna be blood bags. They had enough gas to get to the North Pole and he would drive the Earth until the day he died if it meant outrunning that damn cloud.

It took twenty exhausting minutes for them to push all six barrels up into the truck bed where Chase found a large, neatly folded canvas tarp. The tarp was new and very clean, totally out of place compared to the rest of the truck. It was easy to imagine the moment Tim threw in the last-minute addition, his final gesture of ultimate wisdom and helpfulness. It took eight more minutes to string the tarp neatly over the barrels. With their booty securely hidden in the truck bed, they hid their booties securely back in the dusty cab. It no longer smelled like dust. It smelled like gas.

"My hands smell like metal and gas," Avery confirmed.

Chase scanned the Do-It-Yourself Storage Complex for a wash-station. As lucky as he felt right then, he fully expected an outdoor sink to appear with a

golden halo around it. Alas, a sink did not appear. It was the first of many disappointments to follow. "No bathroom, eh?" His immaculately juiced brain instantly shouted the solution. He reached between them to pull hand sanitizer from the baby bag. "Here you go!"

Avery held out her hands, doubt scrawled across her face. A huge glob of alcohol-smelling hand sanitizer gooped into them. "That's too much!"

"Sorry!" he yelled gleefully. He squirted some in his hand, intentionally producing a funny squirting sound from the bottle. He grinned at her as they rubbed their hands together. Now the truck smelled like metal, gasoline and alcoholic hand-sanitizer.

"Why are you so happy?" she asked. This tone of hers had often killed his joy in the past...but not today! He could see Step Three so clearly; they were going to get out of the city, then stick to back roads on their journey North.

"Because we've got a ton of gas! We can go to the North Pole!" He felt like it was minus twenty degrees outside and he was in a log cabin, wrapped in blankets next to a fire. Eluding discomfort in such an efficient way was its own kind of high. They were about to start a romantic, backroads adventure and nothing could stop them. "This is gonna be fun!"

"My hands still stink!"

"It's okay!" With slimy hands smelling of gas, metal and alcohol, Chase strapped on his seat belt. He mashed the accelerator and they started their journey.

It was not going to be fun.



IT'S HUMAN NATURE TO submit to irrationality. As soon as a biological metatoxin was confirmed inbound, a wave of humanity splashed through the bottleneck exits of all major cities. For the earliest escapees, the countryside they'd long abandoned welcomed them home. For people in crowded city centers who'd spent ten minutes too long arguing about the contents of a baby bag, escape wouldn't come as swiftly. As a horrendous cloud of death bore down on them, Chase and Avery sat in traffic.

The moment they left the storage center, they nearly slammed into the back of a car which was behind a hundred more cars. Avery sighed. "Guess this is

north," she grumbled. Not to be deterred, Chase checked his surroundings for off-road options; however, all sidewalks, soccer fields, and other avenues were crammed full. They were stuck. He'd never seen this much traffic in his life, nor would he ever again. "What a zoo!" he whooped in a bid to maintain his enthusiasm. Nothing was going to rain on his parade. His sweet, gasoline parade. He was now in the habit of checking the mirror constantly to make sure the barrels were still there. What began as an act of affirmation repeated itself into a conditioned pleasure response and the dopamine was flowing. Just look at all that gas. Just think how far they could drive. They could drive to India.

"At least zoos have bathrooms." Avery looked like a robot, stiffly extending her arms to keep her hands as far away from her as possible. The metallic smell was her worst enemy now and she maintained this pose for the better part of a miserable hour. To say they crept at a snail's pace was an overstatement. At dusk, the endless chain of cars became an endless chain of tail-lights winding through the descending darkness. Slowly but surely, the traffic eroded Chase's once pristine mental state. Euphoria acquiesced to simple peace of mind. After all, they were still hundreds of miles from Bath County where the cloud from another dimension was making people cry to death. The sheer distance gave Chase room to assume they had time enough to leave Minneapolis. Then they'd be free to outrun the cloud as fast as they liked.

Given enough time in the truck, however, peace of mind morphed into crushing boredom and a very stiff back. Traffic was moving so slow. It was an insult to the notion of car travel. Against his better judgment, Chase did some basic math to predict how long it would take to escape the city at their current speed. His abysmal conclusion was the catalyst which transformed his boredom back into his most regular state of mind: low, throbbing anxiety.

Avery's phone rang, startling them both. "It's my dad," she said, flipping the phone open. "Dad, hey!" Avery's father Dan was an interesting guy, part-time online instructor and full-time homebody. Even though he lived only a short distance from Minneapolis, he and Avery rarely saw each other. They weren't estranged and Chase never heard a whisper of family drama. Rather, Dan was one of those fiercely independent people who raised his children to be the same. Both Dan and Avery were unsentimental, utilitarian creatures of routine. Their spheres rarely had a practical reason to cross so they rarely spoke or visited.

Added to that, Avery described her dad as "painfully plain," and Avery quickly grew bored in the presence of plainness. Hence, the purple irises. Chase didn't agree. In the seven years he'd been with her, Chase had met Avery's father a handful of times. All instances were brief and emotionally neutral but not plain. Chase's impression of the guy was that he was very much about being prepared. He doubted Dan had been caught in the rain without an umbrella a day in his life.

Avery's conversation with her dad was a one-sided affair to which she contributed little. Meanwhile, Chase went to that floaty, lonely space one goes when their only companion is on the phone with a third party. It occurred to him that he hadn't talked to his parents since this all started. Of course, they hadn't called him either. He knew how they'd be right now: half fatalistic, half nihilistic, one hundred percent lecture. They weren't the type to admit a global event was worth a phone call. Seeing as how they'd called last week to deliver their quarterly critique, it wasn't like them to call again so soon. Still, as a parent-to-be, Chase was growing more sensitive to parental sentiments so he texted them. *Doing fine.*

Their reply was speedy. *Okay.* :) Chase almost called them, then reconsidered. This wasn't a great time for him to be wondering if he'd made all the wrong life choices. He pocketed his phone and stretched his back as much as the cramped quarters would allow. His thoughts returned to his brother Richard, the least plain person he knew. He imagined how his brother was faring right now and a smile threatened to push through his bored, cramped truck scowl.

Richard led an adventured life. He was thriving in this chaos, no doubt about it. Whether he'd ever voiced it or not, Richard had been waiting for this his whole life. Finally, society was crumbling. Rubber was meeting the road for the rich and poor alike. Survival was reclaiming its throne as the great equalizer in a world where most had forgotten it. The training wheels were off and Richard was bound to be loving life right now. He was a true hero, the swash-buckling leading man of any disaster film and perfectly suited for apocalyptic scenarios. Chase, on the other hand...

"What!?" Avery cried. She was gawking a gawk gawky enough to pull Chase's mind back into the truck. "What!?" she repeated, putting her dad on speaker. Whether Chase liked it or not, he was now privy to this conversation and likely needed to pay attention.

Dan's voice came through, nice and calm. Perhaps too calm. "Why don't you stop by?"

"No! We can not stop by, Dad! There isn't time! We have to keep going!" She turned her persistent gawk on Chase, eyes widening in that way that fishes agreement out of their target. Chase nodded. She was right. They couldn't drop by on anyone. Dan didn't get that? It didn't make sense. Why was he even still there? He should be running, too. "You should be running, too!" she yelled.

"Aw, there's nothing to be afraid of. This whole thing is nothing but media manipulation and fear mongering. Why don't you two swing by on your way up north?"

"No! We aren't swinging by! We have to go!" She blinked hard. Funny how she got angry with her father for acting too casual in the face of annihilation. Chase often got angry with her for the same reason.

"Okay, I can't control you. Door's open if you change your mind." There was genuine sadness in his voice though it was easy to miss. After a bitter and short-lived goodbye, Avery snapped her phone shut. "What the hell, Dad?" she whispered.



AN HOUR AFTER NIGHTFALL, Minneapolis was a spooky place. Ominous commotion seeped out of the city. The air was heavy with carbon monoxide and volatility. Chase avoided eye-contact with other drivers because it felt like the safe thing to do. He and Avery sat in agitated silence, the baby bag uncomfortably wedged between them. Avery leaned her head against the window. "I'm gonna be carsick," she said.

"You can't get carsick in a traffic jam."

"Yes, you can. The gasoline smell is terrible and I feel carsick."

"It doesn't even smell like gas anymore."

"I'm pregnant, okay? I can smell a lot better than you."

Any time she used that particular inflection to remind him she was pregnant, she targeted a thorny button in Chase's mind and pressed it repeatedly. That was the thing about Avery; she was crafty in an unknowing, subconscious way and she unintentionally wielded great power against him in their invisible war of passive aggression. He flipped on the radio and instantly regretted it.

"Spasmodic fluttering, seizure and internal bleeding are commonplace. The death toll in Magnolia has reached staggering heights and the streets are literally clogged with the dead." The radio went back off. So, a symphony of car horns and random city chaos was to be the soundtrack of their slow-moving road adventure.

Another hour ticked by and again they were discussing the baby bag. It was one of those meaningless disputes that arise because people are overtired and go on resisting each other as if they were fighting the whole world. "Why does a pregnancy-readiness bag need a flashlight?" he asked.

"Light is important, not just for light but as a signaling device. And this is a good flashlight!"

Chase shifted uncomfortably in his seat. The bag had been pressing on his hip for hours and it was the flashlight's fault. "It's too bulky."

"A good flashlight has a little bulk."

Chase snorted. "And how about a mirror? How much bulk should a mirror have?"

"Did you know if you crash landed in the tundra or the desert, a mirror is the number one item you should have?"

Avery would say that.

"For signaling, dummy. You reflect sunlight to signal airplanes so you can get rescued. Gosh, you thought I wanted to make sure I looked pretty while I starved to death in the tundra, didn't you?"

He marveled at how much they'd changed since they met. "You know, Avery, the most frustrating thing is everything would be fine if you would just let it be fine. We're not in danger right now and..."

"The cloud, Chase. The biological meta-blood-bag cloud."

He took his seatbelt off. "I think we have a nice head start on the cloud, don't you?"

"How should I know? Are clouds fast? This might be a really fast cloud." Avery took her seatbelt off and gave the baby bag a grumpy shove. The flashlight bounced painfully off his hip bone.

Chase scoffed so she would know she smooshed him with the bag. "Did you even bring batteries for this stupid flashlight? What kind of battery does this thing even take? G-cells? It's gigantic."

"No, Chase. It takes Z-cells, the biggest fucking battery to ever walk the earth."

Chase scoffed harder. "Oh, really? Z-cells?"

"Yeah, zeeze nuts. Of course we have batteries, okay? Maybe not fresh ones but I turned it on after you ditched me at home so I know there are some batteries in it, okay? C-cells, as I know you already know."

He scoffed at maximum. "I wasn't ditching you. I was getting the truck we're in right now! How else were we going to get out of town?"

She scoffed three times in quick succession in imitation of him and said no more. A chill ran down Chase's spine. They hadn't even reached Uptown yet. They were nowhere near out of town. It was feeling more and more realistic that a killer cloud five states away could catch them. If they didn't have the truck, they wouldn't have any hope at all. Tim had been so right. Thank God for that man. Chase frowned at Avery. She hadn't even asked about the truck. What kind of person wouldn't ask about suddenly owning a random truck? Well, you know what? If she wasn't going to ask, he wasn't going to tell her. He wouldn't give her the satisfaction.

Chase stared at her while she stared out the window. He stared harder, willing her to look at him. She wouldn't budge. Okay, fine. You want to play hardball, Avery? "You didn't even ask me where I got the truck," he said.

"Of course Tim gave it to you. Why else would you have the old truck from the gas station?" She didn't even turn to look at him while she answered.

"Well, why didn't you comment on it?"

"I didn't need to. Tim's nice. He saw the world falling apart and he gave you a truck. Is there anything I'm missing?"

Chase snorted at her lucky guess. Okay, you win this round. Still, she didn't look at him. She didn't even turn to acknowledge her win. Chase snorted again. All in all, he'd picked a heck of a time to conceive a child and a heck of a person to conceive it with.

His hands reeked like gas and sanitizer. This was stupid. The gears started turning. Think, Chase, think. How could they get out of the city quicker? Ah, yes, the most popular routes out of Minneapolis were the most *popular* so everyone would be going those ways and they would be the most *populated*. What ways did he know that were *unpopular*? Think, think.

He thought about the traffic, the creep, his parents, Avery and Margot. He felt powerless to help any of them and, whenever he felt powerless, he thought of Richard. He wished he could team up with his brother right now and find a solution to this. He thought about the last time they were together.

The TV in the bar kept him company until Richard got there. Plans to build the enrichment tiers were proceeding ahead of schedule. In those days, it was all anyone talked about. Seemed like everything else in the world stopped happening when the enrichment tiers came along. Oh well, they were certainly nothing to complain about. New gas was coming and everyone was about to be all Santa's reindeers, going to the North Pole and back. Suddenly, Richard was at the door and the waitress was pointing to Chase's table.

He was leaving Minnesota and moving to California. Chase asked how he was going to get there. Neither of them had a car. Richard shrugged. When would he be coming back? He shrugged again. "Maybe a year." It was a pleasantry, a promise they both could expect broken. Richard wasn't the type. They both knew what type he was: the type to move to California and never come back. It was an exciting choice but they would be separated for a long time and that was not exciting. They were close as brothers and close as friends. They hung out all the time as children and into the early days of adulthood.

"I'm gonna miss you," Chase said.

Richard gave a respectful, silent nod of solemnity that spoke loud enough. After that, the conversation stalled but the television kept talking. "...following the lightning fast approval of the Fuel Enrichment Initiative, the government is allocating funds for the construction of four fuel enrichment tiers to be installed in Reservoir City, Kentucky. Officials say we can expect the treated gasoline to enter the market within the next two years..."

Chase nodded at the TV. "What do you think of those?" At the time, it was a normal question to ask anyone but it wasn't Richard's kind of question. The man was categorically uninterested in current affairs, especially those occurring outside the room. He was an animal of the here-and-now, parsimonious with his attention and wholly above national or global concerns. Still, Chase and Richard's parents raised them to treat all issues with a certain degree of respectful cognizance. Neither was the kind of person to disregard a question just because it bored him to death.

"Delaying the inevitable," Richard said.

Thanks to the two beers Chase had drunk and sheer cognitive ease, he assumed the role he'd seen many assume in the past few months. "They could stretch the reserves fifteen years or more. By then, we'll have figured something out," he said, a perfect parrot of popular opinion.

"Guess we'll find out."

Chase remembered that meeting with Richard so clearly. It was hard to believe more than three years had passed. After dinner, they rode bikes all over town and had their last drink in this really cool tunnel...

The gears stopped turning. Eureka.

With supreme confidence, Chase put the truck in reverse. He led them through a delicate moment of tip-top backwards-moving precision. Then he shifted back into drive and wheeled them forward in the slowest but most baller U-turn possible with but a brief trip over the median.

"Why are you smiling like that?" Avery's voice bounced violently during the trials of the median. "What are you doing!?"

The tunnel. It was genius.

"The tunnel!" he cheered. He revved the engine and the mighty beast roared in triumphant freedom. They could drive far to the east and then escape the city through the secret tunnel. It was plain genius.

At long last, they were chewing up the open road. Finally, their backroads adventure was taking shape. "See how fast we're going now!?"

"Yeah, in the opposite direction as everyone else!" Vroom, vroom! This was beautiful. "Why are you smiling!? There's a *reason* everyone's going the other way!"

"How do we get out faster than all of them? Not by going the way that's *not moving*! It's better to go the way that's moving, even if it's the wrong way. I know a tunnel."

"What tunnel?"

"It goes straight out of town and no one uses it!" He looked at her directly, backing up his decision with the smile of a true winner.

She glared at him with skepticism, then spastically lurched forward and thrust a gas-smelling finger out of the window. "Look!"

It was as if God himself reached down to place the shining beacon along their path. The marvelous bright green and brown sign read, "St. Cloud's Convenience Mart."

Gravel which flew into the air as Chase wheeled into a parking spot barely settled before the engine was off and he was standing outside of the truck. He wore the unashamed, goofy smile of a golden retriever as his head machine-gunned left and right. This was it. This was definitely the convenience store where he and Richard bought beer before they drank in the tunnel that night. Now that he'd gotten them this far, he knew he could feel his way back to the tunnel. "We're on the right track, babe!" he cheered. Avery and the passenger door groaned loudly as she exited the truck. "This is the place we bought beers!"

She paid him as much attention as a person watching an airline attendant demonstrating how to put on a life jacket. That's okay. This was great. They were going to stretch, wash the metallic smell off of their hands, then get some snacks! He wasn't wrong. They would get a chance to do all those things; however, the experience at St. Cloud's Convenience Mart wasn't going to be quite as cheery as he imagined.

The convenience store was trashed. Disarray and anarchy ruled so heavily inside the store that the single clerk felt like a comedic afterthought. A caretaker was an ill fit to such devastation but there he stood, lording over a wasteland of pilfered shelves and empty refrigerators.

Avery stepped forward. "Hi, do you mind if we use your bathroom?"

The clerk was the type to let everyone know if he was in a bad mood, which he was. "No one uses the bathroom right now. You seen what's goin' on out there? It's bedlam."

"She's pregnant."

"I don't care if she's the Virgin Mary, which she ain't. No one uses the bathroom."

Avery pouted. "Please? Our hands smell like gas and we've been jammed in the car all day."

The clerk diverted his full attention to the glass door and their truck outside. "You got gas under that tarp? Is that new gas?"

Chase pretended not to hear him. "What if we buy some sandwiches? Then can we use the bathroom?"

"Does it look like we have any sandwiches? We're sold out!" Chase had his nose in the empty sandwich cooler when he heard the click of a gun-hammer being pulled back. The sound was pronounced, deliberate and undeniable,

straight out of a movie. "Is...that...new...gas?" the clerk asked, aiming the pistol directly at him.

Chase raised his hands, hardly able to speak. "Yes, it's new. If you let us go, I'll give you a barrel. You'll never need more than that. One tank will get you to the North Pole and back. A whole barrel will last you a hundred years."

The clerk lowered the gun. "Deal. Take some soap from aisle two. There's a hose out back. I'll be out in a minute to get that gas."

"Okay, okay, thank you." Chase nudged Avery toward the door though she needed no encouragement.

"Hey!" the clerk yelled after him. "Get some soap."

Chase nodded obediently, dashing to aisle two to grab a bottle of hand soap. "Okay, thanks." He departed with alacrity, thankful Avery was already on the other side of the door and holding it open for him. They scooted around the corner and found the hose in the back.

"You're gonna give him a whole barrel!?" Avery chided.

"He's got a gun. Let's just give it to him and get out of here."

"We're not leaving a whole barrel! We didn't even get food!"

The hose gushed. The splash-back spritzed them with soapy, convenience store hose water. Chase looked at the truck bed and beheld his immaculate collection. This might be the most expensive pit stop ever, but lightning strike him dead if it didn't feel fantastic to get the grime off his hands. The moment he turned off the faucet, the clerk was there as promised. The gun was in his right hand. In his left, a plastic bag with some potato chips and two bottles of water. "Let's get that gas."

Chase walked him to the truck, untied the tarp and lowered the truck flap. With considerable difficulty, the two of them landed one of the barrels on the ground. Chase relatched the tarp and realized he needed to wash his hands again. He scurried back to the hose. "You'd better get a firearm," the clerk said. He waved his gun in the air like a teacher's blackboard pointer. "It's the law of the jungle out there, now. You gotta get them before they get you."

A piercing tire-screach came from the other side of St. Cloud's, alerting them to newcomers. The clerk stashed his gun in the back of his pants and disappeared around the corner while Chase rewashed his hands. Avery went to pee in the tall grass behind the truck. God bless her uncanny talent for peeing anywhere. Chase hastily scrubbed up, splashing water on cement. He partially cov-

ered the mouth of the hose with his thumb and chanced a razor thin blast to his grimy face, messy and successful. That's when the yelling started. He dropped the hose, rising to his tip-toes to peer through a tiny window into the store. He caught only a glimpse of the goings-ons but the disrespect was brazen.

One of the new customers held a shotgun on the clerk. Two others made no distinction between items as they robbed everything in sight, scooping the remaining contents of entire shelves into big bags. *Good luck with the random stuff of almost no value*, Chase thought, thinking of the empty sandwich cooler. He dropped out of sight before anyone noticed him watching.

Escalation came without warning. All at once, the yelling got twice as loud. Glass shattered in a prelude to persistent sounds of random chaos. Then, the worst case scenario arrived. A warning shout and an exclamation of shock preceded a maelstrom of gunshots. Chase and Avery's eyes locked and widened. She was now taking the most alarmed pee of her life, her mental state deteriorating before his eyes. "Jesus!" cried Avery from her squat. "They're shooting up the place!" Chase nearly tripped over the hose sprinting for the truck. Avery hoisted her pants and jumped in the passenger's seat. Time to go.

Chase had the good sense to sneak out of the back of the parking lot so they needn't cross paths with anyone. They crept away as quietly as possible and Chase craned his neck in the direction of the store, hoping to catch sight of the clerk. Even though the guy robbed them, he wasn't completely irredeemable. He didn't have to dig those chips out of the mess or give them water or even let them go at all. He could've shot them dead and taken all the gas. The last thing Chase saw of St. Cloud's Convenience Mart was a single barrel of gasoline standing in a growing puddle of water beside a running hose. Once they sneaked to the edge of the parking lot, the truck lurched and sped them away. With a rapid heartbeat, clean hands, some chips, water and one less barrel of gas, they hurried back onto the road less traveled.

"I wonder what happened to him," Chase said.

Avery snorted. "The guy who robbed us at gunpoint? Why do you give a shit about that guy!?" Her breathing was loud and her eyes were wide. The fear was gone and all that remained was adrenaline. "Let the people with guns shoot it out, that's my motto. No one's gonna complain once they're all dead from protecting themselves so much."

A bit reductionist, perhaps, but Chase could appreciate parts of the sentiment buried in there. At any rate, he was happy to see Avery so enlivened so he didn't argue. The growing distance between them and St. Cloud's was fertile ground for deep-seeded relief which unexpectedly bloomed into an abundance of excitement. No one's happy when a gunfight breaks out in a convenience store but escaping one unscathed makes for a clear and present thrill. Two minutes down the road, the mood was way up. Avery got super talkative, telling and retelling the story of how she'd been peeing by the truck when the shooting started. They were occupying that space where everyone knows the details of a story but they repeat them to each other, just for fun. Her third retelling contained a new addition; it turns out she'd only been halfway done peeing when she heard the first shot. She got so scared that she pushed the rest of her pee out really fast. Chase smiled and nodded enthusiastically, genuinely thankful she finally told him about that part.

After the tale of the shootout at St. Cloud's lost its luster, their excitement carried over to new topics. Despite the sense of super smell granted by her pregnancy, Avery cheerfully proclaimed the gasoline stink was gone from the truck. Even better, traffic remained nonexistent and they were flying down the road. Avery's breath stayed quick and heavy. Whenever a car came down the opposite side of the road, she watched it pass with a comically dramatic head-follow.

"I still don't get why we're going this way when everyone's going that way." Her trademark skepticism had transmuted into genuine, judgment-free curiosity.

"I told you, babe. Me and Richard found a tunnel out of the city. It's great. Super isolated, super moody. After we get through, we can take back roads all the way to Saskatchewan if we want. It's genius!"

"You and Richard?" Her voice dripped with approval, which is exactly why he'd been sure to mention he *and* Richard found the tunnel. Implying his brother's involvement in any decision was a sure-fire way to score some credibility.

Richard lived with Chase and Avery the whole summer before he left for California and they'd been a regular three musketeers. In fact, that summer was full of such vitality and fun times it likely defibrillated Chase and Avery's relationship. They'd been drifting through a stagnant period before Richard came and his visit gave them a tremendous shot in the arm. In his most honest mo-

ments, Chase supposed Avery even loved Richard a bit after that summer. *Who wouldn't love Richard?* he heard himself asking. But it wasn't like that. Chase was pretty sure Avery loved Richard in that special way you were only supposed to love one person. Maybe even more than she loved Chase.

It didn't matter. It was pointless to consider the weight or distribution of Avery's affection. In matters of the heart, she'd been a well-trained poker player from the start and carried herself with a certain invisible countenance. Maybe she did love Richard but Avery was a woman of practicality and strategy. She knew what kind of man Richard was: the kind who banked frequent flier miles with the seat of his pants. Avery would just as well hunt the end of a rainbow than expect Richard to be the stable kind of guy she wanted.

Chase was that stable guy. He was as practical as they came. Call him milquetoast if you will, but he was also a guy with five barrels of gas in the back of his free truck, a leftover bag of chips and a solid plan. Chase smiled. He absolutely knew this road. They were close now. They crested a steady incline and, at long last, the rolling hills of Northeast Minneapolis appeared and offered a shadow of Chase and Avery's glorious hole of salvation: the tunnel.

Then came the crushing realization there was another line of traffic ahead. Tail-lights poured from the mouth of the tunnel. It was a giant, fluorescent red tongue, laughing at him. They grew closer and closer until the truck rolled to a stop and they became part of the tongue.

"Wait a minute," Avery groaned. "This secret tunnel you found...are you talking about the Fifth Street tunnel!?" Chase thought he probably was. "Everyone knows about that tunnel, Chase! Oh my god, look at all those cars! Think about the time we lost! We might be out of the city by now if we'd stayed where we were!"

He didn't agree but it was still frustrating to hear her say so. "We weren't moving at all back there!" He tried to defend himself as more and more cars lined up behind them. Chase was already in the first stage of grief: denial. "I don't understand," he stammered. "There was no one here when me and Richard came!" The memory was so clear. This didn't make sense. He looked at Avery in confusion and she batted her eyelashes furiously. "It was a secret spot. I'm sure of it," he said.

Whenever Avery was within her rights to be angry, she raised her voice in the same way. "Was it because it was four in the morning when you left the

bar on your drunken little bike trip!>? It might be because no one uses the Fifth Street tunnel at 4 A.M.! They take the interstate!" So much for his credibility. She hip-checked the baby bag in frustration. "Chase!" she yelled in a way which contained anger, disappointment and fear all in a single word.

He took a deep breath. Okay, okay. This wasn't so bad. They could see the tunnel, at least. And even though they were jammed up again, there were definitely fewer cars out here than in the city. This could still be the right move. Unlike before, they were still moving. The pace was erratic. At times, long stretches of road appeared suddenly, bookended by a steady crawl or sitting. But they *were* moving. He knew they'd make it.

It took an hour to reach the cement lips of the tunnel in the hills. As they disappeared into it, Chase glanced at the moon. The next time he saw it, he would be a very different man.

THE TUNNEL

A couple hours after the last chip, the adrenaline from the shootout had worn off and they were in bad shape. Chase's back was killing him. His head drooped limply over the steering wheel. His shoulders had the slump of an old man, beaten into submission by the long decades. Avery squeezed and contorted her face in disappointment and discomfort. Her eyes were much purpler now and they shone, framed by her dirty yellow hair which she was pulling into weird shapes. She looked like a grape juice commercial for people on drugs. She was super irritable now and she had good reason. The joy of the open road had been replaced by the cramped, grody vibes of the tunnel. Fear sat heavy in the atmosphere and it stank like bad times.

The tunnel-bound, crawling ant troop of cars spewed carbon monoxide at every turn. To Chase and Avery, this miserable, multi-colored line of traffic was none other than the feathered serpent god *Quezacochtli*, farting in their faces for having the audacity to think of a plan. What's worse; they had the luck to be nestled behind a poorly maintained school bus which spouted far too much exhaust. If that wasn't bad enough, the dim tunnel light pouring over the bus created a sickening wash of orange which dominated their view. Chase was getting nauseous thinking about all the clouds he couldn't escape and looking at all the dingey orange.

Like everyone else, they had the radio on. "Hospitals are overloaded in Lexington. Meanwhile, symptoms are appearing as far north as Cincinnati and as far south as Nashville." So, it only took a day for the creep to cover Kentucky. That was pretty fast, but there was still time. At this rate, Chase estimated they had about three or four days before it caught up to them. They could definitely still make it.

Maybe Chase had the presence of mind to calculate the four days and mark the slow but definite progress of traffic, but he was the only one. It seemed neither Avery, nor anyone else in the tunnel, could see the big picture. The cloud was coming and everybody knew it. A bloody-blood-bag biological metatoxin was heading straight for them and they were sitting still, trapped in a claus-

trophobic, two-lane tunnel with ugly orange lighting. For this delicate rail of humanity, the math came second to the gruesome details. They refused to acknowledge the calculated safety of the four days. Instead, they were incalculably fixated on the horrifying truth; underneath it all, the scariest thing about the creep wasn't that it was going to catch and kill them. It was that crying gore until you imploded sounded like a terrible way to go.

Thanks to the radio, every person in the tunnel had willingly plunged into their personal narrative of terror with no way of knowing how closely it matched reality. By proxy, Chase had to deal with all this extra terror and he felt his rights violated due to a lack of say in the matter.

"In addition to the electric spine, many survivors report confusing hallucinations and..." He punched the radio with such carelessness that he was surprised it actually turned off. Honking, shouting and an occasional scratch of manufactured car plastic on stone tunnel wall sounded repeatedly into the sickly orange darkness. For the umpteenth time, he glanced at the barrels in the rear view mirror. Once a beacon of endless joy, the treasure trove was now a liability. The canvas tarp over the gas barrels was shaped very much like gas barrels. If the clerk at the convenience store was willing to turn a gun on them for one, what other dangers might they face?

Thankfully, Avery's mind wasn't on that particular hot-button issue for which he had no response. It was on another. As was her way, she pushed violently at the baby bag. "We've been sitting here for hours and we've only had two bags of chips and I'm hungry." It was a failure for Chase on the basest level of masculine providership. It was the oldest kind of embarrassment, harkening back to the ancient days of his hunter-gatherer ancestors. They'd all managed to get food for their girlfriends or he never would've been born. He was the first in a very long line to fail here. "I don't know how you can stand this," Avery said. She pulled her hair and it stuck that way, a full-on cherubic wing on the side of her head.

"Maybe you should get some sleep," he said.

"Me getting some sleep would help you to stand this?"

"That's not what I meant."

"What if the creep catches us and we die in this stinky tunnel?" she asked.

"Not gonna happen."

"How do you know?"

"It's just not," he responded impotently. He was tired. Why must he be the one tasked with throwing pointless optimism on the bleak fire of reality?

"But *how do you know?*" she insisted.

"We have four days."

"What if your math's wrong?" There was no correct answer. Sometimes a nervous person just wants to be nervous. No matter his response, it wouldn't be enough to stop her spinning. This is how it was going to be indefinitely. "Where are we even going?"

"North," he muttered, "by northwest? Away from the cloud." He knew how flimsy he sounded. He was exhausted. The fumes in the tunnel and the grimy pallor over everything were wearing him down. "You know, we might actually have time to see your dad if you want."

Avery ignored the idea and moaned in frustration. "This is sooooo boooooorrrriiing." She hung on every word, knowing it was the most painful way for him to listen. Chase reminded himself this would be over some day. It wasn't a huge help, but it was a little help.

Traffic stopped dead. Eventually, Avery did fall asleep, leaving Chase alone to reflect. He looked at her, scrunched up in the corner of the truck, a restless frown on her scrunched up face atop her scrunched up body. He'd brought her to this. It was painful. Things had really taken a nosedive since the storage shed. It didn't matter if they had four days or not. Right now, she was hungry, bored and uncomfortable, all because of him. This was so like him. So not like Richard. Richard would never be in this situation. Chase imagined his brother, cruising through a black cloud of death, totally unaffected by all biological metatoxins, protected by the sheer magic of his personality and his perfectly chiseled jaw.

Then again, even Richard wasn't immune to particulate inhalation, was he? Chase had better try calling one more time, just to see if his brother was okay. He scoffed at himself. He wasn't fooling anyone. Richard was doing just fine. Chase knew the real reason he wanted to talk to Richard: to make himself feel better. He managed to work a hand into his pocket and retrieve his phone without jostling the baby bag and therefore Avery too much. He sighed. Of course. There was no signal in the tunnel. With obstinate stubbornness, he dialed Richard's number anyway, knowing it wouldn't work. To his surprise, the phone rang. It rang and rang and rang. It wasn't a great feeling but it didn't

mean Richard was in trouble. It could be Christmas day and Richard's phone would still ring like that. Chase snapped his phone shut and smelled fumes. In a micro-temper tantrum, he angrily mashed the brake pedal and pushed against his seat as hard as he could in a wretched attempt to stretch his aching back. Avery sensed the activity. With a childlike groan of dissatisfaction, she readjusted her position. Again, the flashlight in the baby bag ricocheted painfully off Chase's hip. It was the perfect ending to a forty minute period of absolutely zero progress.

For the next amorphous blob of time sitting still, Chase chewed his nails like they were corn on the cob and explored a vast inner universe of regret and self-doubt. It was a circular journey which returned him to the conclusion he'd previously drawn: all of his efforts so far had led only to a huge delay and a lost barrel of gas. At last, Chase put the truck in park with a mind to join Avery in an uneasy sleep. There was nothing else he could do.

Or was there?

An instantaneous, Fulbright Scholar flash of insight blazed before him, transcendent and luminous. He opened the door as quietly as he could. His eyes narrowed on the hugest offender in the truck, the most heinous perpetrator of their suffering. He snatched the baby bag and toted it to the truck bed, checking discreetly over his shoulder before lifting the canvas tarp. There, where the twice-stolen barrel of gasoline had been, was an empty spot. It was just the right size. He shoved the baby bag in the spot with more force than was needed but he was grouchy and that bag had been jabbing him all damn day. Without a second look at the bag, for another glance at the thing would have been too respectful, he pulled the tarp back over the spot and secured it. He nodded at the blinding line of headlights which honked at him for no good reason and got back in the truck.

All at once, the bench seat was a boundless expanse of vinyl leisure. Chase smiled in spite of himself. Thank God for small victories. When Avery woke up, she was bound to be in a better mood thanks to his legendary maneuver. Putting two and two together never felt so good. Now, with victory in his heart, he could afford to doze off a second.

The shallow waters of his nap time were polluted with haunting reflections of his potential futures. Once, he saw himself standing next to Richard's lifeless body. Avery lay next to Richard and she was also dead. A young child, which

Chase understood to be his daughter Margot, looked up at him with tears in her eyes. In a haunting bout of unearned dream clarity, he knew her tears were not begotten of sadness. They came from the ungodly, abhorrent shimmering cloud which escaped the earth in Bath County. The dreams left little to be deciphered.

He awoke to a raucous choir of honking. Avery popped up in her seat, looking like a prairie dog. "We're moving!" she cheered. The terrible pinch in Chase's neck mattered not an iota next to the marvelous sight before him: a long stretch of empty road. After that soul-crushing delay, it did them a world of good to get moving again. They zipped down the road to reach their place in line behind the school bus. They were back to sniffing car farts but things were moving at a nice clip now. Inch by inch, foot by foot, they steadily wound through the cavernous tunnel. Avery got talkative again. Moving the baby bag to the back was the best thing Chase ever did. Before, she thought he was a dummy for giving away a whole barrel just to use a hose and pee in the grass but it actually worked out! It was such a joy to have some room on the seat. It made all the difference. "Infinitely more comfortable without the bag," she declared.

"Infinitely more comfortable," he repeated, really liking the sound of it.

Avery snorted. "Hell yeah it is."

"Genius," he whispered in triumph. Strange how a few inches of empty space between them brought them so much closer together.

The more they moved, the more the vibe in the tunnel improved. With reserved giddiness, hope blossomed. Just like he solved the baby bag problem, the secret tunnel plan was going to work. For the second time in the last hour, Chase felt he'd stared into the ever-present jaws of disappointment and snatched from them appointment. When an upward shift in elevation signified their imminent departure from the tunnel, excitement flooded the cab and electrified them with relief. They were almost out. They were moments away from the open road and a romantic, backwoods adventure in a brand new, second-hand truck with unlimited gasoline. They were free.

He should never have dared to think the thought.



SOMEWHERE IN TURKMENISTAN, a thousand miles from the tunnel, a butterfly flapped its wings. It was a flap most unfortunate; not for the butterfly, but extremely so for Chase and Avery. For, you see, the tiny creature's insouciant notion to take flight at that particular moment was enough to tip the scales in the eternal battle between order and chaos. In the Fifth Street tunnel out of Minneapolis, order was dangerously close to losing this battle. Just inside the northbound exit, a frustrated group of motorists was fast degenerating into an instinctive animal herd, baying in unison over their fatigue and growing panic.

In this arena of the eternal battle, the butterfly's batting wings were regrettably sufficient in impact. Miniscule currents generated half a world away built and built until they arrived in the tunnel, strong enough to stir the maelstrom of impatience, urgency, and good old-fashioned human weakness into a tornado of consequence. Among the few vehicles closest to the tunnel exit, a lone driver in the last moments of his captivity saw an opportunity. Somewhere deep down, he knew he shouldn't go for that narrow opening which appeared between the wall and the car ahead of him; however, he'd been caged in the tunnel for hours. Imprisonment had dissolved his patience and rational thinking. This final, painful stretch had gone on far too long so, when he saw the opening he knew he shouldn't go for, he went for it anyway.

The herd sensed a lion in the grass.

How unfortunate that a crowd so close to freedom could act so counterproductively. How tragic that this lone driver neglected the paramount practice of keeping a cool head in the midst of a crisis. How crappy his single, greedy attempt to get ahead of everyone else sparked in them an animal, brute unwillingness to let a single car through before their turn.

No cuts, no butts, no coconuts.

When a herd as indignant as this becomes agitated, there can be only one outcome: stampede. Lanes—nay, the law—no longer existed. At the sight of the breakaway driver, a dozen right feet pressed a dozen pedals to the floor. Thus began a frothy-mouthed drag race loaded with risk but devoid of any real meaning. At the beckoning maw of the tunnel exit, cars smooshed together like playdough, one slamming into the next. Truth be told, this inciting incident was not the deathblow. After the initial crunch of devastation, a blessed desire for self-preservation rose in the crowd. Serenity made a strong bid for domi-

nance over the groupmind. Brake lights appeared. For a moment, it seemed sanity might defeat catastrophe.

Alas, a semi-truck driver, long burdened with a guilty conscience for entering the tunnel with too large a vehicle, fell victim to the contagion of irrationality. Like the man who started the stampede, the semi-truck driver's patience was depleted. With weary, overtaxed reasoning, he made the split-second decision to plow through the wreckage with a mind to escape. It was not to be. Upon entering the smooshing, his eighteen wheels tipped over. Before the Turkmenistanian butterfly alighted from its merry flight, the northbound exit turned into a roadblock of many tons of inert steel and plastic.

Chase and Avery, several hundred feet from the exit, experienced the event as an aural triptych of disaster. The repeated slams of the accident preceded the Great Honking, upon which rode the most frantic game of telephone in history. "The tunnel's blocked! There's no way out! It's a cave-in! It's the creep! Terrorist! Terrorist!"

The flood of bad news crested and a wave of confusion and washed over them. Despite the muddy picture, the truth hid discernibly in the noise. Chase and Avery looked at each other at a loss for words but with mutual understanding. They had almost been out and now they were stuck again. Of course, it was too good to be true.

"Genius," Avery said. Chase's eyes glazed over, refusing to believe it. He was getting very familiar with the first phase of grief these days. The more he thought about it, the more he couldn't take it. Too many injustices had befallen him. His blood boiled. Why was it always so uphill for him? Just when things were looking up...this. It was so, so typical. Anything the universe could do to throw a wrench in Chase's day, it did it. All the excitement in the truck was eradicated. They sat in alarmed, dreadful silence as denial yielded appropriately to anger.

This time, Chase threw a macro-tantrum. He slammed his hands on the wheel and shook his head furiously for the expressed purpose of pissing off his pinched neck and hurting himself. He beat his hands on stiff plastic over and over again and shouted a string of gibberish and obscenities. Part of him was embarrassed by his actions but he didn't care. This was involuntary; he'd snapped. This useless display of caveman stupidity was the price he must pay for choosing to impose reason on this unreasonable world. The choice left him

bankrupt of a fighting spirit and there was nothing he could do now but surrender. He shouted and spasmed, reveling in his childish display of sound and fury.

Finally, his tantrum subsided and he was still. He breathed heavy as a bull, in through the nose and out through the mouth. He refused to look at Avery for fear of her reaction and for the shame of having lost his shit so unambivalently. His breathing exercise ended in a long sigh. An uncertain, empty moment passed before a bizarre smirk surprised him on the corner of his lips. Chase, still angry and downtrodden, tried to resist the smirk but it could not be stopped for the smirk came from a deeper, more resilient and much stronger part of him. The smirk pushed at his face, threatening to become a full-on smile. Okay, he'd smile. What the hell else could he do? In a moment of supreme resignation, he opened the door. "Let's go for a walk," he quipped.

The idea was so far from left field that it bypassed Avery's automatic tendency to disagree with him. "Okay," she grumbled. Gravel grinded on asphalt beneath their shoes. They met in front of the truck and stared down the tunnel together. Chase put his hand on her shoulder. She patted his ribcage. Then they walked.

At long last, they escaped the oppressive orange shadow of the school bus. By the time it was out of sight, Chase knew they'd made the right choice. It felt good to walk. Stretching his back was pure bliss, even if it had to be below the godforsaken tunnel lights. Avery looked better too. Chase's confidence grew. He developed a theory. Maybe, if he kept his cool from now on, Avery would see they still had four days to run from the cloud. Maybe she'd release some of her stress and that would help him to do the same. Then, maybe they'd have a semi-decent time getting out of the tunnel, after all. They tread the tunnel hand in hand. No matter the outcome, it felt great to walk.

They were awash in a sea of headlights, the shores populated by disapproving honks equal parts annoying and futile. Here and there, panicked shouts rose above the din, thankfully muted by the honking. Chase and Avery's determined stride carried them into pockets of congealed anxiety and away from them, into new ones and out again. For the better part of an hour, the smell of burnt rubber was their constant companion. By the time they were nearing the end of the tunnel, there were more smells in the mix: smoke, motor oil, their old friend

gasoline and a noxious, chemical scent Chase knew to be the powder of deployed airbags.

They turned the last corner and the sight was confusing. They'd expected a car crash and they certainly got one, but neither of them imagined it to be this big. A hundred feet down the road, a fleet of cars were jammed together like breadsticks. Chase couldn't spot a single one which retained its original shape. Maybe something resembling an undamaged vehicle hid behind the huge, up-side-down tractor trailer but he doubted it. It was a hard sight to swallow, grotesque in scale and implication; however, the crash was not the most confusing thing about the scene. Halfway between them and the wreck, a handful of vehicles were parked at random angles to form a semi-circle of cars: a barrier between the crash site and the rest of the traffic. Chase couldn't fathom a reason for this but, even harder to grasp, was the trashcan fire which blazed at the heart of the semi-circle.

Flames licked the rust-eaten edges of a tall, steel can while a handful of people milled around it. They had a certain, twitchy something in their step while they robotically patrolled the narrow space between the cars and the fire. Curiously, a stack of books lay next to the flaming trashcan. Only after noticing the books did Chase see there were more people on the ground, scattered around the circle. The sitting ones had their own brand of unusual motion, a gentle swaying which Chase would later understand to be confusion, pain or both. At the time, however, he had no idea what they were doing. Meanwhile, a moaning so steady it resembled chanting drifted from the site. On top of all that, the flickering firelight painted a strobing effect on the tunnel walls which backlit the whole scene. It looked like an electronic music festival gone horribly wrong.

Chase's first impulse was to turn around and avoid the whole affair. Unfortunately, Avery's curiosity was piqued and she acted faster than he. She took a few steps forward and asked "What happened?" to a person Chase hadn't noticed was there. Near to them, on the outskirts of the assemblage, an old lady leaned against a car and stared in the direction of the fire. She gave Avery no response. Instead, she folded a hand towel several times, unfolded it to wipe her face, then refolded it. Avery stepped closer. "Miss?"

Finally, the towel-folding woman acknowledged them. She turned her thousand-yard stare on Chase and Avery, who were way too close to receive it. "Did you bring any books?" the lady asked. Neither Chase nor Avery were pre-

pared for the question and, although it was an easy answer, they couldn't reply. "We need 'em for the fire," the lady continued. Something was wrong with her. Maybe she hit her head. Maybe she was on drugs. It was impossible to guess the exact nature of her malady but something was definitely wrong with her. Chase and Avery stared down a long moment of uncertainty while the lady unfolded her towel again and re-wiped her face. Then came the meekest whisper Chase ever heard. "Go, see for yourself," she said, waving a limp arm in the direction of the crash. Chase still wanted to turn around and leave but the lady held her stare on them, deliberately or indeliberately imbuing her suggestion with authority.

Well, they'd come this far. They might as well go look at the stupid car crash up close and finish their walk. They left the towel-lady's company delicately, respecting the fragility they sensed in her. During the last fifty yards to the scene of the accident, the flames behind them cast eerie reflections on the tunnel walls ahead. Though the conditions were perfect, this was no time for shadow puppets.

Up close, the sight was even harder to stomach. Avery made a sound Chase couldn't interpret but he guessed it was halfway between a moan of hopelessness and a sigh of resignation. If this was indeed the meaning of her sound, it would put them on the exact same page. That's how Chase felt: just plain hopeless and resigned. He surveyed the site and stretched his painful back. Ugh, what a mess.

It was a wall of destruction. Most notably, the gigantic, overturned semi-truck lay bent and broken, wheels pointed skyward like a dead centipede. Behind it lay an oceanic potpourri of glass, car parts and shiny metal shards. It looked like someone smashed a huge Christmas ornament, one of those classic, red ball kinds that pop if they fall from the tree and break. One thing was for sure; the tunnel exit was clogged. No way they were getting through. In the ultimate insult to injury, a small gap in the top-left corner of the wreckage offered a teasing glimpse of the night sky. Actual starlight. They were so close.

The scene was so discouraging that when a loud, defeated moan wedged its way into Chase's attention, it took him some time to realize he wasn't the one moaning. In a morbid game of *Where's Waldo*, Chase scanned the crash site for the source of the sound. There, near a mangled car at the base of the wreck, was a face. This face had something on it. Was that dirt? It looked like writing.

What was going on here? Chase tried to dismiss the nonsensical letters on the man's forehead as dirt but it was folly. Continued inspection left the facts undeniable. There, scrawled across the man's forehead in thick, black marker was the phrase: "TK 9PM." It was impossible to interpret what he was seeing or guess at a rational explanation. The more Chase looked at this man with big letters on his face, the more the scene escalated from weird to disturbing. A familiar feeling came over him. It was the feeling from the night Avery announced her pregnancy, right after the taxi driver told them about the earthquake. What kind of world was this? What was he even doing here? This man with the magic marker face was more proof that existence was only masking the utter chaos behind it. The absurd, completely out-of-place black letters on this face were nothing less than a manifestation of the insanity which spawned the universe.

"What's that goofy writing on his head?" Avery asked.

A voice came from behind them. As long as he lived, Chase would never forget the first time he heard that voice. "There's nothing goofy about a tourniquet application timestamp. If an ambulance makes it down here, they'll be thankful to know when I put that tourniquet on." Chase turned to see a thin man in a white T-shirt and a black backpack. He was scrappy but not fragile. His gaunt face was stony serious but not angry. "Help me carry him over to the others," the man ordered.

Avery protested. "What if his neck's broken!?! You can't move him!" The man ignored her. He kneeled down, pulled the wounded man's arm over his shoulder and hoisted with a grunt of effort. Chase could see it now. There was a tourniquet around the man's left thigh. The gaunt man groaned and swayed. He showed surprising strength for such a wiry person but he was struggling. Chase lunged forward to insert himself under the wounded man's other arm. Together, the two of them lifted the tourniqueted man to his feet. Avery scoffed. "Okay, fine. Whatever. If he has a spine injury and he gets paralyzed, that's on you two."

"Mr. Chen has a nasty cut on his leg, not a spine injury," the thin man said.

"How would you know? Are you a doctor or something?" The short trek from the crash to the fire contained a lot of grunting but not an answer to her question. Once they were back to the semi-circle of cars, Chase and the doctor arduously landed Mr. Chen on the ground, sitting him upright with his back against the side of a car.

Mr. Chen groaned. "Where's my wife?"

The thin doctor dropped to his knee and took something from his pocket. "Take these pills, my friend. We'll find your wife."

Mr. Chen accepted the medicine, a tear of gratitude or possibly tourniquet pain falling from his eye. In a quivering, pathetic voice he said, "Thank you, doctor," then swallowed the pills raw.

The doctor stood and dusted off his hands. "That's the last of the antibiotics. Let's hope nothing else happens," he sighed. He took a final, lingering look at Mr. Chen before turning his attention to Chase and Avery. "Thanks for your help. Were you in the crash?"

"No, no, we walked from back there," Chase pointed.

"How far?"

"About forty or fifty minutes," Chase guessed. The doctor peered down the tunnel, suddenly deep in thought. Chase extended his hand. "I'm Chase. This is Avery." The doctor didn't notice the gesture or else ignored it. He merely nodded politely at the triviality of Chase's name, all the while remaining sternly contemplative. The message was clear. In a scenario as dire as this, introductions were a luxury and the doctor didn't have the time. Chase immediately felt uncool for not reading the signs and withdrew his hand.

"You ran out of gas?" the doctor asked.

"No, we've got plenty of gas. We just couldn't sit in the truck anymore."

The gaunt doctor's eyes peeled away from the traffic and landed on Chase. "What do you think of our little camp?" He pulled a cigarette from his pocket and lit it in a single, practiced motion.

"Hey doc, would you mind not smoking around us? She's pregnant," Chase said.

The doctor flicked the cigarette in the direction of the wreckage. "What do you think of our camp?" he repeated. Now that they were among the trash-can fire campers, Chase saw he'd underestimated the scope of their destitution. The dozen or so people sitting on the dirty ground all looked to be injured or in some stage of recovery. Crying, groaning and sniffing prevailed over the crackle of the fire. The handful of abled people weren't robotically patrolling as Chase had thought. They scurried here and there, ferrying water bottles and snacks to the sitting injured. One of them rummaged through a nearby van and emerged with some books. With some effort, he manhandled the oversized

stack into the pile by the trashcan. "People from the accident are resting here while I provide medical attention. It's sorta like my own little triage ward. It's not easy but it's the least I can do."

After taking in the apocalyptic scene of the crash, Chase was shocked into a kind of slow thinking. Coupled with his growing fatigue, he felt his mental capacity significantly blunted. If he'd been more alert, perhaps he would've given more attention to the feeling sprouting in the back of his mind. There was something curious about this scenario but Chase couldn't put his finger on it. He was too tired to think so, instead of trying to figure it out, he nodded blankly. Avery was staring into space the way she did whenever she was hungry or tired. The way she was staring now, she was both. "You look tired," the doctor said. "Come with me. I'll show you a place to rest and warm up."

They followed the doctor through the narrow path between the cars and the fire. It was a tight squeeze and they were constantly stepping over people. It was awkward. Everyone perked up at the sight of their guide as they passed, eager to offer thanks or say hello. A couple people reached out to touch him and he put both of his hands around theirs like a politician. The doctor was a real rock star here. "Who's letting this fire die?" he demanded. "Keep it burning!" He gave the order to no one in particular; however, someone immediately came forward to toss a few books from the stack into the fire. Chase could see the doctor was a well-balanced man; kind but also no-nonsense. He was a real man's man who demanded respect and Chase liked him already.

They reached an old couple sitting like Mr. Chen with their backs against a car and their legs splayed out before them. They were in terrible condition. "That's Mr. and Mrs. Wungarten," the doctor explained. "They climbed their way out of the wreck. Not too many more made it after them, I'm afraid. There are probably ten dead in there."

Mr. Wungarten had a huge bandage around his chest with a proportionally huge red stain on it. Mrs. Wungarten clung to his arm. She managed a weak smile for the doctor as they passed. Chase slipped on some gravel and almost toppled into the old couple. "Sorry," he said, nodding in respect. The Wungartens paid him no mind.

"Mr. Wungarten has a sucking chest wound," the doctor said quietly.

"What happened to him?" Avery asked.

He waved at the patch of asphalt they'd arrived on. "That's your spot," he said. "Feel free to stay here as long as you like and warm up." Chase couldn't figure out why he kept mentioning warming up. Sure, they were in Minneapolis but it was the middle of summer and the weather was lovely. In fact, it was so lovely Chase thought this might be the most unnecessary trashcan fire in the history of trashcan fires. It added to the oddness of it all but he didn't have the mental stamina to dwell on it. He was hungry and tired. "I'm afraid the accident did a lot of damage," the doctor said, "but I do what I can. Here, sit." They sat and he lit another cigarette.

"Hey, I'm pregnant, remember?" Avery said.

"Oh, right." He dropped the cigarette and smooshed it into the ground underfoot. Chase waved away the acrid butt smoke hanging in the air and the doctor turned his gaze on their new neighbors, the Wungartens. "I've got some work to do," he announced. "Rest now."

He faced the Wungartens, kneeling to give them a compassionate check-up and a few pills from his backpack. "Take these," he said.

"Thank you. Thank you, doctor," Mrs. Wungarten whimpered.

He caressed her face and flashed a warm smile. "Rest, my child." The smile grew as he lit a cigarette and then he was gone, back into his triage ward. The doctor floated among his patients, distributing medicine and absorbing adulation. He issued a command to one of the young book-burners, who scampered out of sight. Somewhere in Chase's brain fog, he remembered Mr. Chen still needed to find his wife. Maybe that kid was going to look for her. He wondered if the towel-folding lady was Mrs. Chen, then wondered why was he thinking about this at all? Things were weird right now. Before he could ponder the matter further, his thoughts were overtaken by his grumbling stomach.

Avery dropped her head on his shoulder. Their condition was deteriorating and fast. Now that they were sitting down, the full weight of their day-long journey was catching up to them. They needed food and sleep. For the next few minutes, they stared into the trashcan fire. If it was possible to watch a fire slowly, Chase would say he watched the fire slowly. He needed as much time as possible to get his thoughts straightened out.

The fire was easier to look at than the hard truth sneaking up on him. Tim insisted Chase drive the truck home that night but Chase refused. If he'd accepted the truck right when Tim offered it, they would've made it through

the tunnel. It took thirty minutes to go back to work and get the truck and those thirty minutes were everything now. They were the difference between the open road and the death tunnel trashcan fire. If they had that half-hour head start, they would've been ahead of the accident and they'd be free now. Why had he felt the need to refuse Tim's offer? How had politeness led him to this? *Why* had it?

He jerked his head a few times in rough, measured jerks of wanton self-punishment as the reality of his decision the night before closed in on him. Of all the ways one could be afflicted, the affliction of regret was truly the cruelest. Avery noticed his weird head jerking. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"It took me a half hour to get the truck," he said. "Why didn't I take the truck when Tim told me to?" In part because she sensed the question was rhetorical, in part because she didn't understand what he was talking about, Avery didn't answer. She was saddened, though. The exchange was enough for her to sense that their current situation could just as well have been otherwise. For both of them, it was a painful, blistering question which seared like the sun and, like the sun, it was better not to look at it directly.

It was a rough moment at the trashcan fire which ended when the young man who scampered away before came rushing back to the doctor. He held out two square things. The doctor waved him off, setting his gaze on Chase and Avery and pointing in their direction. The young man navigated the minefield of wounded people and slippery gravel with impressive speed. Miraculously, he arrived with two sandwiches in his outstretched hand.

They each took a sandwich and thanked the boy but he ran off too fast and their thanks fell on his back. From across the campsite, the doctor was eyeing for their attention and Chase held up the food to show his gratitude. The doctor gave him a big smile in return and Chase set his full attention on devouring the sandwich. It was turkey. The taste was definitely off but he was thankful to have it.

He and Avery ate as fast as their bodies allowed, knowing it was one of those holy meals that would be fully absorbed without an atom of waste. In affirmation of the sentiment, Avery snatched a falling shred of lettuce with the precision of a center-fielder before palming it into her mouth in one, fluid motion. They finished the sandwiches within seconds of each other and breathed heavily at the fire, reclaiming the oxygen they'd sacrificed for turkey.

Within a few minutes, Chase felt a dramatic boost to his energy and his mood. He sat up straight and put his arm around Avery's shoulder. For an enchanted moment, they observed the happenings of the camp with the passive contentment of fully-fed people. Mr. Chen yelled in pain as the doctor prodded his leg. This excited the towel-folding lady and she shuffled closer to take a look. Guess she wasn't Mr. Chen's wife, after all. More books landed in the fire and it flared up to illuminate the Wungartens and Mr. Wungarten's awful red stain.

The curious feeling from before returned. With a brain freshly fueled by carbs and turkey, Chase could examine the feeling more closely now and it crystallized into a train of thought. It was the camp. The mechanical way uninjured members of the rabble split their time between caring for the wounded, feeding the book fire and consulting the doctor was bizarre. It was too structured, too routine. The accident couldn't have been more than an hour ago. How did all this happen so quickly?

Chase tried some more math. It must have taken at least a couple minutes for the dust to settle after the crash. At the very best, three minutes for rescue operations to start. Then the doctor pulled survivors out of the wreck, organized the camp, got the fire going and instructed others to sustain it. He'd applied at least one tourniquet and wrapped at least one sucking chest wound. The way everyone treated him suggested he'd helped a bunch of other people in some way as well. He must have really been Johnny-on-the-spot to accomplish all that in the time it took Chase and Avery to walk from the truck. Plus, the people at the campsite were acting like the situation was old news; it was like they'd been here for days. The numbers were hurting his brain. Something didn't add up and Chase was determined to sort it out; that is, until Mrs. Wungarten started screaming.

"Help! Help!" Mr. Wungarten was twitching. It wasn't a full-blown seizure but it was enough to rattle Mrs. Wungarten's small frame as she held on for dear life. "What's happening!?" she screamed.

The doctor bounded over with a confident stride, wearing the beleaguered smile of a man possessed by purpose. Measured and collected, he knelt down and stripped Mrs. Wungarten's hands off of her husband. Then he laid Mr. Wungarten flat on the ground. His hands ran across Mr. Wungarten's damaged, quivering torso. He looked like a magician preparing a magic trick. He pressed once on the middle of the red stain and Mr. Wungarten yelled in pain. It took

a split second for the doctor to make his diagnosis. "He's got a broken rib," he announced.

He got on his hands and knees, lowering his ear very close to Mr. Wungarten's chest. Just then, Mr. Wungarten stopped shaking. "Oh no," the doctor said. The dramatic downturn in the tone of his voice left no question; this was bad. "He stopped shaking. Something's wrong, for sure. See those distended jugular veins?" Chase was only a few feet away but he couldn't tell if Mr. Wungarten's jugular veins were distended or not. It was amazing how much training went into being a doctor. "Look, listen!" The doctor grabbed Mrs. Wungarten by the scruff of her neck and guided her head down to her husband's chest. "Do you hear those air bubbles? It sounds like Rice Krispies."

"Rice Krispies!?" she screamed.

The doctor sat back on his haunches and stripped off his backpack. "It's tension pneumothorax. There's air flooding his chest cavity and it's compressing his lung." His forearms rippled with wiry muscle as he unzipped his backpack with a theatrical flourish. "If the pressure builds long enough, it'll stop his heart." In seconds, an assortment of items lay on the ground. Chase saw tape, a bottle of honey, and a smaller bottle with no label. "He's literally dying before our eyes. There's only one thing we can do now: a pleural decompression." By this point, a group of spectators had gathered around the scene. The doctor ripped his T-shirt off, looking like a total badass. He was in some kind of medical trance. "This shouldn't be undertaken lightly. Does anyone have a cigarette to steady my hand? If I don't do this carefully, I might puncture his heart or lacerate his liver or even his spleen."

There was a tiny flicker of light in the crowd and someone held a lit cigarette to the doctor's mouth. The doctor took the cigarette in his lips hands-free and pulled a pair of scissors from his bag. It only took a second to cut Mr. Wungarten's shirt and bandage down the middle, leaving his torso exposed. Chase searched for a sucking chest wound but he wasn't sure what he was looking for. The doctor grabbed the small bottle with no label and squirted brown liquid onto Mr. Wungarten's chest. "Iodine," he said. Then he snatched his discarded T-shirt from the ground and swabbed Mr. Wungarten's chest in broad strokes. The ruddy iodine soaked into the shirt and Mr. Wungarten's skin. Everything looked black in the light of the fire.

"Damn, I'm out of anesthetic!" the doctor announced. Smoke billowed. "Mrs. Wungarten, you'll have to hold his hand." She wailed in consternation. "Hold his hand, damn it!" the doctor yelled. Then he pulled the thickest needle Chase had ever seen from his bag. "This is a large-bore intravenous needle, 14-gauge. I need to insert it just above the third rib, mid-clavicle." He traced a line from Mr. Wungarten's nipple to the top of the adjacent rib and held his finger there. He carefully aligned the needle, then pushed it in. Mr. Wungarten roared in pain. Mrs. Wungarten screamed and squeezed her husband's hand until her knuckles were white.

"You hear that gush of air?" Chase didn't. "That's the air escaping his chest cavity." With a grunt of effort, the doctor pushed the needle even deeper. Chase almost barfed. Mr. Wungarten shrieked in pain. His free hand pawed wildly at the needle but the doctor seized him by the wrist. Thus began a flailing struggle to keep Mr. Wungarten's hands away from the needle with the doctor fighting one hand and Mrs. Wungarten fighting the other. Mr. Wungarten's efforts abruptly ceased when he passed out. "Okay, good," the doctor said. "The air's out. Time to sanitize." He removed the needle and picked up the honey, then smeared a healthy dose of it all over the 14-gauge hole he'd made in Mr. Wungarten's chest. After that, he ditched the honey and picked up the tape. "Sit him up!" he commanded.

Mr. Wungarten's head lolled to the side while a few hands from the crowd helped Mrs. Wungarten raise her husband to a seated position. The doctor awkwardly circled several rings of tape around Mr. Wungarten's chest and under his armpits to cover the puncture before he laid the unconscious man back on the ground. Mrs. Wungarten sniveled. A tense moment passed. The doctor stood and breathed a heavy sigh. "He'll live," he decreed. Mrs. Wungarten and the crowd erupted simultaneously; she into tears and they into cheers. The doctor lit another cigarette and smoked with a smile, shaking hands and grinning with satisfaction about his successful pleural decompression.

Chase sat, staring at Mr. Wungarten's taped up torso, dumbfounded by what he'd just witnessed. He couldn't explain why, but something about seeing that happen right in front of him was invigorating. More than invigorating. He felt downright fantastic. He was overcome with sudden, joyous fervor over the doctor's life-saving procedure. Avery tapped his arm. "Wow," he said, smiling. "Wasn't that incredible?"

She pointed. "Let's go," she whispered.

"Go?" he asked.

She pointed again. "Yeah, look. Let's go." Behind them, a wonderful thing was happening. Traffic was clearing, but backwards. With no room to turn around, everyone had their car in reverse. It was a unique experience to see a whole line of cars, slowly backing away like they'd walked in on a private conversation. Something about it amused Chase to no end and he found a dopey smile plastered on his face.

"Chase!" Avery whispered.

"Okay, yeah, let's go," he said. They stood up and Chase's head swam, a good kind of swim. A great kind of swim. Across the camp, Chase noticed the doctor watching them. Chase waved and pointed at the traffic. "We're leaving!" he mouthed silently. The doctor ran right over.

"How was the sandwich?" he asked.

"It was great! Thank you," Chase said.

"Mind if I walk with you?"

"Sure, not at all. That was really something back there with Mr. Wungarten!" Chase said.

"It's nothing. You know, all in a day's work. Most people treat others like litter cases these days. I like to help when I can."

Chase nodded. He'd never heard the term "litter case" before. "Guess that's the value of sympathy," Chase chirped. He was so glad to be walking again.

"Empathy," said the doctor. "Empathy is when you understand the person's pain but don't feel it. Sympathy is when you feel it with them."

"Oh, well, there's not enough of either in the world these days and that was so nice of you to help like that," Chase said. Then he thought about it and realized he had more to say. "You know, when I was a kid, everybody lived under this unspoken rule that it was okay to break the rules when someone really needed help. But it's different now. The policy must have changed over the years. What happened to all the compassion? When did procedure become more important than people?" Chase nodded emphatically in agreement with himself.

The doctor put his hand on Chase's shoulder. "That's right! My dad always said to put yourself in their shoes. If I was in Mr. Wungarten's situation, I'd want

someone to perform a pleural decompression on me, regardless of the danger or if they had the guts to do it."

Chase nodded harder. Yeah, why would anyone not pleurally decompress someone who needed it? This was a good conversation. "Hey doc, what's your name again?" he asked.

"Mr. Wungarten's tension pneumothorax wasn't the first operation I had to do today. I'm afraid these people need a lot of help. I'm really worried about Mr. Chen, you know. I gave him some epinephrine but it's going to wear off soon and then he'll go into anaphylactic shock. If he doesn't get to a hospital soon, he'll die."

"Shit," said Chase.

"It's not looking good, either. I doubt an ambulance will get down here soon enough to drive him out. I don't think he's going to make it."

"Oh, shit," Chase said again. All at once, a gravity well was pulling down Chase's mood. The thought of Mr. Chen dying from anaphylactic shock soured his next steps and he was at a loss for words. Thankfully, the doctor came up with a great idea.

"If you give me a lift out of here in your truck, I could get some help for Mr. Chen!" he suggested.

"Hey, yeah!" Chase agreed.

Avery tugged on Chase's arm. "Chase..."

"You wouldn't mind? It would be a huge help," the doctor said.

"Of course! We can give you a lift! You might have to sit on the edge of the back, though. There's hardly any room in the truck bed. I stole a whole bunch of new gas from work and we've got it back there."

Avery tugged harder. "Chase!" she whispered.

Chase couldn't be stopped. Maybe he was oversharing but he was feeling chatty. "I was worried I was gonna get fired but, you know what? My boss didn't even care. He said I earned it."

"Oh really?" the doctor asked. Chase was happy to see a smile seeded at the corners of the man's mouth. "How much?"

Chase leaned close so he didn't have to broadcast their secret to the whole tunnel. "A lot."

The doctor's smile bloomed and he even laughed a little. "I suppose you're headed for the North Pole! How far is it to your truck, Chase?"

"Maybe forty-five minutes? It's black. Tim gave it to me. Tim's my boss. Was my boss." Chase carried on revealing extraneous information with enthusiasm. He was so relieved they found a way to help the doctor and Mr. Chen. It got sort of intense for a minute but things were looking better now. "Tim's one of the nicest people I ever met, but you couldn't tell by looking at him, you know? He's one of those people who..."

"I see, I see! Let's pick up the pace, Chase! Mr. Chen doesn't have much time."

"Chase, come here." Avery scooted ahead a few feet and pulled Chase with her by the crook of his arm.

"What's up, babe?"

"What are you doing?" she hissed in a way that took him aback. Why was she mad? Things were going great!

"What do you mean? We're giving him a lift so he can help Mr. Chen."

"We should be leaving! Remember the cloud of death?"

"Of course I remember! We're getting out, though." He smiled. "We're leaving, babe."

"I don't want him to come," she said.

"Why not?"

"I don't know. I feel weird. You're acting weird, too."

"Really, weird how?"

"I don't know. I feel hot."

"You are hot," Chase said. He wasn't lying. Even after sitting in the truck all day, even under the gross tunnel lights, Avery looked gorgeous. Must be that pregnant woman glow.

"We shouldn't be messing with this," she said. "We should be getting out, right now."

"We are!"

"I don't want him to come," she repeated.

"But we can help these people. What about Mr. Chen?"

"We're going to get the truck to help a guy who's back there? That doesn't make sense. Something's wrong," she said.

"We're giving the doc a ride out of the tunnel and then he's gonna get help."

"I don't feel right," she said. "Something's wrong. I feel good."

"What's wrong with that?"

"I feel *too good*. I think something's wrong."

"Nothing's wrong!" Chase argued.

"Something's wrong with you, too!" she squeaked.

This conversation was really destroying the moment. Why couldn't she see how easy this was? In a world that had lost all compassion, they had a real chance here to do something great for someone else. This was their opportunity to prove empathy wasn't gone for good. He needed to put his foot down. For empathy. "Listen, babe," he said, knowing it was a mistake right when he said it. A sentence that started with that kind of "listen" never went well. She huffed angrily and pulled him ahead even faster. "Hey, hey, Avery," he said, resisting her pull.

She spun on her heel and stared him down. "What," she snapped. Chase got lost in her giant pupils and forgot what he was saying. She lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "How's he going to get help, huh? Is he gonna find a solution the second we get out of the tunnel? No! He'll need us to drive him somewhere else!"

"Okay, okay," Chase said, taking a deep breath. He was feeling overwhelmed. "We'll bring him with us, then tell him we want to be alone when we get out."

"No," she said. "No." After all their years together, he recognized her second "no" very well. It was the "no" she held in reserve for when she'd reached the limit of her patience.

"What about Mr. Chen?" he asked.

"Fuck Mr. Chen!" she spat.

Chase refused to believe she could be so cold. He pulled his arm free of her grasp, indignant and grouchy. "No," he said. "I can not fuck Mr. Chen, okay? We need to..."

"Fine," she said with a venomous stare. They looked at each other for a long, painful moment. She was waiting for him to break but Chase stood his ground. "Fine," she repeated. She turned and stalked away at a furious pace, recording her disapproval in the most obvious way possible.

Chase watched her go, his feet cemented in place by his pride. He was overwhelmed again and so it was very comforting when the doctor laid a gentle hand on his shoulder. "I understand if she wants to leave me behind," he said.

"No, no, it's okay. We'll give you a ride. I don't know why she's so angry right now."

"Is there no greater mystery than the fairer sex?" the doctor mused.

"Yeah, I don't know about that." Chase grumbled. He felt lousy about fighting with Avery and even lousier she was way up there, walking by herself. He was in no mood for the doctor's old-timey, self-aggrandizing way of talking and he was confused. He and Avery's argument affected him way more than it should. He was feeling undeniably, unexplainably, disproportionately sad about it; furthermore, everything was made worse by the complicated process of inching along the grimy tunnel wall. They were uncomfortably close to the traffic as it continued its bizarre, rearward evacuation. They were surrounded by shouting matches, middle fingers and fender-bumps. Drivers who resisted the flow of traffic were honked and reverse-lighted into submission. These could be lengthy, noisy altercations and instances were frequent. With every step, Chase grew more sensitive to the hectic disorder and the oppressive vibe of feverish selfishness in the air.

A few front-facing cars appeared in the line, lucky souls who found or more likely stole an opportunity to make a three point turn. Chase supposed forward moving cars were a good sign but his unease was building. Nausea was settling in and he wanted to puke. He tried to keep his focus on the tunnel wall and Avery but his head was swimming. He had at least three halting moments of vertigo when the backwards moving cars beside him made him think he was falling forwards. Whenever Chase froze up, his companion gave him a friendly nudge of encouragement. "Come on. Let's keep up," he said. Other than that, the shirtless doctor was wise enough not to speak much during Chase's difficult time. Instead, he whistled an uplifting and encouraging tune. Chase anchored his attention to the doctor's soft melody and found it helpful and soothing. "Focus on the song," the doctor said. "Persistence. You can do it." His voice was as soothing as the whistle. The song really worked. After a few minutes, Chase's nausea drained away and his mood leveled out. He became extra vigilant, constantly glancing back to ensure the doctor was doing alright. It was good to have a friend like him right now. He looked like a real guru or something, all shirtless with a backpack and whistling magical tunes.

If Chase wasn't checking on the doctor, he had eyes on Avery. He was feeling better about their argument now. Once they were out of the tunnel, he

could patch everything up between them. The thought of leaving the tunnel coincided with the powerful return of his enthusiastic optimism. Their situation had a silver lining and it was glowing bright. They might not be in the ideal spot but they were moving at a reasonable speed now. All they needed was persistence. Soon, they'd be back at the truck and then they could deal with whatever came next. The idea was so uplifting that, for a fleeting second, Chase remembered Avery saying she felt *too* good. It was hard to explain all this energy. He'd heard about switching into ketosis before. Maybe he was in ketosis. At any rate, he was back to being chatty again and anxious to hear about the doctor's plan to save Mr. Chen. "So, how are you gonna get help for Mr. Chen?" he asked.

"We're going to drive him out of here," the doctor said.

"You gonna find a motorcycle or something and put him on it?"

"The traffic's clearing out now. I'll find an ambulance or else we can use your truck to go get him."

"Oh," Chase said. "Oh." He looked around. It seemed unlikely a random ambulance was going to be available.

"That's alright, isn't it?"

"Sure, sure, of course it is," Chase said. "But, how are we going to get down there with the truck, exactly? There's a billion cars between here and there."

"We'll drive along the side, where we're walking now. Everyone's leaving so we'll be able to squeeze by. No problem."

Chase reassessed the narrow passage of road they were on. "I don't know if my truck can fit. It's pretty big. We barely have room to walk."

"They'll make room!" the doctor cheered, slapping the roof of a backwards passing car and noticeably stirring the passengers within. "They'll make room," he repeated to himself.

Chase was doubtful. The doctor hadn't even seen the truck yet. How could he be so confident? "I'm not sure, doc. This plan is kinda crazy. What if..."

"Crazy is the name of the game! Make no mistake, Chase. When the world goes crazy, people go crazy with it."

"Yeah but..."

"Just think about how we got here. Whose idea was it to put every drop of the country's oil in one location? It just doesn't make sense. Of course something like this would happen. Of course it would! Just shows what kind of peo-

ple are leading this operation. They got the fancy clothes but their heads are purely ornamental. Nobody's minding the store, know what I mean?"

There was no arguing with that. When the treatment facility started going up in Kentucky, both Tim and Richard said the same thing. Why take the most precious eggs in the world and throw them all in one basket? It wasn't a move one would expect from seasoned leaders. "We're all victims of our ideas about how much control we have," the doctor said. Chase thought about it. It sounded super wise and he needed a minute to catch on. "Won't be long until things get much worse. They'll cut the power, you know."

"In here? Why would they do that?"

"Not in the tunnel."

"You mean Minneapolis?"

"It'll be more than just Minneapolis. They'll cut it all." Chase was confused. Who was cutting what power? "Do you have a hero, Chase?"

"You mean, like a role model?"

"Yeah. Michael Jordon? Michael Jackson?"

"Uh, I guess. I can't think of one right now."

"Want to know mine?" Chase was distracted. A curious thing was happening in this part of the tunnel. The left lane was moving a lot faster than the right. The cars in the right lane looked like helpless little ducks with their turn signals on, trying to wiggle their back ends into the faster moving left lane. "Shiro Ishii. Mine's Shiro Ishii. You know who that is?" Then there came a honk which rose above the rest; louder, more consistent and more frantic than the others. It captured Chase's attention and split his focus even more. Why did it sound so familiar? "...and he kept getting promoted. What a system. What a world. A guy like that knows how to play the game. He rose above morality. He lived his dream. You know those experiments did more for modern medicine than a lot of people are willing to admit."

"Who did?"

"Shiro Ishii. Kudos to him. Pioneering scary realms of the mind like that. That takes real courage."

"Do you really think we can make it back with the truck?" Chase asked again. The more he thought about it, the more questionable this mission got. He was starting to regret volunteering the truck so heroically. Mr. Chen was probably a swell guy but Chase should be putting his and Avery's safety before

a stranger's, shouldn't he? Maybe Avery was right. Maybe this plan didn't make much sense. Now that people were getting out of the tunnel, they should be doing the same. Nevertheless, Chase walked on without protest. Step by step, he committed to the path before him simply because it was the one he was already on.

The four days kept coming back to him. If his math was right, they still had four days until the creep arrived. That was plenty of time to save Mr. Chen and then drive far, far away. But, what if his math was wrong? Why take the chance? For Mr. Chen, Chase reminded himself. He'd do it for Mr. Chen and Mr. Wungarten who just had a pleural decompression. Chase nodded resolutely, trying to prove to himself there was merit in all of this. He could finally put his money where his mouth was. All that talk about empathy and compassion; this was a clarion call, a chance to prove it all. He could show the world the value of empathy, sympathy, whatever. People before procedure.

"Avery's a remarkable woman," the doctor said.

"What?"

"Don't suppose you two will last long, though. I can see you got lashed by the whip of a pretty face and you're stuck to her real well. But it won't last long." The comment was so irrelevant and inappropriately personal that it short-circuited Chase's brain. He must have misheard. "You don't think she has enough substance. I can tell. She does. You just can't see it because you're lacking or you're angry or you're scared or something like that. Won't be long before it falls apart."

Chase's surprise ceded a few steps to anger. Maybe the doc was trying to be helpful but Chase couldn't ignore the feeling his self-respect was being shredded. "How do you know she's remarkable? You just met us."

"They all are."

"Women?"

"Yeah. She bugs you, though. Won't last long."

As if on cue, Avery called back to them. "Hey, look!" she yelled. She jabbed the air ahead of her. "We're almost there!" In the dim orange light, Chase saw an absurdly orange splash of orange. It was the school bus. They were back.

"That's the bus! My truck's right behind it," Chase exclaimed. Relief hit hard and they jogged. The feeling was short-lived. A few steps into the jog, relief mutated into ardor. It was the feeling one gets when they complete the first

part of a long quest and realize there are many more obstacles ahead. Chase really wasn't looking forward to going all the way back for Mr. Chen. They gained ground on the bus and that's when Chase identified the honk above the rest. Insight and embarrassment struck together and Chase understood the reason for the speed disparity between the left and right lanes. In the grand, backwards race of the tunnel, the school bus was blocking the right lane and their truck was blocking the school bus.

Avery called back again. "He can't get out!" She sped up and disappeared behind the bus. It was true. The school bus was too big to wedge into the left lane and much too big to make a three-point turn. This whole time, the bus was stuck there because of them. *They* were the reason for this troublesome bottleneck. The stretch of empty road behind the truck evidenced their crime against the peoples of the tunnel. Chase's embarrassment and guilt doubled. What a headache they'd made for everyone! He ran faster and heard Avery yelling from behind the bus, "I'm back! I'm at the truck! Let's free the bus! Free Willy!"

He passed the bus, loving the sight of Avery behind the wheel. "The keys!" she yelled. Chase rushed to pass her the keys through the window. The truck came alive and lurched when she put it into reverse. "Let's go," she said. Chase turned. Where was the doctor? "Chase, please, let's go," she pleaded.

"One second," he said. He ran back to get a good look around the corner of the bus. The doctor stood by the bus door, looking confused. Chase waved him over. "Come on! We're going!"

The doctor held his hand up, concern on his face. "Wait," he shouted. "Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Chase yelled.

"He needs help!" The doctor declared. He bolted into the bus. Chase stood there for a monumental second, wondering what to do. To hell with it; he was leaving. He opened the passenger-side door of the truck. A loud yell came from inside the bus. "Help!" It was the doctor.

Chase didn't want to help. He wanted to get in the truck with Avery and leave. She was already backing up to turn around. "Hurry up!" she yelled. "Get in!"

Another call came from inside the bus. The voice was different but the message was the same. "Help!"

It was followed by another from the doctor. "Help! Help us!" The repeated cries for help were too much to ignore. Chase couldn't turn his back on the doctor and the bus driver any more than he could let Mr. Chen die at the trashcan fire.

"Come on!" Avery shouted. What kind of person would Chase be if he abandoned them now? Besides, they might need to move the bus before they could turn the truck around. He should get in there and check it out. "Chase?" He locked eyes with her, then ran. He could still help them. He could save everyone. She honked relentlessly.

Chase reached the open bus door and looked up the tiny staircase at the driver's seat. There was a lot to process. The bus-driver sloped forward in his chair with his back to Chase. The doctor held him in a rippling, Greco-Roman kind of hug that made it hard to tell if the driver was falling out of his chair or being dragged out. Meanwhile, Avery laid on the horn. "What's going on!?" Chase yelled up the steps.

When the doctor saw him, his facial expression melted into dismayed urgency. "Chase! Oh, thank God! We need help!" Something tugged at Chase's mind. What had the doctor's face looked like just *before* he looked dismayed? A guilty dog who'd been caught tearing up pillows. Avery's honking told Chase to turn around. "It's a heart attack or something!" the doctor yelled. Or something? "Help!" he shouted again, this time with real force. The driver was convulsing or something in his chair. It didn't look good.

Chase ran up the steps, smashing his hip on the door-opening lever. His shoes squeaked into the bus as they grinded on plastic. "What do we do?" Chase asked.

"Wait a moment," the doctor said. Chase fidgeted while the other man checked the driver's pulse. The bus made Chase uneasy; the hot leather smell of the old benches, the cheap metal window-frames and tiny overhead lights on both sides of the narrow aisle buzzing with electricity. In the back, the shadowy parts of the bus contained all manner of monsters Chase didn't want to disturb.

"Help!" the bus-driver moaned. He fell on the floor at their feet, forcing the doctor to step back and Chase caught a glimpse of something in his wiry hand. Was that a syringe?

"What's wrong with him?" Chase asked.

"It's too late," the doctor sighed. "He's dead."

"No he isn't! He just asked for help!"

"That's how it goes. Now you're just a bus driver. Now you're just dead."

Something was wrong. No way he was dead. Chase knew the driver was alive and he was going to prove it. He pushed his way in front of the doctor to get a good look at the fallen man. The driver's chest rose and fell and he wheezed. Chase knew it. "See, he's alive!" Chase insisted. It baffled him that a doctor could overlook the vitality clinging to this man. He turned to demand an explanation. "How could a doctor..."

Chase's teeth clicked together and he was silenced by a sharp jab in his neck. He caught sight of the thing in the doctor's hand again. It *was* a syringe. A cold vacuum came over the space, sucking out all illusion. The thin man finally voiced the thing which had been there all along, "I'm not a doctor."

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CHASE WOKE TO A SMASHING headache and the taste of blood. Not only blood. There was something else. Metal. His mouth hurt; a searing pain in the front. Below it, a throbbing, deeper and more expansive pain covered his whole mouth. He was moving but not walking. His feet dragged on the ground. Avery's neck was under his left armpit and a gaunt, bony shoulder was under his right. Chase failed to find his footing while they limped him to the truck.

"Why'd you do that to his face!?" Avery shrieked.

"The bus driver had a seizure. He was thrashing around and Chase took a bad spill."

"Why'd you do that!?" she screamed again.

"He mustn't swallow his tongue. Please, don't question me. There's no time. We need to get him into the truck." Chase's head rolled back, igniting a painful burst at the base of his neck. He squinted into the blazing tunnel lights. The seizing bus-driver must have really clobbered him. Blood and saliva mixed in the back of his throat and he swallowed with hacking sounds. He tried to investigate his mouth with his tongue but he couldn't move it. "Hurry," the doctor said. Chase's feet dragged on asphalt a few seconds more before he got dumped into the back of the truck. He was staring up at the tunnel lights again.

"What's that!?" Avery demanded.

Chase felt a needle under his skin.

"Antibiotics to prevent infection in his mouth." Despite the pain, taste of blood and inability to move his tongue, Chase was thankful for the doctor's continued vigilance when it came to matters of health. Then he remembered the doctor saying he'd given the last of the antibiotics to Mr. Chen. Then he remembered when the doctor told him he wasn't a doctor and knocked him out on the bus. For a split-second, Chase tried to quantify the danger they were in. His vision doubled, then quadrupled. Then, he saw nothing at all.



THE PULSING LIGHTS told Chase he was dead. Their familiar, disgusting color told him he was mistaken. He was still in the tunnel. His mouth hurt. It smelled like gas. He needed to breathe. He tried to sit but his muscles didn't listen. He was paralyzed. It must be the needle. His clothes were wet and his skin itched. A tall gas barrel was to his left. If he was lying in the back of the truck, they must've taken out at least two barrels to make room. They'd splashed gasoline and Chase was drowning in the fumes. The baby bag squeezed against his chest. He needed to breathe. He needed to sit. Again, he ordered his abdomen to flex and, again, there was no response. There was only the infinite weight of the canvas he'd so proudly strung over six stolen gas barrels just yesterday. Now, his entire universe was defined by the suffocating canopy he'd fashioned for himself. He thought he knew panic before but this was a quantum leap forward. Ice pumped in his veins. A total freak-out threatened to choke him and extinguish any sort of thought which would rescue him from this situation.

Where was Avery? Was she in the truck? He couldn't even turn his head. What if she was dead? Invisibility conspired with his imagination and a host of worst-case-scenarios bludgeoned him into hyperventilation. For his whole life, "take a deep breath" was the unshakeable mantra for times when shit got real. What should he do when taking a deep breath meant passing out from a heavy rush of gasoline fumes? He was a dead man if he breathed too deeply so, as humanity is known to do when facing destruction, Chase defied the experts. He breathed as shallow as he could. It was agony with no certain outcome but he reached deep into his most resilient state of mind and found his perfect rhythm. He breathed just tolerable amounts of the poison he'd stolen from work and willed his body to move again.

The desire to sit was his whole being. Second was figuring out where Avery was. A close third would be resolving the issue of whatever was happening in his mouth. Visions of his impending fatality hawkishly circled his deteriorating psyche but he fought them off again and again. His abs burned as he strained to sit but it wasn't enough. He kept trying, forcing the dormant muscles in his core to obey him. This singular purpose was the only thing which made the passing of these torturous seconds bearable.

Finally, he budged. His torso rose enough for him to catch sight of his feet and the red glare of the truck's brake lights. The canvas was so heavy. He fell backward, losing his few, hard-fought inches. The lights of the tunnel returned, flashing over him as a strobe of orange white. They were moving much faster now. "What happened back there?" Avery's voice reached him, partially distorted by the glass and steel of the truck and partially through her open window. Thank God.

"The driver was thrashing around and he knocked Chase out." For a person so thin, the stranger's voice boomed. Even when muffled by glass and steel, it held a powerful, seductive cadence. "I think he had the creep," he lied.

"How could the bus driver get it and no one else?"

"Just look at where we are, Avery. Look at what we're doing. It's absurd. If it weren't so serious, it would be laughable. Do you think we have immortal souls?" Hearing Avery's name on the thin man's lips boiled Chase's blood. With perfect recollection, he heard the clerk at St. Clouds Convenience Mart telling him to get a firearm. He tried to flex his fingers. They were sluggish but responsive. The feeling in his tongue was returning, too. God, his mouth stung. There was definitely metal in there. The taste of iron or aluminum or whatever mixed with blood. With his muscle function slowly returning, Chase willed every fiber in his core to sit. He pushed against the truck bed as hard as his hands allowed. At last, he wriggled himself upright against the cab of the truck. Now that he was seated, the smell of gasoline was greatly diminished. It was time for those deep breaths, which he huffed gratefully. If he craned his neck at the most painful angle possible, he could see Avery in the top left portion of his peripheral vision. She was leaning over the back of the passenger seat, looking down at him. "You didn't answer my question. Do you think we have immortal souls?" the man asked her.

Avery's response dripped with disdain and impatience. "What? I don't know. What has that got to do with anything? Can I get in the back and check on Chase, please? That's why you're driving, remember? You drive. I watch Chase."

"It's got everything to do with everything," the man insisted.

"You don't need to help us, okay. We're good on our own now. Thank you for fixing Chase's face but this is too weird. I'm getting uncomfortable and I think that's fair. I don't even know your name." She got no answer. Avery hated when people didn't answer her. "Can you at least tell me your name?" she repeated, again met with silence. "Hello!?! What's your name!?" Avery shouted. Chase never forgot the arctic, toneless way the thin man finally answered the question.

"Someone."

Avery either didn't grasp the horror of his response or she was much braver than Chase. "Okay, Someone, thank you for your help but it's time to go. I can handle it from here. When I get a chance, I'll send help for you and Mr. Chen." The tunnel disappeared. The temperature dropped and the cool night air swirled around him. The sizzle of tires on wet road replaced the hollow echo of the stone tunnel. The change of scenery brought Chase no joy. This was not how he imagined their exit.

"Even if we live on after we die, there's a survival instinct wired into our bodies. Bodies fight for life until the bloody end. They can't help it. So, seems like our bodies probably don't believe we have souls. Or else, why would they fight so hard not to let go? What do you think?"

"It's hard to think right now. I'm worried about Chase's head and I'm really, really tired. We're out of the tunnel now, okay? Let's stop and check on Chase."

"It's a mishmash. A soup. We're soup; chemical equations chasing cognitive imperatives and hallucinating meaning and miracles and God and love."

"We're out of the tunnel now, okay! What about Chase? What about Mr. Chen?" she asked. "Isn't the whole point of this expedition to get him an ambulance?"

"The universe is a mechanistic and uncaring place. Mr. Chen needs to learn that, same as everyone." In a coincidental bout of horrific timing, this news lined up with a fierce bump in the road. A healthy splash of gas bounced out

of the nearest barrel, covering Chase and the baby bag in quantum enriched petroleum.

"Stop the car! I wanna check on him!" Avery demanded. The truck continued its steady jaunt down the road.

Someone chuckled. "You were right, Avery."

"Stop the truck," she said.

"The writing on Mr. Chen's forehead; it was goofy. That's why I did it. It was funny. You were the only one who got it." Someone's chuckle graduated to full-on, sustained laughter. "He didn't even need a tourniquet. That was fake penicillin I gave him, too." He laughed harder. "Gosh, and the books! Tell people books burn at a higher temperature than newspaper and they actually believe it. It wasn't even cold. People are so dumb."

"Why would you..."

"They needed to learn!"

"But they could die from those things you did!"

"Death isn't enough. They needed to learn."

"Learn what!?"

"To think for themselves! The idiots! They all go following and this is what it gets them. It cost Mr. Chen a leg and Mrs. Wungarten a husband." Chase suddenly remembered what honey smearing on an open pleural decompression looked like. "You can't believe everyone who says they're trying to help you. I know you want to but that's not how the world works and now they learned their lesson."

Avery faced this development with admirable composure or else she finally surrendered to the reality of the danger she was in. "If you drop us off now, we won't tell anyone what you did. You can take the truck and the gas. I don't care. Just drop us off, please."

"No one's gonna care about what I did. Everything's finished. It's all over. Kentucky is the end. Besides, what are you gonna do if it's just you and Chase on the side of the road, huh? He can't even move."

"What?"

"Horse tranquilizer."

"You drugged him?"

"More than once!" Someone laughed. "See, we need each other now. You, me and Chase go together like peanut butter and jelly, like MDMA and turkey sandwiches." Chase's eyes went wide. So, it wasn't ketosis.

"You fucking psycho," Avery hissed.

"Ah, don't worry too much. I'm sure your baby's just fine. Little bit of ecstasy never hurt anyone. Wouldn't worry about the creep, either. You know, Quantum Realignment Phenomenon? It's not so bad. You can take it. I got it back in '94. I know you're wondering if it hurts but it was lovely. You feel real hot, then real cold and your head hurts a little. But then it's real peaceful. You can't move but you don't really care. Then you fall asleep."

Avery ignored this unsettling break from reality, desperate enough to forgive anything if it meant getting away. "Okay. Okay. Thank you for everything you've done. We appreciate everything you did but we're good on our own now and..."

Someone exploded. "No! No! You are *not good on your own!* You need to learn!" He shouted in her face.

When faced with a horrifying scenario, some people get scared and some people get angry. Avery was the type to get angry. "What the fuck are you talking about! Shut the fuck up!" she yelled. Someone didn't respond. Instead, Chase heard the flick of a lighter and caught a whiff of cigarette smoke from the open window. "What are you doing!? I'm pregnant, okay!? You can't smoke around me!" she yelled. Chase heard muffled smacking sounds. "Put that shit out! I'm pregnant! You can't smoke around me!" she shouted. After this failed, Avery went for the nuclear option. She grabbed the pack of cigarettes and chucked it out the window, appearing to Chase as a tiny white box sailing into the night.

The truck screeched to a halt, pressing Chase against the back of the cab. The door flew open. Someone bounded from the driver's seat. Chase's breath caught in his throat as the man passed, his back illuminated by the red glow of the tail lights. *Drive away, Avery. Drive away,* Chase prayed.

Someone scanned the road until he found what he was looking for. He darted ahead and picked up the pack of cigarettes, only to throw it back on the ground. "They're soaking wet!" he screamed.

Suddenly, Avery was there. "Chase!? Are you okay?"

"Go," Chase tried to say. The word came out as a perverse groan of distorted phonemes.

Avery tugged his arm. "Come on!" With all his strength, Chase tried to stand. He made it to his knees but his body was half-numb. He moved like sludge and his balance was off.

Twenty feet away, Someone paced in a circle, hugging himself and rocking back and forth. He uttered a staccato, hiccupy series of moans which suggested some unknown torment. Then, he burst into a rage and wailed. "No one cares! No one cares!" he screamed.

Chase played the horn in his high school band. When blown gently, a nice sound comes out but, if it's blown too hard, the sound gets unpredictable, distorted and noisy. Like a horn blown too hard, Someone's scream hit the non-linear zone in his vocal tract and the sound collapsed into a jumble of noise at max volume. Chase fought his numb legs to reach a wobbly, half-standing position. He gripped Avery's arm for support with his left hand. The fingers of his right curled around slender black steel. Someone finished his screaming fit, then turned his attention to the truck. For a moment, he beheld Chase and Avery with all the surprise of a person seeing a bank robbery. Then, he charged.

Getting in the truck and driving away was impossible, now. It was fight or flight and the answer was clear. In seconds, the thin psychopath reached them. With his legs already collapsing, Chase lunged in what could only be called an aggressive fall. Aided by gravity, the full weight of the slender black flashlight slid through the air, smashing into the base of Someone's neck with maximum leverage. Chase's limp wrist failed and the flashlight clanked to the ground as Chase landed on the street with a heavy thud.

A cry of resolute anger and pain sounded into the night. From his defenseless position, Chase watched in slow-motion as Someone staggered backward, his hand over the spot where the flashlight hit him. A look of pure malice corrupted his face and Chase lay substrate as the thin, shirtless man pounced. His wiry fingers closed around Chase's neck and Chase had neither the strength, nor the control of his body to resist. He was helpless, about to be strangled by this evil man.

The gritty sound of metal on asphalt paired with a grunt of effort. Chase saw her, framed in the moonlight, standing behind Someone like a dirty goddess. "Fuck you, Someone!" Avery screamed and swung the flashlight as hard as

she could. The sickening thunk and immediate cessation of pressure on Chase's neck confirmed Avery's uncanny efficiency. Someone fell onto Chase before rolling onto the gravel heavy, nonresistant and silent. In the red glow of the tail lights, Avery's trembling fingers worked across Someone's body and up his torso until she found the strap of his backpack. She ripped the bag off of him and Chase saw the blood on his face, flowing from the mushy spot on his head. Chase called out for help, an unintelligible mess with no tongue movement. With every ounce of their combined strength, they lifted Chase to his feet and retreated wordlessly into the truck.

Avery drove while Chase chanced to see what had become of his mouth. With a floppy hand, he pushed down the passenger's side mirror and glimpsed a sight of pure horror. Two V-shaped safety pins ran through the top of his tongue. They curved their way through it, pierced the bottom and ran through the skin below his lips. The ends poked jaggedly into the air, thin metal tusks protruding below his bottom lip. "Nnnngg!" he exclaimed. Chase reached up to remove the safety-pins but Avery slapped his hands down.

"Just wait a sec! You've got gas and blood all over you. Just wait." She guided his left hand to his lap and his right hand followed. Avery leaned over the wheel, eyes twinkling in grim determination while she drove them away from the monster they'd left on the road. She deemed a street lamp ahead adequate for her next mission and pulled over and threw her door open. She ran around to Chase's side and opened his. "Can you walk now?" Chase nodded but he couldn't really and so she helped him out of the truck.

Gently, she pushed him backward until he was sitting on a low cement guard wall on the side of the road. The last of the bottled water trickled onto asphalt while Avery dumped it over her hands, then Chase's. She dropped the empty bottle and smeared her hands on her jeans. "Okay, let's do this," she said. Her fingers trembled as she reached into his mouth and wriggled a pin. Metal slid through his lips and the tip of a safety pin was in the tender spot below his tongue. He moaned a warning but Avery's hand held true. The metal inched through his flesh. Blood trickled from three different places at once and it hurt. The first pin was out.

"Okay, next one," she said. This time she was overconfident or the saliva pooling at the back of Chase's throat made him swallow at the wrong time. The tip of the safety pin stuck him on the inside of the lip. She twisted her wrist up-

ward, bending the pin through and out of his tongue faster than the first. With the second pin free, Chase sucked blood. Avery stripped off his gas-soaked shirt and threw it on the road. She tore off the bottom half of her blouse with a prolonged, dramatic rip. She put the fabric in his hand and guided it to his mouth to absorb the blood. Barechested, he hugged her close and drooled blood onto the piece of her blouse. "We can stop at my dad's," she said.

They ended the embrace and climbed back in the truck. Avery drove them onward without a word about what had just happened. They went further east before bending north, circumventing the city and most of the traffic. Neither of them wanted to admit that this was the route they should have taken all along. Neither of them could admit anything except they were done with tunnels for life. The white noise of rain under the tires was the only sound. Headlights illuminated road signs, one after the next. Finally, the sign they were waiting for appeared. It said: "Brainerd." Avery mechanically flipped on the turn signal.

CHAPTER VI

NOTHING STATIC

Tire rubbed obscenely on concrete curb. Chase and Avery oozed out of the truck, looking like something the cat refused to drag in. All manner of sirens echoed into the night while they scurried up vine-covered steps to the screen door of her dad's house. Avery mashed a chipped fingernail into the doorbell which was sticky from atrophy of use. It was an unnecessary gesture as Dan had clocked their arrival moments ago. The door was open before the bell stopped ringing.

The man was a whirlwind of excitement. Miraculously, he made no mention of their condition. It was as if they were coming over for Sunday dinner. "Hey, Avery! Long time, no see!" He folded her into a hug, his eyes drifting in the direction of the sirens as he offered his hand to Chase. Chase was still holding the bloody piece of Avery's top against his face with his right hand and so he met Dan's handshake awkwardly with his left. "Come on, let's get inside," Dan urged.

Dan's home dripped with American-themed memorabilia, including two rifles hung on the wall. Chase noticed a third, empty mount at the same time Dan grabbed the gun from behind the door. He poked his head outside for one last look, then shut the door firmly and locked three distinct locks. "Dad, do you really need the gun right now?" Avery asked with the special kind of disrespect reserved only for parents.

"I don't know if I'm gonna need it, Aves. That's the point. Maybe I will. Maybe I won't."

"I hate guns," she said.

"Believe or not, sweetie, so do I. Especially when you mix 'em with antidepressants, but this is the world we live in so sometimes it's wise to strap up." Dan stabbed a finger into the recesses of a darkened hallway below the shadow of looming bookshelves. "Bathroom's over there, Chase. You can tell me the story after, if you like."

In the many years both behind and ahead of him, Chase was never happier to hear hot water blast from a shower head. He peeled off his gasoline-smelling

pants and climbed into the steamy column. He stared at his feet, tonguing the holes in his lips. As bloody water pooled and disappeared into the drain, his thoughts went with it. His mind was hollow as he washed his aching body until the water at his feet ran mostly free of blood. He heard loudly the mushy *thunk* of black metal on skull. The more he thought about it, the more he knew they'd killed Someone with that flashlight. It was the slackness, the limpness and the dead weight of the body when it fell on him.

The thought was cut mercifully short when Dan cracked the door and tossed some clean clothes on the closed toilet lid. "Got some threads for ya, Chase! Hope they're in fashion."

"Thanks," Chase groaned, the word sounding more like "fanks."

Steam poured from the bathroom when Chase walked out to find Avery with a tall white stack of sanitary wipes. Dan held his gun like a baton, gripping it by the barrel while he pushed articles he'd printed from the internet off the couch.

"Sit here, Chase. Avery'll fix you up." Chase held a towel under his chin while Avery cleaned his wounds and Dan assessed the damage. There were six punctures: two into the top of his tongue, two out of the bottom, and two through the lips. Dan had read a survival manual or two in his day and he easily recognized the handiwork. "When no one's around, you can use safety pins to keep an unconscious person from choking on their tongue. It's a brutal method, though. No one safety pins a tongue unless they're all alone in the woods. This guy didn't know what he was doing."

Chase thought about Mr. Chen's superfluous tourniquet and Mr. Wungarten's likely unnecessary pleural decompression. "He knew what he was doing, dad." Avery said softly.

They needed to learn.

Dan looked them over and absorbed the vibe. Say what you will about the guy, he knew how to read a room. He nodded to himself and disappeared into the kitchen. Below the obnoxious throbbing pain besetting his mouth, a rare moment of tenderness passed between Chase and Avery. She split her focus between keeping her soft touch and reading the feedback of his expressions to find the gentlest way to scrub. It had been a long time since Chase saw her in this light and the first since she had her irises tattooed.

Dan made a hearty dinner of canned beans. "It was between beans and soup and beans were elected, seein' as how I'm not sure Chase can do soup." When Avery was satisfied with her clean-up, Chase went eagerly for the lukewarm beans. He ate like a pelican, gulping down bites the moment they passed the threshold of his mangled lips. After that ordeal, Dan collected the bowls and spoons, chucking the used sanitary wipes in the trash on his way to the kitchen. He blasted some water over the dishes, then came back and plopped into a well-worn swivel chair in front of his computer. Chase could see Dan was ready for post-Petropolis life. A wall of canned goods towered in the corner beside an equally bountiful stack of pallets filled with cigarette lighters. Next to those, a wall of cigarettes taller than the Marlboro Man himself. The quiet, steady stream of terrible news from the TV validated all of it. Must feel good to have all that doomsday planning finally paying off.

"I see you admiring my pallets, Chase. Smart man. First thing I did was go to the store and buy out all the lighters and all the cigarettes. You saw what happened in Chicago when the power went out. Bosnia-Herzegovina before that. Lighters are good. You can buy hundreds and pocket a few when you need to go out to trade. No one knows you're carrying anything of value so you're less likely to get robbed and, believe me, lighters have value. People always need fire. Just make sure you get the transparent kind so you can see how much fluid you're workin' with."

He didn't care what Dan said as long as he kept talking. It felt good to relax and let relative normalcy wash over him. The tunnel left a mark on Chase's psyche that he needed to scrub away with some chit-chat and a good night's rest. "Everyone's in denial, but the truth is creepin' up, same as the creep. It's all over now. People won't be drivin' to the movies on Sunday anymore. No more taxis, no more carpool lane." Dan spun in his chair while he held his gun. Chase sensed the man spent a great deal of time in that chair, spinning with his gun and clicking his mouse. "If it's on TV, people like to sit back and pretend things are gonna go on like normal. 'The further away it is, the less it affects me.' They're all sittin' back, eatin' smug salad." Dan saw a phantom blemish at the tip of his gun barrel. He paused to frown at it before he wiped it away, then carried on. "People startin' to get real edgy, 'specially the ones that don't have a full tank of new gas. Smart ones left the city on their last gallon, but it won't last forever. Hope they like walkin'."

Dan escalated to a state of righteous half-delirium, yelling to an imaginary authority figure in a manner Avery had observed many times. "How you gonna move all them cars with no gasoline, sheriff!?" The very traits that normally bugged Avery about her dad were now a blessing. Dan showed little more than a cursory interest in their journey this far and requested no information from them. He was more than happy to keep talking and they were more than happy to keep listening. Neither Chase nor Avery was anxious to rehash recent events and Dan's constant chatting created a safe opportunity for them to space out without the responsibility of social input.

The things he said made a certain kind of sense for a little while. "No after-shocks gonna topple a tower like that." Then he devolved into things that made less sense. "Think about it. If the creep's coming from particulate inhalation, it's gotta be less severe where the particulate isn't as dense. Checks out, doesn't it!? It's not as powerful as it spreads. It's about the density of the particulate!" He talked continuously about the explosion and the creep. He was a wellspring of confident speculation, occasionally articulating his point with a firm finger poke at one of the articles he'd printed. Chase was beginning to see why Avery didn't come to Brainerd very often. It was impossible for Dan to go five minutes without mentioning patriotism, domestic terrorism, communism, or one of many other kinds of -isms. Nevertheless, Dan possessed the hospitality of a seasoned father and he came through when it mattered. Chase and Avery were never without a glass of water, a snack in their hand or a fresh towel for Chase's face punctures. "Everyone knows we reap what we sow but a lot of people forget we also sow what we reap," Dan was saying when Avery finally held up her hand in equal parts aggression and white flag of surrender.

"Dad, we need sleep."

"Here, sleep on the futon!" Hiding in the corner, beneath an encyclopedia of Post-It notes, was indeed a futon. The yellow scraps of paper didn't last long. The Post-It notes got the floor when Dan's first-born daughter came calling. The futon was uncomfortable and smelled funky but Chase melted into it just the same. On any other occasion, he would've felt guilty for passing out without offering to help clean up but Someone was still on his mind and Chase needed to forget about being awake.

IN THE 1960S, PSYCHOLOGISTS probing dream science found dreamers tended to overestimate how long they'd dreamt. People who'd dreamt five minutes might claim it had been thirty and those who'd dreamt only fifteen minutes might guess they'd been dreaming an hour or three. Chase experienced the opposite effect on Dan's futon. He'd have guessed he dreamt for an hour but it was actually closer to five. Fragmented images came to him disjointed and discordant, woven together only by the underlying knowledge they were coming from the same mind.

He was back at home with Avery on the couch. They were in front of a switched off TV, listening to the news. "We're receiving word that a major earthquake has struck the west coast. The quake, which began in the Salton Sea, reached L.A. within two minutes, destroying San Bernardino, L.A. and Palm Springs." Chase rubbed his face, both in the dream and on the futon. That wasn't how it went. They were in the taxi after dinner when they heard about the earthquake from the driver.

He was in a jungle. On the ground before him, a hulking dung beetle was struggling to push a discarded milk carton but the shape of the carton was giving the beetle a lot of trouble. Every time it pushed, it slid uselessly off the glossy, smooth face of the carton. Finally, the beetle found its footing and toppled the milk. Frothy white bubbles soaked into the soil. Behind the switched off television, the jungle was massive. There was a city back there. Chase heard the click of a plastic button. A cool breeze accompanied the whirring of an electric fan which had no cord or plug. Avery was next to him but talking to herself. "The wind feels great in this heat," she said.



CHASE WOKE WITH THE feeling his mind had been going faster while asleep than awake. Dan's lighter pallets reflected the morning sunlight, bending it softly in a million directions. Dan slapped a tray of food on the coffee table. "French toast sticks, orange juice, and water for the human pin cushion. How'd you sleep?" he asked without waiting for an answer.

The muted TV silently delivered the news. The words "ELECTRIC SPINE" painted the screen above a CG model of the human nervous system. In slow-motion, tiny bundles of color appeared at the bottom of the spine. They

grew until they merged into a single ball of light which exploded upward and outward, lighting up the entire model like a flashlight. Dan sat in his chair and took a bite of a French toast stick. "They've been waitin' for this day a long time," he said. Chase rubbed the sleep grime off his face to the sound of a toilet flush. Avery came out of the bathroom and rejoined him on the futon. "They've been waiting for this," Dan continued. "Think about all the things they'll be able to do while this is happening. A brand new world of control, that's what. It's all about to change."

"Dad, can we have breakfast without talking about that?"

Dan pursed his lips in consideration. "You saw how fast they had the story lined up, didn't ya? Every network reportin' the same thing, all lined up. Went from media blackout to full-time TV in a day, all with the same story! That's planned."

"Dad, please."

Dan pursed his lips harder. He took a breath, opened his mouth to speak, then shut it again. "Those are some wicked contacts, Aves," he said finally.

"It's not contacts. It's gene therapy."

"You mean they're gonna stay like that?"

"They'll get shinier once the cells adopt and replicate."

Dan stirred in an uncharacteristic display of discomfort. "Me and your mom gave you those eyes and you're free to do what you want with 'em but I was partial to brown. Chase, what do you think?"

Chase ripped French toast sticks into French toast bites and watched the electric spine animation. "I like 'em. Kinda like...Skittles," he said.

Dan huffed. "Ain't never seen a purple Skittle before."

"Of course you have," Avery sighed. "Purple's been there from the beginning."

"Never seen one."

"Purple's one of the original colors, dad!" she barked. "You're thinking of M & Ms."

For several minutes, Dan cocooned in brooding silence.

After cramming down some French toast in the most ungraceful way possible, Chase almost felt like himself again. It wasn't the best sleep ever but a day away from the tunnel was nearly enough to get him back to his usual, Chasey disposition. As such, his overactive imagination clawed for things to worry

about. He was shocked to come up empty and find himself relaxed. Against all odds, they were fine. According to his calculations, they still had two or three days before the creep caught up to them. That was plenty of time.

After breakfast, they were going to get dressed. Then they were going to get in the truck and get out of town. They'd head north from Brainerd, same as the original plan. Then it was going to be a backroads adventure after all, simple as that. They weren't gonna be blood bags because they were going to outrun the creep and they had the time and gas to do it. All of the sudden, driving by the seat of their pants and jaunting down whichever country lane most resembled a lovely painting seemed like a real possibility. Despite a few early bumps in the road, they'd done it. Chase was so proud of himself. Proud for calculating the four days. Proud they'd made it to Brainerd. Proud for panning the gasoline. Proud for eating the French toast even though he had six holes in his mouth.

Then, like clockwork, the chaos took aim for him again. The computer generated animation of the electric spine transitioned to a reporter in the studio. She was sitting above the "BREAKING NEWS" banner and her expression screamed bad news. In the background, a map of the country showed a black smear over Kentucky. At the edge of the smear, red arrows pointed in all directions. The smear was closer to Minnesota than Chase would have guessed. Dan unmuted the TV and raised the volume far louder than necessary.

"A strong weather pattern has accelerated the spread of the pathogen to the north. Reports of the creep are coming in as far as Fairfield. If you begin showing symptoms..."

Avery gasped. "Fairfield? That's close!"

Suddenly, they were behind again. Chase had been wrong about the four days, after all. Still, Fairfield wasn't exactly right around the corner. If they got going right away, they should be fine. All was not yet lost. The next statement, however, was an ear-ringing slap that knocked the smug salad right out of Chase's mouth. The words, as he could halfway recall, went something like: "Please prepare yourself for some terrible news. A disturbing picture is developing from affected areas at a distance from Bath County. We can now confirm the effects of Quantum Realignment Phenomena are much more severe for pregnant mothers. The rate of fatality is greatly increased. In cases where the mother survives...", the newscaster frowned, looking like she wanted to quit her job. "the fetus...there's a good chance the fetus will not."

Of all the things for the woman to say, it had to be that. Less than a day after they'd been at their worst, trapped inside a claustrophobic tunnel with a creature of total darkness, they found themselves in a worse spot. Avery's eyes sparkled with purple horror. Dan stood up, gun barrel rising in parallel. "Time to hit the road," he uttered ominously, voice devoid of any trace of his usual joy. They tossed breakfast aside with a clatter of hard plastic and cheap aluminum. A few minutes later, they were outside by the truck.

In classic dad style, Dan had been out to inspect it while they were sleeping. "Put some fresh oil in her and did some research. What you got there is a 1980 K-10 Scottsdale Truck Longbed with a 350 engine. Not exactly a four door family vehicle or minivan, but she'll get the job done." He opened the glove compartment to show them where he'd put the home-printed owner's manual for a 1980 Scottsdale Longbed in addition to a list of commonly asked questions and answers. In addition to the truck dossier, Dan pre-loaded the truck bed with four huge jugs of water and three pallets of lighters. The water, lighters and gasoline were neatly separated by plastic dividers. In addition, he'd crammed two huge bags of peanuts nicely into the back of the cab. The mouth of one bag was perfectly positioned for easy eating while driving.

Dan held out a compact, yellow flashlight with a handle on top. "A good light source is one of the most valuable survival tools," he said. Neither Chase nor Avery acknowledged the statement. Then he passed them his final gift: an oblong, wonky shaped thing in a plastic case. "It's a satellite phone. It doesn't work the way it's supposed to, but it's GPS traceable. As long as you have that, I can find you."

"Dad, you should come too. Why don't you follow us in your car? We can caravan." Avery asked with the tone a person uses when they know it's no use asking.

Dan frowned. "I'm not goin' anywhere. Like I said, it's the density of the particulate. By the time it gets here, it'll be so diluted I might not feel a thing. Plenty of people in the neighborhood will be needing some help soon so I'm digging my heels in. What's best for the goose is best for the gander." Chase didn't think that was how the phrase was meant to be used but the meaning was clear. Of course Dan wasn't coming. It made sense. What good was a house full of canned goods, guns and lighters if you abandoned them when the apocalypse finally came? Here, among the people who'd likely teased or outright chastised

Dan for his over-preparedness, he was going to make a stand and show his community the value of a good doomsday stockpile.

In the swirling mess of emotions Chase was feeling, gratitude took center stage. He offered Avery's dad the only thing he could. "At least let us give you some gas. We have a ton."

Dan took a moment, but not a long one, to agree. "I got enough," he made sure to include, "but it's always better to be safe than sorry. I'll just take a bit. You'll need it more than I will." In the final, rushed moments of their stay with Dan, Chase watched another barrel of panned gas disappear from their supply. In a hurried bit of rearranging, Dan wedged a final jug of water and two more gigantic bags of peanuts, these ones wrapped in durable plastic tarps, into the truck bed.

"Take Route 3 out of town, not 371," Dan instructed, pushing the back flap of the truck into place with a surprisingly gentle hand. "Make a left at the Dollar General. Stay left after that and you should be good." Sadness bloomed in Chase's core, the sadness one feels when a friendly separation comes too soon. "Take care, Chase." Dan extended his hand. Chase was able to shake it properly this time.

Avery gave her dad a long hug. As he was wont to do, Chase framed their hug with excessive melodrama. He wondered if this would be the last time Avery saw her father. Meanwhile, he knew the morbid possibility would never even cross Avery's mind. "Bye, dad."

"I'll be seein' ya soon, Aves. Keep the satellite phone around and I'll catch up. See ya in the new society." He took a step back and shut her door, then leaned in the window to finish his thought. "And believe me, I'm gonna take great comfort in the crumbling of this one. Good riddance. I just hope something better, something more humane, takes its place and not the other way around."

"Okay, okay, dad. We know. Love you, bye."

A scuff of rubber disengaging from concrete signaled their departure. Like so many meetings with family, they left feeling a mix of comfort and trauma. Yet again, something faded in the rear view mirror. Chase saw Dan close his door and imagined the sound of three distinct locks. Then, the dwindling supply of gas barrels jostling next to the two brown bags was all that remained.

Chase sighed. He'd spent two years stealing the most precious resource on Earth, then traded it for peanuts.



THE FOLLOWING DAYS were a hypnotic combination of relief and post-traumatic comedown. It took real effort to decompress from what they'd been through. From watching marines run through a city of blood bags to getting held at gunpoint to Someone, they had plenty of things to keep their minds off. They drove back roads, letting instinct guide them at every junction. They stayed clear of the interstate and took long detours around populated areas, veering tangentially whenever the sprawl of country dwellings began repeating into the tell-tale frequency of an impending town.

Day after day, they toured the forests of middle North America on an endless tress of side roads which kept them far off the beaten path. Their route was marked by such random twists and turns an aerial observer might mistake them for sightseers or lost travelers; however, one thing was constant. Always, they headed north by northwest, pursued by the creep as it pushed radially from the epicenter of the trouble in Bath County.

The creep spread slowly but the madness it stirred was fast. As the shifting winds swirled and scattered the toxic metaparticulate, it was impossible to predict where the creep would strike next. Time after time, the experts' assessments were proven baseless. In some places, symptoms appeared suddenly and without warning. In others, the creep arrived far later than expected. It did arrive, though. It always arrived.

The uncertain date of certain reckoning impinged on the minds of millions and it didn't take long for mass hysteria to devolve into widespread anarchy. Again and again, places everywhere repeated the horrors of St. Cloud's Convenience Mart. Inexhaustible radio reports of a country being devoured by pandemonium had Chase and Avery on edge. It was clear society would be much different on the other side of this. That's assuming they made it to the other side, which a multitude of pundits believed they would not. Endless gloom and doom framed the whole experience.

"Long term effects of the accident in Bath County can't be stated with certainty; however, many experts believe the enriched fuel will cause significant

stratospheric damage during oxidation." As time went on, it just got worse. At best, only thirty percent of humanity would be left standing. At worst, the accident in Kentucky would result in a "barometric eruption" and the whole atmosphere would be ripped away like a Band-Aid. If one truth emerged from the speculation, it was that people were wilin' out. Society used the creep as a pass to take a vacation from the rules. It wasn't safe out there. Gangs roamed. Looting was at large. Road bandits, all that.

None for me, thanks. I'm on a pristine backwoods adventure with my lovely lady and we are eating peanuts.

In addition to the creep, the country soon faced a new challenge: life without gas. Chase was surprised by how fast and how accurately Dan's disturbing prognostications came to pass. Without fuel, the country was in big trouble. Cities became death traps. Everything was a fight for survival.

Not for Chase though, no no. This super smart gas station attendant was sitting pretty on the largest private stash of new gas in sixteen counties. He was driving north and eating peanuts aplenty.

While the major cities emptied out, people who stayed behind were drowning in lawlessness. Without trucks, the supermarkets didn't get refilled. Nearly everyone in an urban area was facing starvation and the population was split. Half were on the run from the creep and half were in the supermarket, fighting their own mother for the last can of tuna on the shelf.

Peanuts, peanuts, peanuts.

Their lives were forever changed. Funny how their old problems so easily became new ones. No longer did Chase need to worry about getting to work on time. Now, his only concern was the phrase the radio was so fond of: "minimum safe distance." Was there such a thing? How fast and how far must they drive to stay ahead of this invisible danger? The creep didn't spell certain death for him; however, more and more evidence was mounting that Avery and Margot wouldn't survive. The science was in; pregnancy amplified the effects of the creep. It wasn't fair to Avery, Margot or him but it didn't matter. At this point, he was past believing in fairness. The six holes in his mouth reminded him that sometimes things were just jacked up.

In some ways, the hanging threat of Avery's certain demise was helpful. It forced Chase to find the Olympian calm he'd always hoped for. Failing wasn't an option so he no longer second-guessed himself. He didn't wonder what to

do; he just did it. It wasn't a fun headspace to be in twenty-four hours a day but there was something liberating about it.

Six months ago, Chase would never have thought eating peanuts for breakfast, lunch and dinner would be ideal but he and Avery were resolute in the matter. The creep wasn't the only persistently looming cloud of danger. It was far better to eat the peanuts and ration the water than go looking for more supplies and risk an encounter with unpredictable, potentially violent humans. After the first week or so, they were very good at getting lost and they rarely saw anyone. That's why it came as a surprise when three people were standing in the middle of the road, next to a broken-down car.

When they saw Chase and Avery coming, they jumped up and down and waved their arms. Chase slowed down but only enough to be sure he would not run them over. A guy had pretended to be a doctor and then tried to kill him. If he felt a touch misanthropic after that, he'd say it was fair. Chances were these three were perfectly normal people who needed help with their car trouble but, these days, you just never knew. In a heart-stopping moment, the three stranded motorists blocked the road. Chase stopped the truck and rolled down the window. "That's close enough," he told them in the most authoritative voice he could find. Then an obvious thing happened. They looked offended.

"We just need a little help," they said. "We aren't gonna try anything." Chase could see they needed help but this was neither the time, nor the place, to take their word for it. He swerved around them with a dramatic turn of the wheel and drove by. Just the same, he tossed a lighter in their direction as the truck went past. Chase and Avery watched the group fade from sight. They were alone again.

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PHYSICALLY SPEAKING, life in the truck was no picnic. Road trips are fun and all but anyone who's spent more than six hours in the cab of a Scottsdale Longbed can tell you it wasn't built for luxury. Chase and Avery were both average height so leg room wasn't a huge issue. However, as a pregnant woman, Avery had a growing host of concerns best addressed by a midwife or at least a goodie. For the moment, she was holding it together alright but the third trimester was right around the corner and there wasn't much room in the truck

for Margot. Avery's growing belly was a ticking clock which hung over everything.

Then, there was the issue of rest. It wasn't fun to sleep sitting upright all the time. In fact, it sucked. Sleeping in the truck began as a purgatory which, over time, wound its way through the rings of Hell. Sometimes, they pulled a bag of peanuts out from behind the seat to use as a pillow. Wedging peanuts into the corner of the cab and drooling on burlap was functional but it wasn't nice. It wasn't nice at all.

Once it became too much to bear, they started pulling over to sleep in shifts. If one of them lied down on the full length of the bench seat, they could get a decent rest. It wasn't fun for the other one, though. The non-resting person was left with nothing to do but twiddle their thumbs outside the truck and keep a lookout for interlopers while listening to the radio and eating peanuts. These guard shifts were their own form of torture, ultra-boring affairs that were, by nature, lonely and also a bit spooky. One time, Chase was dozing off on the seat, thinking about how his head was laying on the same spot his or Avery's butt normally was. Avery stood outside, absent-mindedly patting his feet as they hung out of the open passenger side door. They had the radio on, as usual. The radio was a god-send during these times as it helped put Chase to sleep and gave Avery something to listen to while she waited. "I don't foresee any easy answers falling out of the sky. Do you? We're headed for a precipice! Make no mistake, the longer this goes on, the less likely we will ever get back to how we were. Quite frankly, Pre-Petropolis normalcy is looking more and more unattainable by the day and..."

The last thought Chase had before passing out was that they'd crossed the precipice long ago. Then, Avery was screaming bloody murder. He woke up, scared out of his mind, and banged his head on the steering wheel. There she was, eyes as wide as dinner plates but she wasn't screaming. But...there *was* a person screaming *somewhere*. Who was that?

It was the radio announcer. A mob had reached the station and they didn't like what he was saying. Chase and Avery listened helplessly while the deejay got shot up and the studio was destroyed. It didn't last long but, when it was over, no one stopped the broadcast so the frequency carried only the sounds of the empty studio. There was an occasional microphone pop and once a distant shouting but, mostly, it was a staticky nothing. Chase and Avery froze, hoping

for some resolution, for anyone to reclaim the microphone. All they received was the sound of empty air: nothing static. It was a surreal moment that encapsulated everything about that summer of anarchy. Chase laid his throbbing head back down on the vinyl and a voice called to him from below the front seat.

Make no mistake, Chase! When the world goes crazy, people go crazy with it!

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SOMEONE HAD GOT IN his head and stayed there. It was ten days on the other side of the tunnel and the experience was finally cornering him, making him look at what he didn't want to see. The things he'd said painted humanity in a pale, horrific light and now humanity was proving him right. Nothing scarier than a maniac with evidence to support his mania.

Besides that, he'd shined a light directly on Chase's weakness. The way he'd intentionally balanced friendliness, altruism and disinterest to gain Chase's trust was embarrassing. Maybe Chase had been high as a kite, but not the whole time. There were a lot of red flags even before that. What sort of doctor smoked so much? That had been a red flag Chase willfully ignored. He'd been so desperate for another person to guide him.

Chase didn't regret what they'd done to escape but he never used the word "someone" on the other side of the tunnel. Or flashlights, for that matter. It wasn't a conscious choice but his subconscious was consciously doing it so he wasn't sure where that left him.

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UNDERNEATH IT ALL, a heart-breaking truth pervaded everything. If things didn't go back to normal, there was a chance he would never see Richard or his parents again. He'd talked to his parents a few times since they'd left Minneapolis but he'd never gotten through to Richard. Every day, he tried at least twice. Finally, there would be no more tries. Fifteen days after the explosion in Kentucky, they faced a new wrinkle. If the creep was caustically eroding the bedrock of society, which it absolutely was, this next development razed it to the ground.

On the morning of June 25th, they were drifting through the hills with no civilization to speak of for miles. It was a peaceful day, sunny but drizzling and quiet enough to hear tiny drops of rain hitting the windshield. That's when the electricity started going out in North America. No one had any way of knowing the exact scale of the outage but it was big. A power grid here, a power grid there. The infrastructure simply stopped working and much of it never would again. Many of the power lines and cell phone towers would remain as skeletons against the sky until dismantled and used for spare parts by a later, wiser survivor caste of humanity.

Chase didn't understand why a biological metatoxin would cause the electricity to go out but it certainly fit the atmosphere and so he didn't need the particulars. Once you got swept up in the whole end-of-civilization narrative, you just went along with it. The internet and phone networks went first. After that, things degraded fast. News came frantic and spotty as one radio station after the next dissolved into the sound of dead air. Soon, they were all gone. This whole time, the radio had been their North Star. It told them where the creep was, let them set a pace and kept them company. When the radio finally quit, it didn't take long for the shadows to gather in the truck. The horror was palpable.

The nothing static droned on.

CHAPTER VII

THE FARMHOUSE

They hadn't seen a sign for the interstate in days. Chase wasn't sure if they were still in the United States or if they'd crossed into Canada and he wore this ignorance as a badge of honor. They were deep, deep into farm country. He was sure of that! They'd substituted their hard and fast rule of going north for a more organic, multi-faceted and carefree ambling down nice looking roads. If it looked like a painting, they took it, all the while making sure to keep their distance from populated areas. By feeling alone, they'd gotten all the way into the middle of nowhere during a national crisis. While civilization cannibalized itself around them, Chase and Avery were largely unaffected. In spite of a few birthing pains, the plan had worked exactly as he'd devised it. Together, they'd manifested a romantic, backroads adventure while everyone else dealt with the apocalyptic hellscape that was now society. They had a good thing going in the truck. They knew how lucky they were so they focused on staying lost and spoke little of their growing distaste for peanuts.

The afternoon sun illuminated the vinyl interior of the truck. The floor was littered with shells again. It gave Chase a thrill to see the peanut shells accumulate because he was hooked on the dopamine rush that came from scooping them all out. That only happened every so often, though. It wasn't as fun if there weren't a ton of them on the floor. His favorite pastime now was scrubbing the dust off the dashboard with his extra shirt and, thankfully, that was an unending pursuit. Chase found unexpected and tremendous joy in the process of cleaning up the truck. He made it his duty to keep the dashboard so shiny they felt like royalty in an onyx chariot.

New gas really worked. No matter how far they drove; the fuel gauge hardly moved. In the end, they hadn't made it to the North Pole but they did get some serious distance out of the quantum enriched petroleum. They'd barely put a dent in one of the barrels and they still had a full one left. More than once, Chase thought about ditching the full barrel on the side of the road so they'd have some room to sleep and chill out in the back of the truck. The floor of the truck bed was disgusting, though. It would not be an easy clean. To do the job

properly, he'd need a bunch of supplies he didn't have and so he kept thinking about it. It was a decision he never got around to deciding.

Besides, neither sleeping nor chilling out was a problem any more. Three weeks into their journey, they'd relaxed their safety protocols. Instead of standing watch by the truck while one of them slept inside, they took opportunities where they found them to go off-roading and explore the countryside. They went for walks. If they found a nice meadow, they laid in it. Maybe they'd stay for an hour, maybe five. The grass was a much finer pillow than a sack of peanuts and sleep came easy in those conditions. Despite a tumultuous start, the latter part of their journey was punctuated by tranquil pit stops. On many occasions, while he lay in the grass of an exotic meadow with the sunshine warming his eyelids, Chase found himself awash in a transcendent harmony. Still, there was a growing disconnect here. It was hard to reconcile the serenity of those moments with the big picture. As he looked into those clear blue skies, it seemed impossible that a deadly pathogen was riding the wind up there, coming to get them.

They switched seats when one of them got sick of driving. Every now and then, they tried the radio but it never returned. In its absence, Avery used words to fill the void of comforting background static. Chase was amazed by the places she would go to and the subjects she would address to keep the noise going. She skipped from topic to topic without a trace of rational transition. In the beginning, her favorites included the lack of radio, the lack of phone service, the lack of internet and the likelihood they would die when the creep arrived.

They treated the latter with a certain respect simply due to the enormous weight of the topic, but the respect was purely obligatory now. The beautiful, lonely West shrunk the dread. No longer exposed to the endless, terrifying radio commentary, their capacity to fear the creep had been exhausted like a muscle pushed to failure. There remained only a tolerable, strangely comfortable soreness which reminded them how well they'd done in their quest to escape the worst.

Over time, Avery honed her technique to perfection. The result was a steady stream of endless observation and feverishly detailed updates on the minutiae of their lives, mixed with recollection of old stories and movies. Avery's complexity lay in the boundless depths of her superficiality. No one knew

about painting their nails like she did and no one missed it as much. In some ways, Chase found it hard to relate and sometimes he just could not focus. It was as if there was a force-field an inch from his nose which siphoned her words over his cheeks and beyond his ears' realm of capture. Driving aimlessly day after day was not the most stimulating thing in the world so he didn't blame her for the noise; however, he was the kind of person who required a certain amount of peace and quiet in his day so it was becoming a problem.

First, he tried being the chatty one. Maybe if he pre-empted the talking and controlled the flow, he might be able to withstand it better. Avery respected conversation and she rarely interrupted. Maybe he stood a chance if he took the lead and shifted the conversation to topics he knew something about. However, even a polite person is allowed jump in during any lull in the conversation and hijack it. Chase soon learned that, if he wanted to be the one chatting, he needed to set a pace he just wasn't capable of. His mind didn't work that way. The reality was that Avery outclassed him by a hundred miles when it came to small-talk. On top of all that, he didn't want to be chatting anyway. He just wanted to enjoy the silence.

He tried pretending to be asleep but it never worked. After being with Avery this long, she had a sixth sense about when he was actually asleep and when he was pretending to sleep. If he tried to fake a nap, she'd tell him to stop pretending. If he claimed he wasn't asleep yet but he really was tired so he was trying to take a nap, it also didn't work. Apparently, she had a sixth sense about when he was actually tired as well. If he tried zoning out, she asked follow up questions to call him out for not listening. It was a torturous way to hold him hostage and Chase was praying for the Stockholm Syndrome to kick in.

Eventually, he found his own games to play. Sometimes he tried to make a sentence in his head that used as many words starting with a certain letter as possible. When she asked him a question to make sure he was paying attention to her, he'd answer using as many of the words he'd collected as possible. "Do you remember that sushi place around the corner that turned into a Chipotle? I wish we'd gone there more. That sushi was so good. You remember, right?" she asked.

"Maybe I 'member many times we met on Monday to mix sushi and soy sauce and make memories but mostly I miss making trips to McDonald's to eat meals with my...mom...and math teacher."

Avery rarely listened to his response and so his letter game usually lasted a long time, often far beyond his capacity to think of new vocabulary. If he ran out of words, he would stop saying actual words and just put the chosen letter on the front of everything.

"Do you wanna drive soon?"

"Possibly. People probably don't patrol places like this perry poften. Perhaps you pould pull over po I pan pee-pee."

No matter what happened, the important thing was that he kept going until she gave him a people-eating glare and demanded, "Stop saying Ps!" Then he would absolutely not stop saying Ps until she yelled at him in a way so annoying that it wasn't worth it to continue. That was when he won.

That game failed when she stopped getting upset. If he gave her a string of words starting with B, she didn't acknowledge it. If he sprayed words that he'd added a B to the front of, she translated them in her head and replied as if his modifications didn't exist. No matter what he did, she adapted. He started doubting his ability to compete. Then one day, there was a breakthrough which led to his greatest weapon in this war. It was a powerful method which he discovered through sheer trial, error and luck.

Whenever Avery's stream of consciousness threatened to topple his sanity, he rolled down her window. She liked to put her hand out and bend her fingers so the wind would push her hand up, then down. Up, then down. It was surprising how effective a tranquilizing agent this proved to be. It wasn't fool-proof but it worked more often than not. For some reason, she stopped talking when she was doing the hand-in-the-wind-thing. There was power in this technique; he'd found her Achilles' Heel. When the abuse of power threatened to make him feel guilty, he reminded himself this was about his survival. Besides, it wasn't like he was attacking her. It was more like he was standing motionless before a T-Rex, using the beast's natural weaknesses against it.

That also ended in failure. One time, instead of lowering both of their windows at the same time to mask his intent, he pushed only the button for her window. That's when she put it all together. She accused him of manipulating her and he denied it. They both knew the truth. Still, his cunning must have earned her respect because, after that, she eased off the verbal torture. Perhaps she saw the amount of thought he put into shutting her up and it awoke the empathy sleeping in her heart.

In the end, they developed a system based on the spirit of compromise. If she asked him a question and he didn't respond, it meant he agreed with her. It didn't have to be a "yes" or "no" question, per se. They both understood his silence indicated agreement with the idea *behind* what she was saying. It was a good system and it was working great now. "It doesn't even seem like it's still real. Of course it is, but, honestly, do you feel like a cloud of poison is gonna slam down on us out here?" Translation: she couldn't imagine the creep existing in this beautiful place. He agreed so he didn't have to reply.

Divergences in opinion were easy to spot. They jumped out from the stream of noise like salmon. Strange how rarely this happened. It was a welcome and unexpected nuance of their interaction, a pleasant reminder they agreed about many things. That being the case, he was free to let his mind wander without worrying he might miss something critical and that was very good for both of them because they had a lot to think about. As peaceful as truck life had turned out to be, it couldn't continue much longer. His lower back hurt all the time and Avery was seven months pregnant, for crying out loud. Day by day, her tummy was growing larger. Margot was already proving her talent for getting their attention. Her best trick was putting pressure on Avery's bladder; they were constantly stopping for pee breaks. Oh well, one more reason to stop and smell the roses. At this particular moment, however, Chase was the one who needed to stop. "I really need to pee," he repeated.

"Not yet, I can feel a good spot coming up." Avery smirked, knowing how easy it would be to pull over for a second and let Chase go on the side of the road. She liked to make power plays like that. That's okay. Chase had caught on to her little games. He knew she liked to make him wait so he'd learned to exaggerate his need. That way, when he *really* needed to pee, she'd already believe she'd punished him long enough. Unfortunately, in this instance he'd mistimed and she was winning again. He turned his face to the wind to keep his mind off it. His eyes closed and he ran his tongue over the two healed bumps inside his lip. He almost thought about how they'd gotten there but the wind pushed all that away. That memory wasn't allowed here. "Do you still need to pee?"

He didn't fall for her trap. Number one: of course he still needed to. He hadn't yet and she knew it. Number two: if he said he still needed to, she might continue her power play and he'd end up waiting even longer. He wouldn't commit to her twisted head game. It was better to hang his head out the win-

dow and look sleepy or entranced by nature. There was a chance she'd consider that a good enough excuse for not answering her question. If he moved his head forward gradually enough, before she looked over at him, he might get away with it. Thankfully, the sound of the wind changed pitch when a guardrail appeared next to them. Avery glanced at it, giving Chase time to fully assume his distracted, dozey pose. He half-shut his eyes to complete the ruse. Perfect.

They were winding their way around a large hill. It smelled like trees. During their three weeks in the truck, Chase had become a great smeller. He could identify a hundred subtle differences between the scent of asphalt and the smell of gravel dirt road. It was easy to say which he preferred and they were definitely close to a fine-smelling dirt road. He also smelled that they were near a body of water, though that information came in more like a taste than a smell. Some kind of river or stream. Now, he really needed to pee.

Avery squeezed the brakes and veered off the road. "There," she said. "See, there's even a hiding spot." He had to hand it to her: it was the perfect place to pull over. A natural cul-de-sac peeled off into a shaded grove. They'd gotten good at spotting quaint little alcoves to take a break but Avery's talent for finding them was unmatched. The forest absorbed hydraulic squeaks while the truck bounced lopsidedly over tree roots. Noisy bumpiness became the silent, smooth rolling which marked their arrival in the grove. She put the truck into park. "You're free to pee," she announced. It was music to his ears. All that bumping over the roots accelerated his timetable. Things were getting urgent down there.

Chase ambled to the front of the truck, scanning for the lucky tree. The canopy sparkled with dots of penetrating sunlight. Insects buzzed warmth into the air. It was one of those idyllic scenes he'd started taking for granted. Out here, everything was beautiful. The edge of the tiny wooded cul-de-sac birthed a small dirt path. As all dirt paths in the countryside did, this one beckoned them to walk it. They curved through the trees and found themselves in a shaded vista on a hilltop. Chase left Avery's side and found his spot. He was about to let loose when she hissed at him.

"Chase!" He turned and saw her pointing. "Not there!" she chided. He followed the invisible line of her pointing finger and was thankful her eyes were keen enough to spot what he'd missed. Behind him were two graves, though they barely qualified as such. The two wooden crosses were so crudely con-

structed Chase thought he'd stumbled into a pet cemetery. After further inspection, it seemed unlikely. Edgar and Elizabeth Jones were unconventional pet names. The graves hadn't been dug to the standard depth of six feet and the two barely visible, elongated, grass-covered bumps in front of the crosses were people-length.

Chase's dropped to his knees like a ninja and scanned the area. The person who buried Edgar and Elizabeth may be lurking in the forest, ready to add to the collection. "What are you doing?" Avery asked. He looked at her goofily from his stealth crouch, the feeling that he needed to pee now joined by embarrassment. It was a good question. One glance around the peaceful grove exposed his cautionary maneuvers for the overly dramatic theatrics they were. The coast was clear. It was a gorgeous, sunny day and there was no one in sight but Avery.

"Better safe than sorry," he grumbled, passing her to find a tree on the other side of the woods. When he was done, he joined her where she sat, cross-legged on the ground by the graves. The site raised a lot of questions. What kind of person buried these two in shallow graves with such piddly crosses? What would their last days have been like? What would it be like to die during these crazy times? Whatever the answers were, the Joneses couldn't share them. Here, before them, were two people who represented the end of the most recent chapter in human history. They were gone and they took everything that came before with them. Chase and Avery sat on the grass while the insects buzzed.

After they kept the Joneses company for a while, they walked to the edge of the grove where a break in the trees afforded them a view of the countryside below. This time, the beauty was impossible to take for granted. An endless expanse of green stretched to the horizon, bisected by a shimmering stream and one other interruption: a small farm. The scope and splendor was staggering. "Wow," Avery whispered. Clouds cast massive shadows on the landscape and they mozied lazily across the emerald field. It was a place frozen in time which would remain this way until dark and reclaim its majesty in the morning. After weeks of running from an invisible terror sweeping the globe, it was surreal to find a place as untroubled and whole as this. The sight held them hypnotized for ten minutes which felt like an hour.

There wasn't a need to voice what they both felt. The view from the hilltop instantly vanquished the charm of the open road. They walked back to the

truck, then drove down through the grove. Thin branches smacked, then slid off the windshield. The truck peeked out from the forest. Chase held his foot on the brake as they rolled down the hillside, curious to see what promise the luminous green expanse was hiding. Grass yielded to rubber as they glided across the field, ever approaching the farm until the drive was done. With a sense of adventurous expectancy, Chase turned the key. The engine fell silent and a quizzical knowing settled on him: the truck's job was nearly complete.

The farmhouse was a simple, one story affair but it held gravitas. It exuded a certain rustic charm of times long before electromagnetic signals drenched the air and the earth. A large tree shaded the left side of the house. A rope-swing hung from its largest branch; two thin ropes met opposite ends of a wooden board which dangled over a yellow soccer ball. Rain marks and leaves spotted a glass table next to a faded, outdoor couch. A red triangle was splashed on the white panel siding of the house. The triangle camouflaged a healthy tomato plant growing from the soil in front of it.

They ventured from the shadow of the tree into the back yard. The endless blanket of green which brought them here stretched for a hundred thousand yards. The distance consumed them. Chase imagined playing fetch with a dog out there. A waist-high, wooden fence squared off the backyard. One side of the fence was indistinguishable from the other if not for the tree on the far side. Three branches extended from the slender trunk of a young oak. As young, pale and fragile as the tree looked, Chase was surprised by the height of it. It was at least twelve or thirteen feet. Next to the oak tree, a stone cylinder rose from the ground. Beyond that, a bright green pond sat beside a tiny shack.

As soon as Chase saw the stone cylinder, he rushed over to check it out. It couldn't be. Could it? "A water well!" he said. There was a bucket and everything.

Avery lifted an eyebrow at him. "What's so great about that? I bet that water's dirty."

Chase was too excited about the well to let her pre-dirty the water. "Only one way to find out!" he said, pulling the bucket up. The weight confirmed there was water in it. He looked over his shoulder, hoping no one would see him stealing their water but it was a half-hearted look. There was a feel to this place. The property didn't look well-cared for and he had the growing suspicion

Edgar and Elizabeth Jones were the previous tenants. When the wooden bucket came up looking mostly free of dirt and debris, Chase drank.

Avery wrinkled her nose. "Well?"

It was the best water he ever tasted but he grimaced and pretended otherwise to get her back for assuming the worst. "Gross. Better make sure I don't go blind before you start drinking it."

"That's what I was thinking," she said. He lowered the bucket until wood slapped water. After that, there was only one place left to explore. They faced the farmhouse, knowing what came next, nervous to proceed. He didn't know who moved first but, together, they put one foot in front of the other. Then they stood at the threshold, feeling the weight of the moment. They only one step left: the most important step. They took it. After all, the door was open.



AFTER ONE LOOK, CHASE knew there was no abider in this abode. The place had that abandoned feeling. The walls had long released the last sounds they'd absorbed. The air hung in the space, as still as a kid playing freeze tag. There was a whole lot of dust. Chase sneezed. They started in a dusty truck and now they were in a dusty house.

The front door opened directly to the living room where windows on every wall brightened the dingy on the cream-colored carpet. An armchair, a couch and a bookshelf filled with jigsaw puzzles occupied the space to their right. To their left, the corner hugged a dinner table which was snuggled up to an L-shaped bench. You could have six people eating dinner at that table. Beyond the table, the carpet stretched to the modest kitchen which marked the edge of the house. No amount of natural sunlight would beautify the edge of that carpet; it was mega-dingy where it met kitchen tile.

A short hallway in the back of the living room led to the rest of the house. The first door was on the left; it was a bathroom which looked clean but smelled like pee. Chase flicked the light switch a few times with no result. There were three more rooms at the end of the hallway. A brown, dust-covered crib presided over a scattering of baby toys in the room on the right. No electricity in there either. The room on the left was a playroom. A thin rope attached to the pull-down attic door hung in the middle of the space. Toddler toys decorat-

ed the floor at the foot of a rocking chair. Whenever Chase saw a rocking chair, he imagined a ghostly figure rocking in it. This time, the figure was an old lady, too old to be breastfeeding the imaginary child in her arms. Chase shook the image from his head. Gross.

The middle room was the master bedroom. It was master in name only, no bigger or smaller than the other two rooms. A double bed, laundry hamper and writing desk were the only furnishings. A photograph of a middle-aged couple sat on the desk and, with no way of validating his certainty, Chase knew it was a picture of Edgar and Elizabeth Jones. Of all the mysterious, nuanced intuitions he felt that day, that was the strongest. "The baby was the center of their world," Avery said, startling the shit out of him. "See how the nursery is on the right of the bedroom and the playroom is on the left."

"Good thing you got that psychology degree," he said, earning him a slap on the back.

"This is nice," she whispered.

Chase bounced his head in agreement. It wasn't nice, but it was nice for them. They stood in the nexus of the hallway, looking into the three rooms but unprepared to venture in. Most of their attention fell on the crib. Under the layer of dust, it looked like a good one. It wasn't hard to whip up a few daydreams while they stood there looking at the crib, the playroom and the bed for two. Avery took his hand. She led him back through the hallway into the living room. It was the second time they left a dark hallway together in the last month. The living room looked massive from this angle and all the empty space reminded Chase of his empty stomach. It was time to take a closer look at the kitchen.

The entire back wall supported the countertop and a bevy of cabinets. The colorful collection of kitchen items exuded utility and thoughtful selection. The large sink matched the large window above it. They opened every cabinet like they were stealing all the chocolate from an advent calendar. Their worst fears were realized. There was nothing to eat. There was actually nothing. No sugar, no condiments, no flour. In Chase's mind, a tiny red flag popped up. What were the chances the Joneses ate the last spoonful of flour on the exact day they died? Somebody must have been in here to take the food; the implications were alarming but, for some reason, Chase just wasn't that worried about

it. It was more of a tiny yellow flag. "Oh well," he laughed. "You know what that means." It was time to open a brand new bag of peanuts.

Outside, the sun doused him with rays, cleansing nooks in his mind he hadn't noticed dirty. His feet slid along the grass and he reveled in the moment of being a man in the country, walking to his truck. He opened the door and grabbed the penultimate, fully wrapped bag of peanuts from behind the passenger's seat and took a deep breath. That was definitely Edgar and Elizabeth's picture in the bedroom. This was big. Bag of peanuts under his arm, he shut the truck door and swore he heard a short, melodic tune. It was some musical marker, like in a video game, signifying he'd completed an important task. He scanned the landscape for the source of the sound but his eyes couldn't get past the incredible bright green reflection of the pond beyond the fence.

Inside, the bag of peanuts took up nearly half the dinner table. He struggled with the plastic until Avery got impatient and shooed him off. The L-shaped bench called his name. He sat, realizing how tired he was. After a short, ego-driven struggle with the wrapping, Avery ripped the plastic with too much force and a handful of peanuts exploded onto the table. She sat next to him. He felt the warmth of her thigh against his leg while they ate and Chase admired the cargo she carried. He hoped Margot didn't look too much like a peanut. They cracked shells and chewed and looked around. Except for that one line of gross, moldy carpet next to the kitchen floor, everything looked dusty and perfect.

When Avery had her fill of peanuts, she went to the kitchen sink and stood before the great window, gazing into the backyard. Chase gathered her randomly discarded shells into his neatly built pile. He got a lucky, four-peanut shell and decided he was finished with the peanuts, too. He put the final shell in his pile, then scattered them all with a wave of his hand. It was time to join her at the window.

Once more, Chase was floored by the endless ocean of grass upon which floated a distant shed and a baby oak tree. From this vantage point, they were truly sunk in it. The yard put Chase's mind on pause. As he traced the meandering shadows across the field, Chase had the notion he'd be able to read the mind of the earth if he studied the patterns long enough. "Wow," Avery whispered. "It must be nice to wash dishes at this sink." They stood, arms around each others' waists, looking out of the window for a moment which held its beauty longer than most. When Avery said she was tired, Chase knew exactly what she meant.

They had run a long time without knowing where they were going. Now, they knew. They couldn't run forever. If they were going to die, at least they'd die in a beautiful place. Before they walked away from the sink, they wordlessly agreed to a contract they signed in silence. They were going to stay here, buried safely in the rolling forgetfulness of good, old-fashioned countryside.

That night, the sun set on the end of their first life. Without electricity to keep the shadows at bay, it was obvious when bedtime arrived. They found clean sheets and pillowcases in the bedroom closet. They stripped the old bedding and put the new sheets on by feeling, sensing the motion of the other in the darkness across the bed. The mattress was comfort beyond description. Chase's wakefulness dissolved the moment his head touched the cool pillow. That night, they dreamed vividly of things they'd forgotten in the morning.



WHEN CHASE AWOKE, HE didn't know where or who he was. It was an abstract moment of pure, unadorned awareness he was loath to interrupt by digging for answers in the invisible space between his eyes. Alas, the details poured in unprompted and he was himself again.

His first morning trip to the bathroom got him wondering what he should do with his day. The bathroom held an answer; he needed to clean the bathroom. As luck would have it, there were paper towels and multipurpose cleaner in the cabinet below the bathroom sink. Soon, the smell of dried pee was replaced by heady, artificial citrus. When he finished cleaning the bathroom, he moved on to the rest of the house. He drifted room to room, blasting drops of dust and citrus into the air for the better part of an hour. The dust came off thick and his pile of discarded paper towels grew and grew. After that, he tossed couch pillows into couch corners and wondered what to do next. Avery was still asleep so he might as well continue his janitorial pursuits. He started by tidying up the playroom where he found the closet stacked with jigsaw puzzles. Chase sighed. More puzzles? He didn't know what he'd been hoping for but it was kind of a letdown. The closet in the nursery was better. He found a large stash of diapers, both cloth and disposable. Most importantly, there was a vacuum cleaner. It was a curious addition to a house without electricity. The implication was promising.

When he finished in the nursery, Avery staggered into the hallway with a crooked smile on her face, half-closed eyes and bed head which defied traditional geometry. "You making orange juice?" she asked.

"Yeah, want some?" He held the cleaning spray up to her like a gun. "Freeze." She went into the bathroom and Chase seized the opportunity he'd been waiting for. He dusted and tidied their bedroom and then all the dusting and tidying was complete. Now what to do?

He went to the well and filled an empty jug from the truck. As the jug grew fuller, Chase was pleased by the relatively small amount of brown things floating in it. When he was done with the water, he was hungry and determined to have a breakfast that wasn't peanuts. As a hail-mary pass, he opened the kitchen cabinets to see if they'd missed anything the day before.

His heart jumped into his throat. There, in the corner of the lowest cabinet, was a basket of eggs. No way those eggs were there yesterday. How did this happen? There was only one explanation: they must have overlooked them before. It was impossible but his stomach squelched all misgivings about the beautiful basket. "Eggs!" he yelled.

"What?" she called from the bathroom.

"We have eggs!" He rushed to the bathroom door with the basket, realizing when he got there it was always a strange vibe to be standing next to the bathroom when a person came out. Avery's egg-lust destroyed any hint of awkwardness.

"Where'd they come from?" she asked.

"They were in the cabinet! We must have missed them yesterday." They looked at the eggs like a pair of children staring at leprechaun gold. "Let's eat outside," he said.

Soon, Avery sat on the outdoor couch with a glass of water she'd poured from the last full jug in the truck. "The well water has brown flakes in it," she said.

"Not a lot," he responded.

"I don't want to drink flakes."

"We'll filter it."

Avery kept talking about the flakes. Chase nodded his head while he scrubbed the grill. He sort of heard what she was saying but he was about to eat some damn eggs. When the grill was ready, he found a couple pieces of wood

and some kindling at the base of the rope-swing tree and got a fire going with ease. Thanks to Dan, they had enough lighters to start a fire every meal for the rest of their lives.

The smell of the eggs got them buzzing with excitement and Avery stopped talking about the dirt in the well water. In a flash of inspiration, Chase plucked a tomato from the plant growing by the house. Two eggs, a tomato and well water constituted the absolute best breakfast he'd ever had. After that, they sat on the couch and watched the sun arch through the sky. They played on the rope swing, kicked the soccer ball and chatted about the house. They hung out under the little oak tree. They walked along the fence until they found a small gate in it, latched with a metal hook. They passed through the fence and it was time to check out the unusually green pond and the tiny shack. They meandered around the pond, perplexed by what sort of process was happening within. It was coated in a scumminess that glowed green nearly to the point of fluorescence. It was so green it didn't look real. When they reached the other side of the pond, they found the final feature of the property: a young boy.

He blended so well with the scenery that neither noticed him until they were nearly upon him. Chase first perceived the boy as a collection of shapes and colors animated by subtle movement. When his brain finally assembled the components to present the reality of a boy squatting next to the pond, it gave him a shock. The boy glanced up, casually looked Chase and Avery over, then returned to his activity. He dipped something into the scummy pond water, then poured what he'd collected into a test tube.

"Uhh," Chase stammered.

"Uhh," the boy repeated. He held the test tube up to his face, then poured a bit of green stuff from the tube back into his dipping receptacle.

"Do you mind if we come over?" Chase asked.

The boy stopped his test tube measuring, then met Chase eye-to-eye for the first time. "If it makes you feel better," he said. Chase and Avery made their way over to the young man, who Chase guessed to be about ten years old. There was an enervate slightness in his frail form that made Chase tired just to look at him. Brown hair capped brown eyes which gleamed with a mysterious radiance; a radiance that shouldn't be there considering the state of his malnourished body. There was something else in there, too. Chase saw a long history

written in them. It was unsettling seeing those eyes inside the head of such a young man. "Nice truck," he said.

"Uh, thanks," Chase stammered. "My boss gave it to me." The boy had dark green flecks all over his teeth and lips. He'd been eating pond scum.

"Don't get many strangers in these parts," the boy said in a comically exaggerated farm boy accent. He placed his tube in a tray on the ground and stood, patting his hands clean on his jeans. His movements were slow, deliberate and intentional. His demeanor impressed upon Chase that the boy was thoughtfully funny but sly enough for plausible deniability. He was definitely the one who put the eggs in the cabinet.

"We're from Minneapolis."

The kid looked into the distance beyond them like he knew exactly which direction Minneapolis was. "Trying to outrun it, then?"

Chase was distracted. It was hard to get past that green-flecked smile. "Do you think we can?" Avery asked.

The boy considered the question, rolling his eyes upward and turning to look at the other side of the sky. "Nah." His tone left much implied but Chase couldn't say what. The boy pointed at his tray. "Cyanobacteria in the algae helps it regulate its altitude in the pond. I test it every week to ensure the balance." He wiped his face and, thankfully, cleaned his teeth with his tongue. "Algae's got all the essential components for life. That's why the astronauts eat it." Chase nodded and glanced at Avery. Her eyebrows were riding high.

Without any prompting, the young algae-eater launched into a speech. It injected some vitality into him and some of the sallowness drained from his face. "This is the East Campus. This algae pond is the heart of the farm right now. Algae has more benefits than most people realize. You can eat it but you can use it for fertilizer, too. Even make fuel." The boy poked a thumb over his shoulder to some machinery behind him. "I'm planning to run those generators from algae biofuel as soon as I figure it out. With any luck, I can turn this pond into the first node in a network which extends around the farm and even out to the neighbors. Each node in an algae pond network provides mutually beneficial input and output." Chase took a long look at the developing algae node. It looked terrible. There was junk everywhere and snack wrappers littered the ground. There were a few pieces of rusty machinery and they all looked broken. Chase would be surprised if this place had any function whatsoever. The

boy frowned, then grabbed a plastic bottle filled with pond scum from his back pocket. He held it out to Avery. "It's really good for you and especially your baby," he said.

"No, thank you," Avery said with a smile as polite as she could muster.

He frowned and drank and the green stuff was all over his teeth again. "Somebody needs to set an example, you know. Make a template that others can copy so we can make it through the tough times ahead." Chase tried to imagine what those tough times entailed. He wondered what the boy thought they entailed. The kid jammed the plastic bottle back in his pocket and waved at the land beyond his little pond-shack. "We've got a bit of livestock left. Chickens. We need to take care of the ones we have but I don't plan on getting any more. It's not sustainable. You know microalgae require less than 2.5 square meters of land per kilogram of protein produced." He paused, letting that sink in. "You know how many square meters you need for a kilogram of beef?"

"No, I sure don't."

"144,258 square meters per kilogram of protein. Let's take a look at my tree." Avery's eyebrows rose higher. The boy trudged around them and they followed, recognizing they were being led on a tour. It was a feeling familiar, unexpected and good like a piece of their old life had suddenly been unearthed. He walked them to the small tree in the middle of the yard and cradled one of the leaves in his fingers. "This little oak tree has so many leaves. If you added up all the leaves you can see, just right here in this little bit of space, the total surface area is about the size of a tennis court."

"Hmm," Chase said in genuine amazement. They stood under the tree, looking up at all that surface area. It was a small tree but Chase didn't doubt their young guide's figures. Nature was often efficient like that.

Avery got bored with the tree. "I'm Avery," she said. "This is Chase." She gestured to her abdomen. "This is Margot."

"Margot. Nice name," the boy said, taking another swig of crud.

"Thank you," Avery said sweetly.

The boy turned his attention to the house and raised his finger in the air. He was about to say something but Chase interrupted him. "What's your name?"

The kid held his point in the air. His eyes drifted toward Chase in a way that expressed agitation about being interrupted but also said he wouldn't voice it.

"Name's Jimmy." The farm accent was thick. It was hard to tell if he talked like that ironically or if he actually talked like that.

"Nice to meet you," said Chase.

Jimmy nodded and straightened his pointing finger. "So that's the next step, after the algae fuel. Figure out a way to make a solar panel farm, but with the panels arranged like tree leaves, I guess. Solar trees are better than traditional solar farms because they take up less space. To run everything, I'll need about two acres of solar panels." He pointed at the endless field. "I figure I'll put the solar panel forest over there and keep this land for crops and maybe a wind turbine. Not one of the big, noisy ones, though. Those can make you insane from the low frequency sound and they kill bats and birds."

"The birds get chopped up?" Avery asked.

"The wind from the turbine blows the lungs right out of them."

"Oh."

"You might be wondering why I need two acres of solar just to run the house. Well, it's not going to be just the house. I'm gonna build a school and invite people to come learn here. I wanna teach agriculture for sure and some other stuff like language programs. With any luck, some experimental science facilities would also be in the mix. I want to do research and responsible experimentation with new methods for sustainable farming, systematically trying unexplored options to see if anything new is accidentally learned through mistakes. That's happened so many times in history, you know."

"Yeah," Chase said. He guessed he did know that somewhere in there. He just didn't think of it much.

"But that's not my main jam," Jimmy said.

"Oh?"

"The school is secondary. First things first: get the algae pond network going."

"Oh."

"Integrated aquaculture systems. I've been living at the East Campus since it's the number one job." Jimmy smiled, green flecks everywhere. "I.A.S."

"You live out here by yourself?" Avery asked. Chase recalled the two wooden crosses at the shallow graves on the hill and it all made sense. Jimmy lived in the algae shack because he'd just buried his parents and it hurt to live in their

old house. Jimmy shared a glance with Chase which simultaneously confirmed and dismissed the realization which had just come to light.

"Thinking I might move back into the house soon, though. Why don't we go check it out?" Jimmy showed them around the house and everyone pretended Chase and Avery hadn't already toured it themselves. Jimmy told them the house got its electricity from a generator but the generator was broken. So that explained the vacuum cleaner. After the tour, they sat at the L-shaped bench and drank lukewarm well water while Jimmy drank algae sludge. There was an air of awkward confusion about what to do next. Jimmy's presence threw a wrench into Chase and Avery's plan to stay a while. They couldn't claim a deserted house if it wasn't deserted first.

"Thanks for the eggs," Avery said. "Thanks so much, really." Jimmy nodded slowly.

"Inevitably, you've got to face reality. The world is crumbling around us and you're trying to outrun a metatoxin which simply can't be outrun." It's not what Chase expected him to say. Jimmy let the moment breathe. His eyes moved in their deliberate, wandering way, moving over everything except for Chase and Avery. It's hard to tell how aware a ten-year-old is but Chase suspected Jimmy knew the full power of his gaze and rarely focused it directly on other people. Then, just for a second, he did float his attention across the two strangers who'd invaded his family home and slept in his dead parents' bed without permission before dusting without permission and using up all the paper towels.

"How's that stuff taste?" Chase finally asked, nodding at Jimmy's algae bottle. Jimmy passed the bottle over and Chase took a swig of warm, slimy moss-water. It slid down easy and the taste wasn't as bad as he expected. With a little salt or sugar, it might even be passable. Chase gave the bottle back. Jimmy didn't ask for Chase's opinion and Chase didn't offer it but something had happened between them.

Jimmy broke the silence. "You know, New Zealand was completely isolated from the rest of the world since it's an island and all. The only animals on it were the birds who flew there. Over time, the birds evolved in a bunch of different ways and occupied every niche in the ecosystem. They had small rodent kinds of birds and big grazing birds like cows and everything."

Chase couldn't tell if Jimmy was changing the topic to lighten the mood or if he was simply dodging the question which hung heavy in front of them. Or maybe he just liked New Zealand. "Cow birds, eh?" Chase asked.

"That's right. Big ones. But none as big as the Haast Eagle. The Haast Eagle was so big it used to snatch up the native people and eat them."

"What? You're making that up."

"No, I'm not. You can look it up. The Haast Eagle. A golden bird with a six foot wingspan, which was considered small for its body size. Just eating those aborigines right up. It was one of the first animals man had to drive to extinction to ensure his own survival, same as *Smilodon Fatalis*."

"*Smilodon*?"

"*Smilodon Fatalis*. Better known as the sabretooth tiger."

"Oh, of course."

There was another long pause. It almost felt like Jimmy was waiting for them to understand something hiding below the conversation. Finally, he gave them the answer. "Maybe you're here to occupy this ecosystem." So, Jimmy had been aware of the big question all along and chosen to answer it indirectly in the most diplomatic, interesting and informative way possible.

Avery jumped in for clarification. "So you don't mind if we stay here?"

Jimmy took a drink of algae and coated his teeth in slime. "If it makes you feel better."



SO THEY STAYED, NOW with expressed permission from the legal owner of the farm. Jimmy stayed in the East Campus algae shack so Chase and Avery could have some space; however, he was always hanging around the house with them. Their presence was no doubt a detriment to the ongoing development of integrated aquaculture systems but Chase supposed it did Jimmy a world of good to take a break and make new friends.

Besides, he'd been out to see the full extent of Jimmy's operation and it was even worse than his first assessment. The algae node was glued together with bubble gum and duct tape. It was the work of an obviously well-informed ten-year-old, but a ten-year-old just the same. It was a long way from sustainability and Chase shuddered to think what would have become of Jimmy if they'd nev-

er arrived. How long would he have lived his life of solitude with his parents buried on the hill and no one to talk to? Jimmy would've been alone until the end, clinging to his dreams of integrated aquaculture until he died of malnutrition. Chase would never tell him but it seemed like he and Avery had come just in time.

There were seven chickens in a coop behind the algae shack. Jimmy said that equaled five to seven eggs per day, plus they had the stockpile he'd amassed. They also had the tomatoes but there was only the one plant so the tomatoes went fast. Other than that, their only option was algae cakes. They were thick, flaky bars of green crumbly stuff that were almost palatable when sprinkled with some salt. They were a step up from the sludge milkshake Jimmy was drinking when they met but they weren't great.

Jimmy insisted the land was suitable for plenty of crops like radish, carrots and spinach; his family had success with potatoes before. Cucumbers were not out of the question, either. It would take some time to get those crops going, though, so mostly they ate algae cakes and occasionally had some eggs. Of course, they still had the last two bags of peanuts. Unlike Chase and Avery, Jimmy was thrilled to eat them and so they let him.

The best part was the well water. Jimmy showed them how to strain it through an algae filter. At first, Chase wondered if Jimmy was going overboard on the algae products but the filtered water was fantastic every time. Chase could never go back to anything else. No other water came close. With the generators in disrepair, it was always lukewarm but Jimmy promised them there was nothing better than well water with well water ice cubes.

For the first two days, they worked from sunup to sundown, scrubbing the hell out of the house. They spent a particularly long afternoon cleaning the edge of the living room carpet where its unholy marriage to the kitchen tile birthed a universe of grime. When they were done with the house, they helped Jimmy clean the algae shack. He'd stashed a plethora of helpful supplies in there with some books and a few more puzzles. They took the last barrel out of the truck and Chase finally got to clean the truck bed. His love of cleaning was growing by the day. Maybe he should have been a janitor or a maid instead of a government-certified-fuel-distributing-professional.

Soon, they needed more things to do. Thankfully, Jimmy had a list. They could take care of the yard, reroof the chicken coop and improve the algae-cake

bakery to include other algae-based food products. They learned how to bake the algae cakes even though there wasn't any real baking involved. It was mostly drying pond scum and pressing it into clay molds. Jimmy also wanted to give them a lesson about cyanobacteria and algae depth regulation.

A couple days later, the yard looked great, the chicken coop was reroofed, the algae cake factory was streamlined and Chase understood as much as he was likely to about cyanobacteria. Once he learned the theory behind integrated aquaculture, Chase thought it might actually work. With a little finesse and some luck, they might feasibly transform Jimmy's technical know-how into real success. It was a long way off, though. It was going to take a lot of skills and know-how they didn't have yet.

They needed another project. Jimmy insisted they could get a few solar panels connected to the farmhouse but Chase drug his feet on that project. He didn't know much about electrical engineering except it was potentially dangerous; furthermore, they wouldn't get much electricity out of the few solar panels Jimmy had. By the boy's own admission, there wouldn't be enough power to run the fridge or make ice. It seemed like a lot of work just to ration electricity for some night time reading light. Truth be told, Chase wasn't in any hurry to get the electricity back. He was starting to love his candle light and campfire lifestyle. The beginning and end of their work days were marked clearly by the sunrise and the sunset and Chase had never felt better.

Life settled into a weird equilibrium. During the day, they worked, kicked the soccer ball or hung out on the couch by the rope swing. In the evening, they often climbed a ladder on the side of the house where they sat in lawn chairs on the roof and watched the sunset. They also did puzzles. Lots and lots of puzzles. They did puzzles until their eyes were falling out.

Their existence was peaceful in a way Chase hadn't thought possible; however, it was forever overshadowed by the undeniable, unforgettable fact: the creep was still coming. After running for so long, it was easy to second-guess their decision to stay in one place. They were completely isolated on the farm so it was impossible to know what was going on out there. It was a scary proposition to sit idly by, just waiting for it. More than once, Chase discussed the idea of going farther north with Avery but she wasn't interested. She kept reminding him they made the choice to stay and the reasons were sound. Jimmy was right. The inevitable was approaching and it didn't matter how far they went. It didn't

make sense to bury their head in the sand when they had a perfectly livable life right in front of them. When the creep came, they'd face it together. If Chase thought about it too much, it stressed him out to no end. Of all people, pregnant Avery had the most to fear but she just didn't seem that worried about it. Instead, she was worried about other things. For some reason, the lack of internet struck more fear into her than the arrival of the particulate.

In some ways, there was a beautiful, natural harmony here. In other ways, it was boring Avery to death. Boredom and stress are a bad combination and Avery was very, very bored. As they completed more jobs around the farm, she got more and more agitated. It was as if peace and quiet were actually painful for her. What Chase had experienced in the truck was only her embryonic stage. Now that she was rested and powered by well water, her endless broadcast powered up to Super Saiyan levels. This time, Chase couldn't roll down her window so he endured. As much as Avery got under his skin with her brand of chit-chat, it was even worse for the young man of the house.

Jimmy had his own brand of talking, often deep and surprisingly detailed speculation about scientific stuff. It was a stark contrast to Avery's surface level musings. Speaking euphemistically, Jimmy and Avery's personalities didn't mesh well and they were often getting on each others' nerves. One of her favorite topics was Jimmy's shoes, ancient things which could hardly be called as such. "When are you going to get some new shoes?" she asked. Jimmy lifted his feet, poked his finger through the hole in his heel and frowned.

"Why do I have to wear shoes, anyway? It's all grass out there."

"It's not safe," she said. "Who knows what you'll step on?"

"Uh huh." His laconic reply pointed a shining arrow at his disinterest in continuing the discussion. Avery couldn't say anything. She wasn't his mother and she hardly had any right to tell him what to do with his feet. This was their trademark conversation type, probing and pushing each other's buttons in a half-hearted cold war of words which continued only because no one could remember who'd cast the first stone. For Chase, it was an amusing aspect of life on the farm; at times annoying, at times hilarious but mostly just amusing.

One time, they were on the roof watching a storm roll by in the distance. Avery was telling them her mother was a singer who covered all the classics and how, as a child, Avery thought her mom wrote all the famous songs she played.

It wasn't until she grew up that she found out her mom was singing songs written by world-famous musicians. Chase was into the story but Jimmy was not.

"Hey, Twenty-Four-Hour-News, can I please watch the sunset without the play-by-play?"

"Sorry," she said. "I'm just bored."

"Boredom's a modern creation that comes from romantic expectation," Jimmy said.

"Oh really? Where'd you pick up that little gem?" she asked.

"My dad says it," he answered.

Chase and Avery shared a look. That was the first time Jimmy mentioned his parents. Naturally, they were both curious but they walked on eggshells around the subject. If he didn't want to talk about it, they weren't going to bring it up.

"Well, my mom used to say 'Rhiannon rings like a bell through the night and wouldn't you love to love her' and I thought she wrote it," said Avery.

This incident diffused without further escalation. Their exchanges rarely escalated beyond mere jabbing; however, once such incident went far beyond jabbing. This time, the puzzle was a 3000-piece Angkor Wat and Jimmy was doing the talking. "So, in the 1990s, a guy named Dr. Leonard Horowitz with three Nobel laureates in advanced medicinal research said he thought the main purpose of DNA isn't protein synthesis like everyone thinks. He says, since only three percent of DNA cares about protein synthesis, the rest is mainly for electromagnetic energy reception and transmission, stuff like bioacoustics and bioelectric signaling."

"So?" Avery asked. She was smart in her own way but Jimmy was talking to the wrong person about this. Avery detested all talk of microscopic, unpractical things she couldn't apply directly to her life.

"All it takes is a little imagination to think maybe there's something we don't know. Maybe that junk DNA has a lot more potential than we think."

"Or maybe it's just junk."

"Like ninety-nine percent of the things you say," Jimmy spat, delivering his message with potency and finesse unexpected from a ten-year old. This was the first time Chase noticed how closely Jimmy guarded his ideology. His theories painted the world as a mysterious, sacred place. If anyone trespassed on this magical worldview, he protected it with force. Despite his unique maturity,

Jimmy was still a child; however, insults hurled by a child may still find their target. As an adult, Avery would not engage Jimmy at his level but she also would not let the disrespect go unanswered.

"Don't get mad at me," she said. "I'm just saying maybe the junk DNA is actually just junk. You want it to be something else but maybe we don't all believe that."

Jimmy ignored her and pressed his attack. He viewed these discussions not as fertile ground for mutual understanding, but a vicious battle to be fought and won succinctly by inflicting as much emotional damage on his opponent as possible. "Hey Avery, why don't you take a break from constantly talking about everything unimportant and complaining about not having a TV? We're not going to have a TV or internet any time soon, okay? It sucks for everyone but it's making it so much worse that you won't stop talking about it." The deviously insightful utterance locked Chase's mouth shut. Avery put down another joyless puzzle piece and expected the lecture to be over. It wasn't. "Hi, I'm autopilot Avery. I talk and talk because I can't stand the sound of silence because I hate what I say to myself when I actually listen. I am so annoying because I have zero presence. I have a routine I'm comfortable with so I don't have to try any more. Thanks for flying with autopilot Avery. Sorry you didn't die from the useless things flying out of my mouth like machine gun bullets."

"Hey, that's not nice," she said. Now Chase and Avery really expected that to be the end of it but Jimmy was unhinged. The salvos kept coming, each more vicious than the last.

"I ask questions I would know the answer to already if I just put in a tiny bit of effort. 'What are you doing?' 'What are you doing?' 'What are you doing?' I wouldn't mind telling you if it wasn't so easy to see already. I'm staring at the grass, if you couldn't tell. 'What are you doing?' Do I have to tell you I'm reading a book? Is the reason you can't tell I'm reading because you never read one before?"

"Stop it, Jimmy," Avery warned.

"Oh my god, the sky is gonna fall. I don't have nail polish. I don't have TV. I don't have internet. Why can't I charge my phone? Do you ever say anything of value or substance? After all this time listening to you go on and on, I still don't know anything real about you because you're stunted. It's surprising that someone so good at talking sucks so bad at expressing their emotions."

They both looked at Chase, who thought of the only thing he remembered from high school Physics: the cat in the box. Is it alive? Is it dead? The theory says that if you never look, you never know so, technically, the cat is never either. He felt like both the cat and the person who was looking at the cat. He was dead in any way that he responded so maybe he should say nothing. Of course, that was no real solution so the best solution would certainly be to have never looked at this situation at all.

He didn't say anything and so Avery finally took the bait. She engaged Jimmy in battle, relying on her most famous ammunition. "You know why I'm worried? I'm worried that you're running around with no shoes on and you're gonna cut your toe off on glass and I'm gonna be the one who has to sew it back on!"

"No, I won't. I look where I'm going. I'm thoughtful, unlike some people who just ramble on about whatever they please. You're maudlin and mawkish. You know what that means? I'm sure you don't." She didn't know what maudlin or mawkish meant but she knew enough by the way he said it. He'd called her dumb and proved it in the same breath. He knew exactly what to say to hurt her feelings.

"Apologize for that," Avery demanded. Jimmy kept his silence, goading her to fall into the trap he'd set for her ego. Avery refused to diffuse her anger into the air. Instead, she wielded it with her tongue and returned fire with the refined technique of an adult. "Hi, I'm Jimmy and I eat algae and pretend that I can live sustainably on a farm that's falling apart."

The statement rolled off Jimmy's back and he delivered the killing blow without missing a beat. "Hi, I'm Avery and I have a ton of emotional damage I haven't dealt with and my boyfriend doesn't love me and it's not hard to see why because he's thoughtful and compassionate and I'm a mindless automaton, animated by all the awful habits that messed up the world in the first place. I never did anything with my life but complain and one day my looks are going to fade and I'm going to hate myself."

Chase balked at the cruelty. "That was uncalled for," he said. He was too late. Avery turned her head, refusing to let Jimmy see the tear he'd put in her eye.

"Just shut the hell up, Jimmy," she said to the wall.

"That was really uncalled for," Chase repeated.

Jimmy ate a peanut and flicked the shell on the table. "Maybe we don't all believe that." The shell skittered to rest on the middle of the puzzle and the room got quiet. A painful moment passed before Jimmy walked off.

"He's just a kid," Chase said.

"He's an asshole," she rubbed her eye. "What an asshole."

"I do love you," Chase said, putting a hand on her shoulder that needn't be put there if he were sure. Avery blinked and the heavy tear fell from the lilac.



AFTER THE STORMY NIGHT, morning brought a lovely sunrise. As usual, Chase was the first one up. He liked to spend these early moments of quiet solitude tidying up or doing some exercise so that's what he did. On the outside, it looked like a regular morning but, inside, there was a new wrinkle. Jimmy's criticisms of Avery the night before planted a seed that was sprouting today.

Chase looked out the kitchen window and thought about the patterns of his daily life. How much of that was autopilot? These days, he was learning a lot about how to live on the farm and he felt very thoughtful. Back in the old days in Minneapolis though, he wasn't so sure. If he added the sum of his typical actions in a given day back then, it was difficult to spot anything he wouldn't classify as thoughtless. He certainly had thoughts, but rarely were they related to what he was doing. Instead, one habit bled into the next without much deviation. Chase had to admit he hadn't been doing much creative or critical thinking about anything back in those days.

Today, he'd do something different, something random just to prove that he wasn't guilty of flying autopilot on Chase Air. He found he'd already wandered out to the rope swing so the most random thing he could do would be to swing on it. In an act of open defiance to his thoughtless daily routine, he hoisted himself into a standing position on the wooden plank. So it was to be extra random: stand-up style swinging instead of sit-down. He gripped rough, hardened and prickly parts of the rope that had never been touched and realized he was likely the tallest person to ever stand-up swing on this tree swing. Score one for novelty.

He rocked his hips, swinging gloriously back and forth and reaching the dangerous heights at treacherous angles only an adult stand-up swinging on a

child's rope swing can reach. Each thrilling, pendulous arch was overshadowed by the persistent, nagging worry the rope would snap. The last thing he wanted was to fall and break an arm or reopen his face holes. Still, he had to prove to Jimmy and to himself he was capable of free thought and creative action; thus, he held the itchy rope, reveling in the danger and clinging to the possibility his worst fears may not come true.

You don't think she has enough substance. I can tell. She does. You just can't see it because you're lacking or you're angry or you're scared or something like that.

He opened himself up to honest consideration of the issue. When he met Avery, she was an undergraduate who often stayed up all night, pulling her hair into weird shapes by the light of her computer while chowing Adderall to write a paper she would slip under the wrong professor's door the next day. It never mattered. She knew how to get what she wanted with her feminine wiles and weaponized her sexuality fiercely in those days. All fingernails and fragile legs, she was the picture of elegant, scrawny beauty and there wasn't a professor alive who didn't accept her late assignment when she went to their office and batted her big eyes, which had been brown at the time. Then she'd turned that charm on Chase, offered it to him willingly and he'd felt special for having earned it.

He had to admit the feeling had changed. The new-car smell was gone and their relationship felt like a challenge and sometimes it felt wrong. He was so easily annoyed with her and she with him. Something had gone. He often felt he should have broken up with her as soon as he felt that something go. Deep down, he'd always known they weren't compatible. He felt stupid for letting it go on so long because he hadn't the courage to back out and now it was too late. Was Margot to be a Band-Aid to hold them together by distracting them from their problems? He was excited to be a father but also disappointed with how it came about. That messed him up. How could he raise a child with Avery if they didn't love each other?

Won't be long before it falls apart.

At last, he stopped rocking his hips and let the swing come to rest. It was too much to think about right now. He felt out of breath so he sat on the swing and surrendered his thoughts to his backyard, dimly aware of a pulsing ache, deep in his head where his ear met his jaw. He was bored again. He'd go exploring.

Until now, the mess of the attic had kept him away from it. Now that he was a cleaning expert, he was ready. He pulled the rope in the playroom and the attic door yawned open. Chase landed the ladder gently on the floor, then climbed. At this time of day, it was a beautiful place which shone in a bright gray aura of natural light. Dust circled lazily in the sunbeams above an entire ecosystem of boxes. This would be a challenge, even for the most experienced cleaner. Chase rolled up his sleeves and got to work, putting things in piles and organizing the piles. He found a distinctly attic-like assortment of random items but it was mostly books. There were heaps of nonfiction and scientific journals heavily favoring the topics of Neuroscience and Biology.

Chase poked through the boxes, hoping to find something lighter than the science reports but was coming up empty. He was about to give up when he found the journals at the bottom of the fourth box. They were the speckled black and white, stationery store journals he'd seen a million times. The title on each was the same: "The Journal of Edgar Jones." There were four of them, numbered accordingly.

Chase touched the hard face of the first volume, feeling how the heavy pen strokes on every page had distorted the shape of it. He opened it and his bicep twitched, an errant muscle spasm probably due to his session on the rope swing. He was not surprised to find the book resembled the technical manuals and nonfiction books surrounding him. Absent were the records of daily life, reflection on personal problems and other traditional journal fare. Instead, endless paragraphs flavored with religious terminology reflected a man searching for answers. The margins were full of notes and citations. Coherent passages were few. Edgar wrote in first person and frequently referenced a nebulous "they."

"Their instincts were telling them to do one thing but outside pressures convinced them to do otherwise. Over time, their instincts were heeded less and less until they were given no notice at all."

Some entries pointed an accusatory finger at society, blaming it for crimes Chase felt were not evidenced enough for a conviction.

"Our culture has blinded us with the illusion of time. The present is but a miniscule hairline fracture between a regretful past and a crushing future, so important it is to be feared. We are bereft of a true present."

Edgar liked to write about time and Chase spotted many references to an experiment which he could not glean the specifics of. He'd never heard of Spinnaker Loops before. One passage lay conspicuously below a fair illustration of an apple tree.

"Would creatures lacking dual brain sentience perceive all sensory input as one unified sense? In a state of synesthesia, without the capacity for retrospection or introspection, time would not cease to exist, but how could it be perceived or cataloged? There's no other time than this. The past and future are abstractions. Yesterday exists. Tomorrow never comes."

"Tomorrow never comes," Chase repeated. "Hmm." It was the kind of comforting self-talk one does when they feel out of their league and pretend to understand. However, something strange happened as he read. Even if the specifics sounded unnecessarily accusatory and brainy, certain themes shone through. Chase felt like an astronomer trying to locate an invisible blackhole by studying everything around it. He flipped through the first two volumes at a steady pace, lingering on the illustrations. By the time he got to the third volume, he was having fun trying to figure out what was going on in Edgar's mind.

The fourth volume destroyed the fun. The handwriting was the same but large segments were the voice of a different person. The words here were hastily scrawled and devoid of the numerous strikethroughs and margin notes featured in the previous volumes. Lengthy segments of volume four were clearly written in one sitting. The pages possessed a certain hypnotic quality, laden with mysterious phrases which hinted at possibilities both terrible and sociopathic. They were unnerving and ambiguous enough that Chase disintegrated into a pile of discomfort. His awareness of the attic diminished, then returned all at once. Suddenly, it was a scary place. It was beautiful outside and somehow horrifying in here. At one point, Chase felt another person cohabitating the space with him. He kept looking around, expecting to see something watching over him

until the pages drew him in completely. His eyes hurt. He wanted to stop reading but couldn't look away. He was in a waking dream with no control of his actions. The edges of the blackhole became clearer and clearer, threatening to reveal a truth Chase was sure he did not want to see. He felt his mind was getting sucked out through his eyes.

Then, a figure was before him, shadowed and opaque. Chase's soul tried to escape his body in fear of the thing conjured by the sheer perversity of his reading. "We gonna do the solar panels today?" it asked him.

"Oh shit, Jimmy!" he blurted. "What's up?" He fumbled with the journals, not knowing where to put them. Why did he know he'd been busted?

"We doing panels today?" Jimmy stepped out of the shadowy part of the attic where the ladder was. "Are those my dad's journals?"

"Yeah, yeah, I was just gonna clean up and..."

"You shouldn't be reading those," he said, pushing an index finger into the place behind his ear. Chase handed the journals to Jimmy, who received them with concern. "That's my dad's life work. It's not easy to understand if you didn't know him."

"I'm sorry, I was just..."

"It's fine," Jimmy said amiably. He put the journals back in the bottom of the box and closed it. "I guess we should clean the attic so it matches the rest of the house." Whatever crime Chase committed seemed forgiven.

Chase pushed through the awkwardness, looking around erratically, super relieved that Jimmy was there now. "Yeah, I think it could be real nice up here. Maybe we could hang out here too sometimes if it's raining."

Jimmy looked around, a smile spreading over his face. "Yeah, let's do it. Solar panels are gonna be a lot of work anyway. Maybe this is better." Chase stood up, glad everything was settled but still feeling troubled by what he'd read. "Don't read those, okay?" Jimmy repeated.

"Okay."

"You can read the other ones but those are important. They aren't for us."

"I promise," Chase said. It was one of those rare promises that contains an emotional affirmation as well as verbal. The two stared at each other, letting silence give weight to the statement. Chase mirrored Jimmy's poking of the place behind his ear without noticing. "Let's go get some supplies, then come back and clean the attic." Jimmy nodded.

Chase was happy to leave. Once they were back downstairs, Jimmy went to the algae shack to grab supplies and Chase lagged behind. He looked up into the attic one last time and shook a chill from his shoulders before he slid the ladder up and shut the door. Again, he pushed his finger into the place where his jaw met his ear. There was a tangy soreness there like he'd eaten a raw lemon.

In the living room, he got a jolt to find Avery sitting at the L-shaped bench. She wasn't doing puzzles. She wasn't reading. She wasn't doing anything but staring into space and the air was thick with the knowledge Jimmy had just passed through the room. Chase sat across from her. "Hey, how do you feel this morning?" he asked.

"I've got a headache," she stated. The slightest detail he would not recall until later was how she was surreptitiously working her jaw to the right and left.

"About last night," he started, but couldn't finish.

"Yes?"

"What Jimmy said."

"Which part?"

Which part did he mean? The part about how she was on autopilot and he partially agreed? Or the part about how Chase didn't love her and he partially agreed? His need to reply paralyzed him so he changed the topic. "I was in the attic." She waited. "There's some weird stuff up there."

"Weird how?"

"His dad, he's got these journals. I don't know..."

"What about 'em?"

"They're spooky. They're spooky as fuck, actually." Chase often used her favorite word when he wanted to score some points with her and it never failed. This was the first time it failed. She didn't answer, just kept on staring. The tension was palpable. He hadn't stood up for her when Jimmy viciously attacked her. The longer he looked at her, feeling bad about it, the longer he realized it was something else. She wasn't angry. It was something else.

"I looked up 'maudlin' and 'mawkish.' Super mean," she said.

"He's only a kid," Chase repeated.

"But, you know, I learned another word by accident when I was looking in the dictionary. Perspicacious. It means clear-sighted." Chase waited. "He's a perspicacious kid. Maybe I am maudlin."

"No, you aren't."

"Do you know what 'maudlin' is? You don't, right? So how do you know I'm not maudlin?" She had him there. Why did he feel a frightening pressure squeezing this conversation? Avery pushed a finger into the back of her cheek. "So, I guess I'm perspicacious too."

Chase intended to reply but got sidetracked. Perspicacious. He turned the word over in his head, thinking of how to spell it. Per...spi..cascious...cascious...C...A? C-A-I...No, that would be *perspi-sky-shus*. Probably C-A-C-I-O-U-S.

Two full minutes into this line of thought, an alarm sounded deep in the delta of his limbic system. The world looked different. The lighting was all wrong. Avery's eyes were deep wells of blackness, ringed by a slender band of shiny indigo. They realized it simultaneously; the inevitable had arrived.



HIS HEART NEVER BEAT this hard before or this unnaturally. It wasn't a normal lub-dub. It was a deep, central pounding in the center of his chest. It felt like someone had a finger in there, poking, prodding and pushing his heart like a button. Next came a warm throb in his tailbone. The room was so bright. Avery's face glistened with perspiration. The pressure at the base of his spine increased and his skin itched with heat. He drew sweaty palms over his tingling forehead down to the corners of his dry mouth. Something crawled up the inside of his back and his brain stopped working correctly. His thoughts stacked up in a confusing jumble, only to fall over like a Jenga tower when he tried to think them.

A signal floated to him which took too long to recognize as Avery's voice. She made sounds he knew to be English but he couldn't understand her. "Avery's talking," he said. The pressure in his lower back increased and another something crawled up his back. Avery's eyes grew wide in violet terror. She gasped and clutched her chest.

"Ow," she sighed. This preceded an event Chase could never have prepared for and would never forget. Unbelievable, stabbing pain ripped through his legs to his feet, up his back, into his neck, across his arms to his fingertips. Bright white spots exploded in his vision. Liquid, electric fire poured across every nerve, soaking his entire body in pain. Every muscle fiber contracted,

compressing his skeleton with brutality he would have thought impossible. His teeth clenched so violently he expected them to break from his jaw. Relentless, pulsing waves of searing agony burst from the base of his spine, pooled in his head, receded and pooled again, each cycle worse than the last. For a hellish moment, they sat across from each other, spouting unintelligible, lock-jawed protests. The torture of the electric spine rendered them helpless and paralyzed. They were trapped in their own private world of agony, unable to do anything but suffer and watch the other endure.

Another wave struck, contorting his neck into a demonic angle and freezing it there. His skull burned and pounded as bombs of electricity landed, one after the other. His knee jerked, slamming into the bottom of the table. Avery's cup fell over and water spilled across the surface, then dripped onto the carpet. The sound of the dripping horrified Chase for what it represented. He was powerless to stop it. This was far beyond his control. He forced his hand down onto the table next to Avery's, hoping she would take it. Instead, she pulled her hand away. It bent upward, where it hung distorted and crooked in the air before her as if she were casting a spell on him. She shook and her fingers splayed open, straining so hard it seemed they wanted to detach. Chase's arm remained on the table, flopping like a fish in a puddle.

Avery screamed and started crying. Long, thundering wails hiccupped through the air as heaving sobs detonated in her chest. She looked exactly like the people in the leaked Bath County video who died from dehydration. Suddenly, Chase's face was wet, too. His chest shook and he gushed tears but not as many as Avery. Not by a long shot. He wanted to help her, to reach out for her but the electric spine had him jailed. His vision blurred and he spasmed into a tearful seizure. The pain was too great. He thought he would die until the nuclear, arcane energy forcing its way through him annihilated his ability to think.

Chase wasn't a courageous man like Richard or Tim. He'd never done anything heroic, like stopping the house from burning down or saving his partner from a biological metatoxin. Still, he doubted even Richard or Tim could have faced what Avery had in store. All at once, thin rivulets of blood poured from her eyes: inch-wide, flowing streams oozing from the bottom of her eyelids. He wanted to scream but his shaking chest held the scream prisoner. Something disappeared from Avery's eyes. They lost focus and Chase knew she could no longer see him. Her violaceous gaze beheld eternity.

Chase wiped tears from his face. "Avery? Avery?" he asked. Her attention was far gone, adrift on a distant, enigmatic sea. A singular fixation arose in Chase's mind and he became obsessed. She needed a towel and he was going to get her one. He stood and felt fresh bombs and saw fresh dots. His thighs trembled. His legs were jelly as he traversed the infinite ten feet to the kitchen. His hands burned. He saw a towel hanging by the sink. The moment he grabbed it, a bitter taste appeared in the back of his throat. Before his astonished eyes, the whole room transformed into a mysterious, alien place. His perception warped and all delineation faded.

He saw space as it existed noncategorically. There was but a mere slab of concrete separating the inside of the house from the outside. After that, the frail membrane of the atmosphere became the void. He saw himself as a collection of molecules, connected to an invisible wall of quarks that went on to the edge of the universe. He was part of everything, an unknowable outside that went on forever. As he recognized his body as borderless, his mind followed. The edges of his awareness dissolved and then he was fading into the infinite plane which was both beyond him and of which he was a part. More and more, the outside encroached on him, laying waste to his person.

In an act of outright defiance, Chase slammed and bolted the door to that unknowable outside, shuttering himself in the dark little cell of his separate identity like he was used to. It was a pointless exercise, like shutting a door on a flood. Pure, formless energy spiraled through him, pushing from his spine into his brain. His head became a cavity of fire. He thought his skull would explode. The energy was uncontainable and, again, he was wracked with tremors. His jaw ached. In his shaking hands, the towel ripped in half.

A vice grip on his neck accompanied a deafening ring. He cried out and tried to cover his ears but his arms did not answer. The ring split in half and the pitch fell into a pair of hums low enough to breach his sanity. Two massive, mashed frequencies blended into a sound which had no business existing. The noise consumed him. It was the last weapon his body deployed in its war against him before his consciousness mercifully surrendered. His mind failed and he evaporated into a place he knew not where.

Reality became two-dimensional. He was but a single buoy trapped in an eternal flatness which ebbed and flowed, a living wall of energy he could not escape. Then, he was spread. He was smeared across and into the flatness until

he was gone, a nonentity that hung formless, suspended in a network of empty space and etheric static.

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IT SMELLED LIKE IRON. A drop of water struck the carpet. His finger twitched, forcing him to acknowledge the twitch. Another drop of water fell from the table, forcing him to realize he'd heard it. As his environment lived around him, Chase involuntarily perceived it. Each stimulus drew a new boundary on his awareness and grew the understanding he was an individual in a sensory world. Another drip hit the carpet. A bird chirped outside. As Chase experienced these things, his selfhood reformed around them. Bit by bit, he was carved away from the place he'd been before, back into the limited field of himself.

He sat, wondering what to do until the idea was absurd. Why should he do anything? It was impossible to contemplate his purpose when the infinite wall of quarks he was part of had no opinion. Then, he saw the torn halves of the dish towel in his hands and saw that Avery was gone. "Avery?" he called. She didn't answer and he felt a chill. Where was she? How was she? He pushed himself to his feet, spotting an algae cake and some peanuts on the kitchen counter. The idea of food was foreign, confusing and repulsive. His heart still pounded. Each vigorous beat kickstarted a painful cascade of residual electricity in his joints .

Chase limped to the table where the water dripped onto the floor. He turned Avery's overturned cup upright. "Avery?" he called again. Tiny, rust-colored spots covered the carpet below the table, the start of a trail of blood leading into the hallway. The dark entrance to the back of the house ballooned and shrank. Chase gripped the towel pieces and followed the trail. Once he crossed into the hallway, he felt it was a dreadful place. He couldn't stand to be in it. The walls were too close. The silence and the spots of blood on the floor were too ominous. With each step, the world grew darker. Shadows swirled and space distorted. His confusion and disorientation made the pain lingering in his joints that much worse.

There was an open door on his left. The cleanliness of the bathroom was a momentary safe haven. He staggered forward, holding the doorway for sup-

port. He caught sight of the mirror and the sight was confusing. The reflection contained another person. Chase squinted to be sure. "Dad?" he asked.

He took two steps and braced himself against the sink to investigate. There was no denying it. The space from his nose to his forehead belonged to his father. An errant thought interjected itself. His parents, always with him in one way, were absent in so many others. It was strange two people conceived him and they were not here now. His mother and father had completely unique lives, as rich and multidimensional as his own, and yet he knew almost nothing of them. Where were they? It was bizarre they were still out there somewhere, having made him only to lose track of his whereabouts. Suddenly, it was strange that anything was out there. Nothing was here except for what was here.

After he looked long enough, the face in the mirror resolved back into his own. A curious interest for the mundane aspects of his body gripped him. Every pore shone with sweat. A single vein on his forehead stood out against the rest. He blinked his eyes and they glistened with moisture. He scrutinized the muscle tissue in his face, his tongue, his arms. Around his eyes, a hundred lashes which he never noticed yet were always there, serving their important purpose. He opened his mouth and observed the complicated design of his teeth. The wet folds of his tonsils and the single, purple line running up the underside of his tongue. He was such a complicated, grimy thing.

Avery yelled from the bedroom. He couldn't believe he'd forgotten he was looking for her. What was happening to them? He passed through the dark hallway to the bedroom where Avery stood by the door. She was deathly pale under drying streams of blood but calm. Her shirt was drenched in sappy crimson but her eyes radiated purity and peace. She pawed at her chest. "I'm swimming in milk," she stated. That left him something to consider. He nodded in faux understanding. Maybe she felt like a grimy, complicated creature, too. Her hands fell to her sides. He thought to give her the towel halves, then saw he'd already placed them in her hands. Beyond her hands, he saw her belly and a vision of its future. The impending violence of Margot's birth affirmed the griminess of everything.

A twisting, tightness appeared behind his ear and he yawned, a massive yawn which stretched his pained and exhausted jaw. The light was strange again. The bedroom was much too dark for this time of day. He needed to lie down. He passed Avery on his way to the bed, putting a hand on her shoulder

and wincing as latent electricity penetrated his elbow. She did not react to his touch, nor did she stop standing by the door and staring at the wall.

The bed held no safety. The ceiling was dotted with tiny, mustard-colored lights. They were all wrong and Chase didn't want to look at them. They were radioactive, spilling penciled rays of fetid yellow light which poured upon him like sheets of rain. He closed his eyes. His mind raced. Abstractions of color and geometry swam behind his eyelids. They were not pleasant but he preferred them to the radioactive dots on the ceiling. He knew those unholy lights were still falling on him and the thought struck him with nausea. He took deep breaths and probed the geometric hallucination space, hoping to find peace in the quiet of the moment. It wasn't to be. The ring of silence was the hum of his nerves and it hurt. The sizzling electricity was still coiled in his spine, waiting to pounce like a jaguar.

The shapes faded until only one remained, an esoteric symbol Chase could only describe as a neon hieroglyphic. It was an ancient thing he could not interpret. It spun away and he saw another, then another. There came a whirling ring of these symbols, emblazoned on a gigantic black, stone disc. His arms tingled. The disc whirled in his direction. He couldn't open his eyes. He tried to cry for help but the disc was upon him, dismantling his thoughts and de-atomizing his being. He was stretched as if he stood at an event horizon. The eternal flatness he'd become part of in the kitchen was below him and he could see all of it. The entire, sticky collection of his life events lay before him, simultaneously present. His memories were tangible ripples on the flatness, side by side, finally stripped of the linearity imposed by his pattern-seeking, human psyche. They included all the people he'd ever met and all those he ever would. Then, the disc was coming for them. It fell upon the diorama of his life and ground it into a pulpy oblivion.

Chase remained as a pastless, disembodied person in the jail cell of the disc, pressed against black granite walls, at once suffocating and megalithic. The neon hieroglyphs returned. From his place inside the disc, they spun around him. They spun faster and faster until one was indistinguishable from the next and a hypnotic wall of light was all that remained. The pressure of that irresistible light crushed inwards. The walls of the disc shattered and Chase's naked vision was seared by lucidity beyond its endurance. He cried out and ran away from the light, an action that sent him toppling from the bed.

He lay on the floor, eyes finally open again, staring at the ceiling. He did not rush to get up. A big, technological stone disc had just rearranged his soul. Somehow, he knew it was integral to his sanity to take his time working through the experience before he moved on. For a long while, he stayed on the floor thinking about how, after being shredded by the disc, being irradiated by alien mustard lights wasn't so bad. Eventually, a certain truth descended upon him as a sudden breath of fresh air. He knew he was over the disc experience now and a lot of subconscious things had just happened which he'd probably never understand. Having dealt properly with that, he raised his head to search for Avery. Her slender figure was framed by the doorway, interrupted by Margot in the middle. This whole time, she hadn't moved. Chase observed her, thinking about how long they'd been together. By this point, it was like he was seeing his own reflection.

"Avery, you okay?" he managed. The question hung in the air. She stood, the same distant expression on her face, holding the ripped towel in her hands and looking ambivalent. How strange the name Avery sounded to him, suddenly. It was but a word attached to this person who could've just as well been something else. The thought skewed his perception and he saw her in the nameless reality of a world without human attribution. He saw her as she truly was: a function of the earth and a beautiful one.

In a delayed response to his question, Avery walked robotically to his region of the floor and sat next to him. Her back was very straight. The towel was still in her hands. The blood and sweat on her face made her into a mess; and yet, somewhere below that mess, one of the most wonderful creatures to exist. In her, a fire burned. It was a fire which burnt since long before she entered the world but of which she was a part. It was the fire which lay behind the eyes of all living things, thrust into endless forms but always the same and always beautiful.

How could he tell her? How could he impart a feeling so unimpartable? And at this time of all times, after he'd fallen off the bed and was flat on his back? He paid the price of acidic joint pain to prop himself up on his elbows. He had to try. "You're so beautiful," he said. Avery tilted her neck and used a ripped piece of towel to smear blood across her face. Then she leaned forward and met him eye to eye, pushing a finger into her cheek. The cheek dimpled and her mouth opened. She pulled her finger away and her mouth closed, then she

poked her cheek again to redimple and reopen it. She leaned closer and Chase saw an unusual glint in her eyes. They were glazed with all the affection of a hit man.

"I've never been associated with this disposable thing," she said, poking her finger into her cheek to open her mouth again. Cryptic to say the least, horrifying to say the average. Chase wanted to look away. Instead, he willed himself to meet her glassy, disincorporated eyes. He compartmentalized the fear they struck into him, outright rejecting the notion she could be a danger to him. He matched her stare until it finally softened.

Then, he found something else to fear in her eyes and she found the same in his. They looked at each other until one of them could utter the words they'd so long been afraid of. She spoke hushedly, slurring her words so heavily they sounded like a single word. "Why are we together?" she asked. The question didn't require a verbal response. Anxious and motionless, they looked for the answer in each other. The silence was enough for them to find it. Chase's vision blurred with tears. Together, they understood that they were two misty-eyed parents-to-be, unwilling to enter a new cycle together before facing the truth. The love they'd once had for each other had burnt out. For too long, they'd continued this senseless and unfulfilling partnership, marching to the beat of a drum they slammed only to validate their previous decisions. "Because you didn't have the guts to leave," she said. She blinked a bloody tear from her eye. Then she gave him a look which confused him until he understood what it was: pity.

"You're soft," she said. "You're an egg tart." Chase blinked his tears away. His sight unblurred. Avery leaned in to her closest. Her eyes shimmered and presented her emotions raw like a steak tartare. Her eye twitched and a muscle spasm crawled up the side of her face. Chase imagined a house fly buzzing around the fresh, uncooked steak of her vulnerability.

"I want you to go," she said. He froze, afraid to leave and afraid to stay. Avery made the decision for him. She lunged forward and slapped his face. "Get out!" she screamed. She whipped him with a towel half and screamed. "Get out! Get out!" He sprang to his feet and rushed away. In his wide-eyed haste, he misjudged the position of the bedroom door and crashed into it full force. Mentally and physically, he was the picture of discomfort as he hurried down the hallway, through the living room and out of the house.

The screen door slammed behind him. Avery's screams echoed in his ears; her face echoed in his eyes. He was smothered by a wet shroud of anxiety. His chest was too tight. What the hell just happened? First the disc and now this. For the second time in ten minutes, he fought to process a tremendously uncomfortable experience. At least, he thought it was ten minutes. Truthfully, he didn't have a clue. Time was a paper-thin apparition, born from a part of his brain that wasn't working right now. He took deep breaths, slow and steady. The breaths sent his head swimming in the deep end. He tread water there until a workable conclusion surfaced: he was in no condition to deal with this right now. He needed to take a break from thinking about Avery.

Hungry for a distraction, he stretched his attention over the wavy pasture that was now his backyard. The light was funny outside, too. He thought of the video from Reservoir City again, when the sky was black but all the buildings were illuminated. The same weird light covered the farm now, except the sky wasn't dying. It was gorgeous. Furthermore, there wasn't a building in sight. This was good. Gorgeous was good. Finally, he'd caught a break. The glossy emerald sheen of the yard provided the thing he needed most right now: serenity. He'd never seen grass so green. A cool gust of wind raked across the land. Chase thought the timing eerily synchronous; just as his inner world was settling, the outer world sent this nice breeze. He planted himself in the moment, breathing in the peace, pulling himself back to center. Everything was fine for a tranquil instant.

That's when the ballooning and shrinking effect from the hallway came back. This time, the whole countryside expanded and contracted. Distant things were near and near things distant. The earth sped up, swift as a time-lapsed video. A bumble-bee crossed his line of sight at the speed of a hypersonic rocket. Beyond the fence, the young oak tree shivered in the wind like a dog drying off. Enormous shadows raced across the pasture while, paradoxically, the clouds casting them hung suspended in time like a painting, not moving at all.

Chase fixated on the clouds to confirm what he was seeing. It was confirmed: the clouds weren't moving. Above, there was complete stillness. Below, a racing ecosystem of boundless complexity. As a part of the lower, faster world, Chase's mind raced. He was portaled from one idea to the next so quickly that most of his observations disappeared before he could acknowledge them. One truth remained constant, however. This was all there was. Everything that was

happening in the entire universe was happening now and he was a part of it. This was all there ever had been and all there ever would be; birthless, deathless, forever.

Chase stood in the middle of the yard, resonating with infinity. Holy shit. This was intense. Was he going to stay like this? What if this was permanent? He fell back to his old stand-by: deep breaths. He needed a break from thinking about the yard, too. He pressed his palms against closed eyes, yawned again and bent forward at the waist. Then he thought maybe the disc would come back if he kept his eyes closed for too long so he pulled his hands away. This left him bent over and looking at his feet, where he discovered a sizable portion of the big toe on his right foot was hanging off. The collision with the bedroom door had more to offer than embarrassment, it seemed. Chase stared at that raised corner of bloody toe and his mostly dislodged toenail. The blood on his foot reminded him of the blood on Avery's face and the scene he was trying to ignore crashed in on him. She'd screamed at him to leave and slapped him. At face value, the incident was bad enough; unfortunately, there was also an emotional element underneath that cut deep. Why did she want him to leave? Why did she have that look of pity on her face? He didn't have the answers and that hurt so much more than his toe.

He groped blindly for any sensible explanation. Desperate, he perceived the notion that Avery wanted to be alone so that he, the person she loved most, wouldn't need to help her sop up all the blood she'd leaked. He knew it was weak. She'd also whipped him with a towel and called him an egg tart. If privacy was what she wanted, there were better ways to get it than that. He tried to follow this line of thought further but failed. He couldn't focus. His thoughts were circular and chaotic. The blood on his toe reminded him of her making him leave which was the reason for the blood on his toe.

He felt pukey. Beyond the blood, beyond Avery, something else was hitting hard. He needed to sit down. He aimed for the couch by the rope swing but getting there was a larger challenge than expected. Traveling a straight line was so difficult. He'd never take it for granted again. Thankfully, he found the ingenuity to crawl. He made his way to the couch on all fours, then decided not to pull himself up on it when he got there. Instead, he rested against the base. He wouldn't let the couch betray him as the bed had done.

Overhead, the sun beamed supernal light down onto the big tree and the rope-swing. He shielded his eyes and looked up, determined to catch the clouds in motion. They were still frozen but he was certain they'd moved when he wasn't looking. So, it was to be a game of red-light, green-light. He shook a finger at the clouds. "Shame on you," he said. The sight of his hand surprised him. What was this clawish, soft thing attached to his arm?

He flexed his fingers and held them before his eyes, flipping them over to see both sides. The dirt on his palm and the veins below his skin were fascinating. He'd never noticed the rough patches around his fingernails before. Surely, they'd been there all along but they'd escaped his attention until now. How interesting. He folded his hand into a fist and opened it, then did it again, thinking it odd to have fingers. Of all the ways life could have developed, it ended up like this; ten fingers on two hands, two eyes and a nose on top of a tube which ate and excreted things. It was strange enough how it worked but stranger still that it existed at all. There could just as well have been nothing and probably should have been, given the odds. But it wasn't nothing. It was two arms, two legs and a head on a tube. Chase studied his hand, transfixed. Right now, millions of invisible bacteria were at war on this very battlefield but he couldn't see any of that. He saw only the perfect harmony of it all. He looked closer. Everything around his hand became blurry, swaying in the background. His hand was the center of his universe. Finally, the hand-gazing session ended in a stalemate. As for what game they'd been playing, Chase didn't know.

The heavenly light on everything grew brighter. His whole body hummed and his head got scrambled up again. If he tried to hold a thought, it drifted away and left him to wonder what he'd been thinking about. Eventually, he gave up trying to think altogether. Not knowing what else to do, he returned to his hand. This time, he had a mind to engage with it thoughtlessly. As soon as he did so, he was surprised to see his other hand join the conversation, rubbing dirt into his wrist to see where the sweat would hold the dirt on his skin and where it would fall off.

A deep breath forced its way in and out of him. "I'm sorry," Chase said apologetically, "but I don't feel the same way I used to and I never will. I just don't love you, Avery." He didn't know where the words came from or why he'd said them. He hadn't prepared to say that particular sentence or thought it beforehand but he was glad it happened. It was a great help to hear which parts

rang true and which didn't. Maybe he didn't feel the same way he used to but he did love her. He was sure of it. It wasn't a fiery, honeymoon kind of love but they had a history and, despite all the differences of personality, they respected each other and they were friends.

So why did she scream at him?

The sun teased brightness, then faded. Chase's spirits fell. It had moved a lot during his time on the ground even if his old nemesis, the clouds, stayed obstinately still. The day had got away from him. He saw himself objectively, sitting on the ground and rubbing dirt into his skin like a child. A swell of disappointment surged forward and he was angry at himself for wasting the day. He tried to define the anger and isolate it from himself. If he could examine why he was angry, he wouldn't be so controlled by the feeling. He failed. He couldn't remove himself from it. He was angry. He hated it; sand forever poured through the hourglass, squeezing movement, age and change out of him and everything else.

He wanted to get on the couch but he also wanted to be stubborn. He wanted to defy society and all of the other forces which expected him to sit on the couch, not on the ground. He toyed with the idea of looking at his hand again, just to ignore the issue out of spite against society and the forces. In the end, he decided not to. Defying random watchers by sitting on the ground instead of the couch was one thing; looking at his hand when he didn't want to was another. There was a balance to strike and he needed to claim his power.

And yet, he'd been on the ground a long time and his back hurt from pressing against the couch. His journey in the truck had so firmly linked lower back pain and the taste of peanuts that sensing one instantly called up the other. Chase tasted imaginary peanuts but the flavor was wrong. These peanuts tasted like TV static.

The sun hid behind the rope swing tree and thrust Chase into the shadow of uncertainty. He looked all around, wondering what had changed. He knew he'd assigned very important levels to his environment earlier but now those levels were all different. He didn't belong here anymore. He couldn't even count himself part of this couch area. He was underneath it or behind it. The world was a painting and he was but the primer. He stretched his neck and swung it left and right. What happened to his levels?

Screw it. It didn't matter who was watching. He wanted to sit on the couch now so that's what he would do. He pulled himself up onto the dusty thing, bumping the water-streaked table on his way up. "Sorry," he said. Good, he was on the couch now. He made sure to sit in the middle and lean backward, not forward. It was safer this way.

Speaking of safety, Chase wondered what his old friend his hand was up to. He held it up and examined the newly flushed, rapidly fading streak marks from its journey across the rough, outdoor fabric of the couch. They were dazzling. "Wow," he breathed. Behind his hand, he caught sight of the tomato plant and the giant, red triangle painted on the wall. The triangle transformed into an image of Avery's blood and her sopping. His heart sank.

How could something so well-intentioned go so awry? Maybe if he'd done something different, said something besides "You're beautiful," it would have gone another way. The idea dripped with frivolity. He hadn't said something different. It had gone the way it did and it couldn't have been any other way because it wasn't any other way. He pushed it to the back of his mind. This was ridiculous. Why should he be reminding himself of Avery just because of the red triangle on the house? He should force the triangle to remind him of a different memory.

The answer found him right away: the red carousel from his hometown. It was just an abandoned carousel with red horses but people came from miles away to see it. It was interesting how that carousel became a tourist attraction because of its abandonedness. In its early years, it was an active and popular town carousel. Then, later in life, abandoned and forgotten. Then, later still, popular again because of its abandonedness. It was a life cycle twice completed. It was a bi-cycle.

The water-streaked table caught and split a ray of sunlight, spraying color prismatic and defined over the glass. The colors pierced his brain and illuminated a memory from his first day on the farm. He'd gone to get peanuts from the truck so they could have dinner and he'd heard a song. He'd paid little attention to the far away sound, though it was real enough to remind him of a video game achievement tune. Why was he remembering that now? It was so vivid. In fact, it was vivid enough that Chase thought perhaps he actually was hearing it. He'd never had an auditory hallucination before and the clarity of it shook him. He stood up to investigate and it didn't take long to decide he wasn't hallucinating.

The song was out there on the wind, coming from beyond the fence. It was the tree. The tree was singing.

If a singing tree wasn't worth seeing, nothing was. It was time to start another journey. But how to move forward? He'd had his fill of crawling. Maybe he'd give walking another go. Chase switched off his levels and left the couch area. He inched forward into the expanse, wetting blades of grass with blood from his toe and wishing again he had a dog to enjoy that yard. As soon as he left the shade of the tree, paranoia seized him and he faced the irrefutable, embarrassing knowledge that a person was pranking him earlier but he couldn't remember who. It didn't matter. He should always be on guard for pranksters, regardless of who they were. That was just good practice. He absorbed the certainty of that resolution to find he'd run out of certainty.

Where was he going? What was that sound? What a relief that both questions had the same answer. He was headed for the song from the tree. He took a few more steps and stopped. His yard was so awesome it was literally holding him rapt in awe. He smiled at the scene until he caught a glimpse of the clouds and his smile fell. Now he remembered who'd been pranking him earlier. Maybe, if he was sneaky enough, he could get them back. He hid a mischievous grin and bent over to feign interest in his toe, which he felt a very believable act. People tended to look at freshly injured parts of their body. To be fair, he *was* looking at his toe, just not in the way they thought. He stayed bent over this way long enough to sell the illusion. Then, without warning, he snapped his head up.

The clouds must've known what he was planning. They remained as fluffy statues, floating in the air: stoic, expressionless, unmoving. They were good. "Fine," Chase grumbled. "You win again." He acted disappointed for their sake but he didn't regret losing. After all, they were a lot older than him. He resigned from the game so he could continue his walk.

He looked over the pasture to judge how far he was from the song; however, the song had ceased and that made the task much harder. Trying to calculate his distance from a song no one was singing overtaxed his mind. The discipline and determination he'd conjured for his journey evaporated. Maybe he'd stay put for a minute.

The endless wash of green before him recalled to mind the infinity of the plane he lived in. Beyond the tree, distance went to the horizon, the atmosphere

and, beyond that, space where distance was unthinkable. Out there, there was so, so much nothing. Against the backdrop of outer space, immeasurably gigantic stars shrunk to invisible dots. Like the nucleus of an atom, they were hardly even there. Even atoms were mostly nothing. "Everything is empty," Chase said, believing it to be the most brilliant thing ever uttered. Further consideration prompted a revision. Chase couldn't see a single insect in the yard ahead but he knew the place was packed with them. Existence was like that: a sprawling emptiness that somehow came to be inhabited. Hidden in the stillness of nothing, there are liminal spaces where life transits unnoticed, vibrating to death for the purpose of maintaining the infinite stillness. He added, "but not really," to his statement. Now it was the most brilliant thing ever spoken.

Chase stood there vibrating until the stillness compelled him to continue his journey. He walked from place to place in the yard, making no bones about not remembering where he was going. His mind was a mess, grasping at one thought after another and holding none. He walked a few steps and stopped, walked a few more and stopped again. Blades of grass whipped at his toe. Finally, he found himself beside the fence. He looked down in confusion, trying to remember how it worked. Though he resented having to do so, he consulted his past for the answer. It told him there was a gate in the fence with a latch. Now, he had the first piece of the puzzle; he needed to find the gate. The only problem was he didn't see it. The more he looked, the more he couldn't find it. Was the gate gone? Chase took a step, then another back to whence he came. The gate was not here now any more than it was when first he looked. Again and again, he repeated his survey of the small piece of fence before him. No matter how much he searched, he could not find the gate. If he'd been in his right mind, he would have walked further down the length of the fence until he found the gate, where it had always been. Alas, he was not in his right mind and so he searched and searched without walking more than a step at a time, then going back the other way and accomplishing nothing until he gave up. The fence was too great an adversary. Defeated, Chase simply stood.

From here, he could see Jimmy's algae shack and the bright green pond: the integrated aquaculture systems center of the universe. Chase transposed the scene with his memory of it when they arrived, dismal and hopeless. It wasn't a whole lot better now but it was an improvement. The solar panels and algae pond weren't functional yet but Chase knew they would be if given enough at-

tention. Suddenly, a third image transposed itself. Chase saw the site as it would be. He saw a generator that ran on biofuel. He saw the cyanobacteria regulators and the solar panel trees. Every detail of the completed algae node was there, separated from him only by time.

How weird to think the raw materials for everything that would ever be invented were on the planet from the start. The wheel, sliced bread, the internet and everything in between had always been here, staring everyone in the face, waiting for the proper eyes to see them. Future generations would pluck profound and unforeseeable truths from the same world he was standing in. That world was throbbing hard now. Chase tried to imagine the massive scope of human history. He tried to engineer the thought that all of mankind's progress had led to this moment. Everything had built up to this. Alas, it was a thought he decided not to think. As the world pulsed around him, it seemed wrong to do so. At this moment, looking to the past or the future seemed irrelevant to the point of vulgarity.

The world throbbed harder. The twisting itch behind his jaw returned and forced another yawn. Colors ran together. His heart thumped and his spine sizzled, threatening to electrocute him again if he didn't respect the sizzle. The unknowable outside from the kitchen was coming back. Chase's knees threatened mutiny but he fought them, winning his right to stand. "Okay, I'm okay," he said, dubious. The patch of grass between his feet undulated; a torrential swirl that called the very idea of ground into question. He felt sea sick so he looked away. "Oh, shit," he said. A megalithic network of gigantic hexagons was pressed upon the sky. It was an intricate complexity of shape and color which matched the sky but was not of the sky. He'd been wrong, after all. This plane of existence was not infinite. It had walls and they were a gigantic Aztec grid.

Surely, the hexagons weren't really there. It was some random thing happening in his brain and projecting the grid onto his eyes. The hexagons were inside him, not out. He looked down at the wavy ground. The grid did not follow. He looked at the sky. The grid remained. He scanned the yard, left to right. The grid did not follow. Always, the grid stayed in the sky. Chase didn't know what to do. Either he was hallucinating the grid specifically onto the sky *and only the sky* or it was really there. Contemplating the hexagons wasn't easy but he couldn't reject the grid so he looked at the dreadful, wonderful thing. He wanted to pee his pants in fear and raise a glass at the same time. *Here's to you,*

hexagons! The longer he looked, the more he couldn't decide if the gargantuan, webbed lattice was supporting the sky or generating it and he hadn't the courage to guess. Eventually, he got the feeling the hexagons weren't going to disappear any time soon so he might as well take his first steps into a post-grid world.

Chase reapplied himself to the task of locating the small gate on the fence. Reality bent. The world hummed. The wall of quarks was back. There was no separation between him and the stars on the edge of the universe but now he had new information. For a tangible moment, austere reality was laid bare. There was something behind the wall and everything else was merely an expression of it. Perhaps the grid was proof of that. Now that he'd seen the hexagons, Chase felt he could reach out and push a hole through this crisp, flat reality with his grimy finger. It was only a veil.

He frowned. He didn't want to pierce reality. He only wanted to go through the fence. He swiveled his head from left to right, lost. The gate eluded him. Though only waist high, the enigmatic fence bound him for he could not or would not think to climb over it. He was immersed in a world of emotion and impression. Critical thinking was out of the question right now.

The song returned. This time, Chase understood the words. "There's a time for life and a time for livin'," the tree sang, "so take a chance and face the wind. An open road and a road that's hidden. A brand new life around the bend."

Chase knew he'd heard the song before but he couldn't remember where. He directed his full attention to the tree, determined to glean some insight from his intense act of will. And glean he did. There, sitting on the other side of the tree, was a small figure. It was Jimmy with his back against the trunk, singing and holding the soccer ball. Just like the day they met, Chase simply hadn't seen him right away. Finally, it made sense. Jimmy was singing the song he'd been following all this time.

"Jimmy!" Chase called. Either Jimmy ignored him or didn't hear; however, Chase held space for a third option. Perhaps he hadn't called out to him at all. Jimmy put the soccer ball down then he picked it up and squeezed it. Then he put it down, picked it back up and massaged it some more. Then he put it down again. Chase stood at the fence, watching this curious interaction. The song disappeared when Jimmy yelled at the ball. He was very angry. The wind died down and a suspenseful silence blanketed the scene. Chase, the birds, and

all the insects waited to see what would happen next. Jimmy picked up the ball. He held it to his face, then roared at it again and put it back down.

Chase was getting uncomfortable. A shadow fell over him and suddenly he was back in the attic with Edgar Jones' journals in his lap. The pupa of a dreadful mindworm from those ghastly tomes had slithered into Chase's brain this morning and now it was hatching. A peculiar way of seeing came over him. All at once, Jimmy seemed like an animal or worse. The boy sitting under the tree was nothing but a collection of mechanical responses, reacting to different stimuli and scenarios in the method predetermined by his genetics and personality. Jimmy was merely an organic robot, forever executing a sterile combination of subroutines which coalesced into the illusion of a person. What's worse, Chase knew all people to be the same. Consciousness was a lie. People didn't exist the way they pretend to. Instead, every person on earth was only a slave to the singular, selfish motivations of an organism built for survival and nothing more. Humanity was a lie.

Chase's heart wrenched. He pushed away this bleak nightmare, this godforsaken version of reality, knowing he could never unsee it. A bizarre, existential vertigo came to strangle him. He wanted to talk to Jimmy right away. He needed to make a connection, to have a real conversation with a real person to prove they were not skin robots. Alas, he was trapped by the fence. He had nowhere to go and he didn't know what to do. He was lost. He was out of place in space and time, a lone blip on the radar of infinity. As the eternal seesaw of time cast a shadow over the cosmos, he was but an accident in the penumbra. He was nothing, a hapless simian born of chance, only to be ground to dust. He was powerless. In fearful desperation, Chase turned around to seek reassurance in the reflective windows of the farmhouse. The house only reminded him of Avery. This time, there was no rationale attached to the feeling; only sadness and the notion something was unresolved. The house offered no solace, only more discomfort. Chase had no choice but to turn around again.

Jimmy must have thrown the ball because it was far from him now. Chase steadied himself and commanded some modicum of control from his faculties. He was done viewing the boy as an organic robot. Instead, he dove fully into the opposite end of that spectrum. What if Jimmy was a thinking, fully realized emotional person with the innocent soul of a ten-year-old? He was all alone below that tree and Chase couldn't escape how the scene showed Jimmy as he

truly was: an orphan, all by himself. Chase felt so sad for Jimmy who'd buried his own parents, only to scrounge for days on a dwindling algae farm with little hope of survival. Jimmy was staring into the face of a truly harsh reality out here on the farm and he was facing it alone and it was so sad. Not only that, but he was doing it with a smile. The twisting itch appeared in Chase's jaw. His eyes filled with tears.

Thinking about Jimmy's family destroyed Chase's long-standing defenses and a thought he'd been keeping at bay infiltrated again. His own family might be gone, too. There was a good chance he would never see his parents or his brother again. He had to be prepared to accept that reality. A sea of despair swelled up in him and he was endlessly drowning. His tears flowed. And what about Avery, the other part of his family? He felt so guilty for letting her become his source of frustration over the last few years. He'd been so grouchy with her for so long. For what? He was blaming his own problems on her. He was guilty of not taking better care of her, not loving her more. He was guilty of being annoyed with her simply for being herself. She was a pregnant woman, seized from the buzzing comforts of cell phones and TV, the only life she'd ever known. They were cramped in a truck for three weeks and then trapped on a farm with nothing to do but puzzles and Chase never once tried to put himself in her shoes. Even before all this started, it was the same. He made her the reason for his grouchiness and critiqued her behavior all the time. He was the one to blame for the bad blood between them. No wonder she'd screamed at him to leave. In this moment, it seemed the most natural, obvious thing in the world. The reality of his failures crashed onto him as a heavy weight he acknowledged and accepted at once. He absorbed them all like a sponge before they were diffused in a prismatic sploosh which was both reflective and refractive.

Somewhere in the cascade of emotions and revelations about Avery flooding through him, he sensed indignance. Was he actually painting a clear picture of life with her? He couldn't be the sole source of blame and sadness, here. No doubt she'd played her own part in their problems. Still, it felt good to claim the fault and transmute it into tears of absolution. In this cathartic moment, he looked for more things to cleanse himself of. Hungrily, he fought to harness and then discard the painful imprints of everything which had come before this.

He saw himself with her, back in Minneapolis on their old couch. How much time had he wasted on that couch or in the mall? He'd traded so much

time for trinkets of momentary happiness, chasing the paltry tinsel of the earth. For so long, his only purpose for existing was to keep a TV in front of him and a couch under his bottom. What a waste. He could have done anything but he'd squandered it happily. Distraction was so much a villain he'd never realized the magnitude of his transgression. His tears came fiercer as he saw clearly the blasphemy of his life.

He cried for Jimmy who was all alone. He cried for losing his parents and his brother, for mistreating Avery, and for wasting his life. He cried so hard that he had not the will or desire to resist when the unknowable outside came for him again. When the wall of energy consumed him this time, he surrendered to it and it stole him away. As it absorbed him, he absorbed it. Chase was spread far beyond the constraints of his body. He was at one with the world around him. Resplendent beauty and complexity struck him full force. With eyes not of the human plane, he saw the cosmos in all its vastness: a luminous balloon pushing against the dream-texture of unrealized thought energy which existed beyond the physical universe. It was a vacuum of love, a warm place unconcerned with the blemishes of his history.

The place was so familiar that Chase instantly preferred it to the conceptual, linguistic life he'd known before. Here, he was free from the burden of personality. He felt he would float away, perhaps past the stars themselves and he was prepared. Alas, it was not to be. His exit to the next dimension was hindered by his stomach. He was surprised to find there was some process of digestion happening there and he was duty-bound to tend to it. His lungs and heart needed operating as well and they called him back. His vital functions held him prisoner here.

From that moment, Chase knew he existed even in death. When one day he finally set aside the task of maintaining his body, he would become invisible to this plane as a dynamic, living idea: a dream-body that would pass away as the bubble of consciousness grew tired with itself and simply burst in a final, wakeful touch which would result in something unknowable and new.

It was only for curiosity and inexperience that he remained above himself, sitting sphinx-like in an unrelenting stillness, punctuated only by his own sobs for mercy below. Chase hung there adrift, flushing away a lifetime of trauma through his tears until the texture of the moment changed. Time broke and began to flow again. With a final hiccup, his chest settled. He sat down, cross-

legged. His back was very straight and the straightness was his center. He breathed, calm and still as an understanding formed.

Something was about to happen: an invisible something but big. Something important; maybe the most important thing to ever happen to him and it was happening soon. He knew it like he knew his name. Then, there came a beatific light. Acceptance blossomed in his heart and he realized that the something had been happening his whole life. He'd obscured its precious significance with the mindless comfort of his daily routine but the ultimatum of his life's journey had always been there and would continue to be, forever a stranger who sat next to him.

He found his mind was in his throat. His heart pounded. The sweat poured from his brow and over the grime on his skin. It felt good. He was alive, more in his body than he'd ever been. He sensed the potent power of agency within him. He felt the uncertainty and potential of every moment as it was, unimaginable and infinite. He saw his true self, animated by the ancient paranormal fire he'd sensed in Avery before. It was a fire not of his body but it rested there, eternally burning. This was existence. He was a living, moving creature and he no longer had time for distractions. He might turn into an unknowable dream bubble one day but, right now, the griminess was everything.

His mind was hovering around this idea when a second pang of bliss struck him and he was overcome with gratitude. The dim memory of sitting on the couch in Minneapolis returned. This time, he saw it not as a waste but as a great victory. He'd left the couch behind, after all. As it robbed him of his life, he'd escaped it. That whole time, it would have been so easy to find a different life but it was impossible to see then and Chase was so thankful for what happened. They might have suffered a few nightmarish experiences but it was good to live through history. Theirs was a memorable time, not a crappy, routine one which would be lost to the annals of history. They'd done the best they could. They'd run, run, and run some more. They'd helped a few people along the way. They'd dealt with unpleasantness but they'd survived and tried to be good people. They'd made lemonade. They'd escaped the couch, escaped Minneapolis and escaped the tunnel. He knew that chapter of his life, and the greater life of humanity at large, was finished now and he was so, so thankful.

Chase stopped his mind and found the everpresent stillness behind everything. A flock of starlings crossed the land, bringing clarity on the wing. Jimmy

wasn't alone because they were there with him now and Margot was on the way. He and Avery were going to raise two kids here, together. They had a solar powered generator and a fledgling algae farm. He didn't have to worry about money anymore; the only thing he needed to worry about was food and that felt amazing and right. They might have to eat dried pond scum for a while but, if Jimmy could do it, they all could. As the picture of his new reality coalesced, the anguish of his past was a toll he counted weightless against the torrential bliss now descending.

There was only one thing amiss: the ache at the end of him. He looked at the wayward chunk of his big toe that went sideways when he crashed into the door. The corner was wholly dislodged. It hung only by a thread. The toenail was also done for, lying loosely on top of his toe. It was tender to the touch. Chase knew there was little hope for the nail or that piece of toe. The only logical thing to do was remove it. The procedure was not painless but the pain was not unpleasant. It was a mere indicator, not something to be afraid of or reject. It was a unique feeling, a liberating pain which reminded him he was alive and he would stay that way for a while. When the job was done, Chase discarded the piece of his toe in the grass.

He looked toward the house and saw Avery on the couch by the rope-swing. She looked exhausted as she casually raised her arm to give him a thumbs-up. Chase waved. He knew her well. Whatever happened before in the bedroom, Avery was as confused about it as he. Whoever needed to be forgiven was forgiven. From one egg tart to another, let them never speak of it again. The speck of starlings scattered in the air. As they banked, bent and swirled together, Chase observed the clouds were moving again. At long last, their deadly payload had been delivered. At long last, he could rest. The fear was over.

He stood and felt light.

CHAPTER VIII

GREEN

EXCERPT FROM OAKWOOD: BOOK II

10 MONTHS LATER

Chase's shirt clang to him uncomfortably. It was hot. It was extremely hot because a green sky reflects less ultraviolet radiation than a blue one. He was sure he had oceans of sweat around his armpits and his ass-crack but he'd long given up caring about little things like that. The forecasters had been mistaken. They didn't all die and the atmosphere wasn't stripped away like a Band-Aid. Instead, the sky turned green, an innocuous yet massive change which altered life on the planet in every possible way imaginable. Last week, Chase saw a thunderstorm many magnitudes larger and louder than he'd ever seen before. It was so clear, forever staring them in the face: everything which led up to Kentucky and the creep. The poisoned green horizon hung there as a reminder, final and unrelenting. For better or worse, life would not return to how it was.

The last year had seen a lot of turmoil and a lot more turmoil was still being seen. He'd once been part of that world but not anymore. He was on an isolated farmhouse, far away from all the trouble, leading his daughter around the yard for the first time. The creep hadn't claimed Margot's life. It hadn't claimed his or Avery's or Jimmy's, either. Mission accomplished.

Jimmy told him that a hundred years ago, more than ninety-five percent of all births took place at home. "Avery can do the same," he said. He'd been correct, too. The delivery was tense but absent of complications, except for the eyes. Margot's cells decided to adopt and replicate as well. She was born September 20th, 2010 with the most beautiful, purple eyes imaginable. They weren't dark purple like Avery's. They were really light. If the light hit them a certain way, the purple paled to near-white. It was more often beautiful than freaky but sometimes it was freaky.

Margot's tiny fingers held one of his and Chase shook with a bevy. He knew it to be the timeless gut punch all parents have when they realize how much danger has suddenly ratcheted up a notch in their life. The world was multidimensional now. No longer was he solely responsible for keeping the invisible

headspace he knew as himself from being shot or crushed by a boulder. There was another one to tend to: a completely finite, wholly observable other person who'd unknowingly tasked him with her well-being. Whatever became of this fragile floating bubble, he now had real skin in the game because of her. Surely, he'd worry for this gorgeous drooling creature he'd made until the end of his days and he'd not the ability to refuse it.

Chase studied the strength of her chubby legs, releasing her hand to see if she'd remain standing, which she almost did. The thought struck him that she was among the first to learn to walk below the new sky. This green-roofed world was the only one she'd ever know. Like her eyes, it was beautiful and scary all at once. In the beginning, Chase assumed Margot stared through everything because it was something all babies did. After a while, he was certain of her blindness. Good chance it had something to do with those eyes but he'd never say it. He wouldn't lob that grenade. Chase was sure Avery knew as sure as he was she ignored the fact in fear of self-reflection. He thought back to high school Physics and the cat in the box. If no one asks, there's nothing to answer for. Could they live in the shade of a question long enough for it to become moot? How long could they live in that place, relentlessly refusing to ask?

He supposed the issue would come to a head one day but today wasn't the day and he was thankful for that. Besides, there was another, more important thing coming to a head much faster. They were getting low on supplies. Over the last ten months, they'd scavenged what they could from the property, but they needed soap and a handful of other things. They couldn't hide in the isolated safety of the farmhouse forever. Thankfully, that was also an issue for another day. In this moment, everything was fine and he was going to enjoy his time in the yard with Margot, then go enjoy his time at the pond with Jimmy. They were doing algae stuff today.



