

OTHERWORLD \*

stories by  
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Of him I love day and night I dream'd I heard he was dead,  
And I dream'd I went where they had buried him I love, but he was not in that place,  
And I dream'd I wander'd searching among burial-places to find him,  
And I found that every place was a burial-place;  
The houses full of life were equally full of death, (this house is now,)  
The streets, the shipping, the places of amusement, the Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, the Mannhatta, were  
as full of the dead as of the living.  
And fuller, O vastly fuller of the dead than of the living.

Walt Whitman, *Of Him I Love Day and Night*

HENRY

Some mornings in winter, right before sunrise, we coast down PCH in neutral with the headlights off: always downhill, always toward the beach. There are no other cars out most days and it feels like holding my breath on a roller coaster or falling in a dream, each time waking before hitting the ground and never knowing what comes next or if I would even want to. On the radio we listen to a call-in show about eschatology, reminded every hour on the hour by a DJ with a raspy voice that we're listening to Desert Springs Public Radio and that, now more than ever and with each passing hour, the end is nigh. The sense of excitement in his voice as he forecasts doom emanates from the speakers in waves and saturates the leather interior of the car. Today I'm in the passenger seat and Henry has been missing for two weeks but no one talks about that. Instead we focus on how the news says it's going to snow. Winter in California, I say out loud, adding that I don't remember the last time it dropped below fifty degrees. Aaron tells me he heard it from Dallas Raines, the TV weatherman who uses the Mega Doppler Radar 7000, so it must be true. Then Henry's sister Emma, who's driving, says that Dallas Raines has journalistic integrity. I shrug and tell her to turn up the radio. The voice speaking to the DJ is a woman's, middle aged and nervous: When Jesus comes back, she says, I know where I want to be. I don't like suffering, I don't like pain. I don't like all that drama. I like nice things. I'd rather just go up to heaven.

At the beach the sand is grey and cold, warming only slightly as the sun rises behind the clouds. A lone seagull stands near the edge of the water and squawks at the waves. I rest on my elbows, staring at the point where ocean and sky merge into one and slowly give way to the waves as they crash over the smooth, worn down sand as it sifts between my fingers then topples back onto itself. After a while Aaron tells us that the other night a guy in West

Hollywood asked him if he was a Muslim.

What are we going to do tonight? Emma asks.

It's like you can live somewhere your whole life, think you really know the place, and then all of a sudden you're reminded of how many weirdos are out there trying to make you think *you're* the strange one. It must have been my beard, Aaron says. You think I should shave it?

Did you hear what I just asked you?

Aaron shrugs at her and I ask him if we can go to his place tonight.

Again? he asks. The last party I had just ended, what, three hours ago?

I want to see that girl you introduced me to last week. She wasn't there last night.

If I invite Kim, he says, then you have to go find Carmes today.

Deal.

You think I should invite everyone else who was there last night, too?

They'll probably just show up anyway, Emma says.

Wait, I say. What's the name of that street corner Carmes is always on?

Cameron and Locust, Aaron says. But that's Wednesdays. You'd have better luck near the 7-11, I think.

How do you know all that? Emma asks.

Aaron just shrugs again. I ask Emma if she'll come with me to find Carmes.

No, she says, watching as the seagull flies off silently.

The last time I saw Henry was on a Saturday morning, just after sunrise. The four of us had been driving around all night. After we dropped off Aaron and Emma it was just Henry up front and me sprawled across the backseat, half-asleep and staring into space. It had been

raining all night and the chemicals and dirt embedded in the roads were rising out of the cement and causing accidents all over the city. Henry and I had just finished walking around our elementary school for lack of anything better to do. It was the first time I'd been back there since leaving over ten years earlier and I spent most of the trip trying to remember ways in which I'd changed since I'd been there, ways I'd stayed the same. Things I did remember: Falling off of the monkey bars at Rocket Ship Park and getting the wind knocked out of me. A girl in first grade who only spoke Russian. Recess three times a day. Henry was the only person I still knew from there.

I wish I were a kid again, I said, looking across the school.

I don't, he yelled over the wind.

What?

I don't, he said again, more quietly this time.

The school was on top of a large hill and had a view of the ocean, skyscrapers, and smog below. I looked at everything at the base of the hill—PCH, the beach, my high school—realizing as Henry stood gazing at the same landscape that I'd enjoyed the view more when I was younger. *Jason loves life but hates his friends* was written on the jungle gym and Henry had laughed at this while I wondered what it meant, who had written it.

I think my sister's into you, Henry told me.

I think I'm into her, too.

Yeah, he said. I know.

And this is okay?

This is okay.

The wind was getting worse as we walked over the map of America painted on the blacktop and Henry told me that he'd completely forgotten Montana existed. It's the kind of

place no one thinks of until something bad happens there, he said. I asked him if he thought there was anyone who didn't wish they could wear a cape and he told me no, not one person. People with capes can fly, he said. I looked at him for a moment, confused, and we sat silently for a long while. Times like these, he finally said, are going to end up being the only ones worth remembering. I didn't know what he meant at the time but I think I might now.

Henry was in a strange mood after we left and probably shouldn't have been driving but I was too distracted by the voice on the radio to say anything. I thanked Henry silently when he turned it off and started to tell me about a dream he'd had the night before, a dream he made me promise not to tell anyone. It took him less than a minute to describe and after he was finished I asked him to take me home, too tired to absorb it all, telling him I'd call later, once I'd woken up. Later, sometime in the afternoon, my phone rang and suddenly I was awake. It was Emma, saying Henry wasn't returning any of her calls. She asked me if I knew where he was and I told her no.

I wake up around sunset and start to drive around, looking for Carmes, who Aaron says might be homeless and works for a guy named Jason the drug dealer. If he actually does have his own place, no one's ever been there. The only way to get a hold of him is by driving on the strip of PCH between the beach and the onramp to the 405, then waiting until he appears on a street corner, in a parking lot, or under some billboard. Sometimes he gives directions, like *Look for the guy standing on the corner of Emerald and PCH with no shirt on between four and seven tomorrow*, but even that doesn't help very much. He seems at least mildly dangerous and Henry once told me that every time he would drive out to meet him, he kept a pair of scissors in his car in case the deal went south. I turn the radio on and am greeted by the raspy voice of the new DJ from DSPR whose name I still don't know. Good evening, eschatologists, he says.

Does this feel like earthquake weather to anyone else? He introduces the new song from There We Smolder, saying that *the band's name is a vision of tattered flags in a circle with a child wrapped within them*—which really creeps me out—and I finally see Carmes outside of a liquor store, talking to someone who at first looks like Henry. Once I walk up to Carmes, he's ready with a question: Could you say that, objectively, Ozzy Osbourne is one of the greatest rock-and-rollers of all time?

I'd say so, I tell him as he leads me into the alley behind the liquor store.

Good man, he says. What can I do for you today?

Same as every other day, man.

In the car on the way to Aaron's Emma is telling me that there's going to be a séance at the party tonight to contact Henry. There are things I would say to her if I were wise or even smart but I'm not and ever since Henry disappeared I can barely look her in the eye because she reminds me too much of him and thinking about it makes me lower my head and forget where I am, sometimes for a few seconds, sometimes longer. Then she turns up DSPR and tells me that last night in her dream there was an earthquake. As the car pulls up to Aaron's I lie and tell her I don't remember my dreams anymore. Once she parks I wait in the passenger seat for a few minutes and tell her to go in first. Nodding like she understands, she gets out of the car and nearly disappears under the starlight before opening Aaron's front door and walking into the house. I hold my breath for a moment and look at my watch until the minute hand changes.

When I walk inside there's a crowd of people in his living room and they're standing in a circle, straddling the perimeter of what looks like a pentagram scrawled across the floor in red paint. There are candles placed at each of the star's five points and someone I've never

seen before is muttering quietly in Latin about Dionysus, Baphomet, something like that, his lips moving slowly in the near-darkness. In the corner of the room, behind the crowd of people, I see Emma standing under a painting of a clown, its eyes gazing over her head as if to remind us of something we don't dare think of. I look away and try to wave to Emma but she doesn't see me and after a moment I notice she's crying. After trying again I notice her look at me before she turns and walks away. One of Aaron's friends whose name I don't remember is standing next to me and he seems transfixed, completely dazed. *Otherworldly*, he keeps saying. So fucking *otherworldly*.

I make my way through the crowd and gravitate outside toward the pool, where I know I'll find Kim. Kim dyes her hair a color between dark brown and red that I don't know the name of and she smells like a field of poppies would in a dream. She's surrounded by a small group of people, none of whom I know. We have nothing in common but our eyes seem to meet every time we're at Aaron's house and each time it happens I imagine her fingernails digging into my back, her breath in my ear as she whispers things she doesn't mean, things I could never repeat. In my head, I count the number of empty bedrooms—two—in Aaron's house. It's not yet midnight and the room seems to blur around her as Aaron, standing next to her, waves me over with a knowing look in his eyes. I look over at her and we make eye contact and she smiles as she looks away and the night slows down and grows quiet and for once I know what happens next.

Later that night, her head resting on my chest, rising and falling as I breathe in and out, I think of the Fourth of July last year, the first time Henry started acting odd. We only cared about the fireworks that night, ignoring everyone else at the party, whose faces glowed in the

light of the bonfire. We'd both been getting tired of the slow summer days ending without anything to distinguish one from the next and so the night was meant to be an end to that, an exception to the rule, but something just felt off. The sky started changing colors, bright bursts of neon and gunpowder reaching some higher point and then falling back to earth like so many grains of sand—blues and reds and greens that faded as they descended, briefly illuminating the collective face of everyone looking up to the sky and watching. A gasp took hold of us as one last burst lit up and set the sky aflame and for a moment I felt convinced that all roads led here, that everything was unraveling and making way for this one moment in time that would wilt as surely as all others had before it, leaving no trace of itself for the future should there be one at all to salvage and make sense of. I looked over at Henry's blank face. Then only the blackness of a night devoid of moon and star hovering, consuming.

The next morning, after Kim has written her number on my hand and left, I walk downstairs and into the living room feeling the same as I did last night. Aaron is sprawled across the couch, his eyes hidden behind sunglasses and glued to the T.V., watching the weather. I stare at my reflection in the mirror for a few moments before he notices me and tells me to sit down.

Is that Dallas Raines? I ask.

Yup. Says a big storm's coming.

I still don't think it's going to snow.

You'll see. Have a good time last night?

You could say that. What about you?

He shrugs. Not really. That guy Wes told me he heard a story about Henry just walking into the ocean one night.

People say things, I tell him.

I know. But then this girl who was with him told me he appeared to her in a dream. She told me he said he's walking the earth.

Walking the earth? What does that even mean?

Just wandering, I guess. She's still here for some reason.

Where? I ask.

Out by the pool.

Tell her to leave then.

Wouldn't make any difference, he tells me, letting out a sigh.

Whatever. Kim told me she had a weird dream last night, too, I say, changing the subject. Said she was alone in a rowboat and someone from the beach was running toward her yelling, only she couldn't hear what he was saying.

Cosmic, he says.

Yeah. I guess. Listen, I'm bored. Do you want to do anything, drive around maybe? It's nice out.

Is it?

Yeah, I say. It is.

Aaron takes off his sunglasses and looks out the window. Man, this is what it looks like every goddamn day, he tells me. Anyway, I don't feel like leaving the house today. I can't be far from home when the storm hits.

The windshield was covered in dew that night, the last with Henry still in the car with the rest of us, and he was the only one aside from me who seemed to notice this, and the street lights were so blurry that we could hardly tell when to go and when to stop, so when Emma asked me where I wanted to go I told her that I didn't know and asked her to drive more slowly

because the dew was making me nervous, but she just looked at me through the rearview mirror from the passenger seat with a quizzical stare, like she knew something I didn't, so I decided to drop it and focus instead on the way Aaron kept putting the car in neutral when we went down hills in order to save gas and I realized how vulnerable we were, soaring down Hawthorne with the same song playing over and over, feeling like I'd been here before and each time it ended the same way. Then I looked away, out the window, at nothing in particular.

There are a lot of dead insects, bees and flies mostly, in Aaron's pool, and most of them have floated toward the shade. There are at least thirty of them and at first I wonder why but then dismiss the thought, remembering that I didn't notice them last night. In the darkness I was probably swimming through them without even knowing it. The girl who never left Aaron's party is sitting over by the jacuzzi and I almost feel like talking to her, smiling maybe, at least asking what her name is. But I don't. I can't find seem to find the energy to do anything but tread water and float. Aaron is doing laps in the pool, surfacing every time he reaches either end, gasping for one breath of air and then submerging again. When he's finished I to go into the jacuzzi and tell him to come with me, almost but not quite saying something to the girl, who I'm assuming must know Aaron somehow. She doesn't seem to notice me but I feel uneasy anyway, as if unable to speak, but it doesn't matter because Aaron isn't talking either, just singing the chorus to the new Smolder song under his breath. I'm sitting on the step into the jacuzzi with sunglasses on, beginning to get too hot to stay in and after several minutes of silence he asks if I want to leave and I nod yes. I don't acknowledge her as I walk by and she doesn't seem to notice me either until I stop by the pool and drop my sunglasses into the water, watching them slowly sink to the bottom before we walk back into Aaron's house.

Aaron and I decide to eat at a taco stand by the beach. We normally only come here when it's late and nothing else is open. Above us the sky is getting grey and the seagulls are flying towards the water. When we pull into the parking lot in Aaron's avocado green convertible we see Carmes stroking his dreadlocks and I don't feel like dealing with him so I let Aaron get out of the car first. Aaron goes over to the window to order as I get out of the car and Carmes walks up to me. My man, he says. You need anything today?

Not today, I say.

Drag. You got a minute?

Not really, man. I just want to—

It'll only take a minute. I just need to rap at you real fast.

About what? I ask.

Family, he says, not even looking at me. You ever hear that phrase *nuclear family*? What does that even mean, man? You gotta understand, I'm a dude and I'm in my undershirt and I get pissed when I hear things like this that don't make any sense to me. I want to see a real nuclear family. I want children with no legs and three arms. With thirty-seven teeth. Child number one: Zeke. Number two: Couch. Number three: Accident. And so on and so forth. Something a nuclear facility wouldn't love. *Get back here, Couch. Sit back down with the rest of your brothers and sisters.* Family family family. One big incestuous family. I want them to grow out their beards in the summer and shave them off in the winter. I want them to have handwriting so bad even they won't be able to read it. I want them to know what death is by the time they're eight. Every day they're moving closer to it and I want them to know it. I want them to be aware because that is our greatest gift and our greatest curse. Our sickness. And all you can do is laugh, laugh because it's funny and laugh until you can do nothing else.

That's pretty heavy, Carmes. I think you've been listening to too much DSPR.

Maybe you haven't been listening to enough, he says.

After I walk away, Aaron asks what Carmes wanted to talk to me about.

Have you talked to Emma today? I ask, ignoring his question.

Not yet, he says.

She seemed really upset last night.

I know.

I don't know why you let them have that séance or whatever it was.

I thought it would help.

You should have known it would freak her out.

I think she was more upset about you, he says.

Me?

You. Going after Kim as soon as you walked in the door. Why are you so into her?

I don't know, I say. A distraction, maybe.

Let me know how that turns out.

Shit, I say, noticing something in the air and looking up at the sky. I think it's gonna  
rain.

Did you hear me?

Yes. I heard you.

Neither of us says anything for a while.

You're right, Aaron says, looking up.

Right about what? I ask.

Looks like rain, he says, his eyes still fixed on the sky.

After we leave the taco stand Aaron and I drive to Henry's parents' house up near the cliffs and ring the doorbell. A maid answers the door and when Henry's mother appears a minute later we ask her if she's heard from Henry.

No, she says. But that's nothing new. Why do you care, anyway? she wants to know. You and your hippie friends, you're the ones that got him into this mess.

What mess? Aaron asks her nervously. What are you talking about?

Like you don't know. Does it even matter to you if he shows up or not?

Aaron and I look at each other. He shrugs before I can say anything.

Fuck off, she says, slamming the door in our faces.

God damn, one of us says. I think it's Aaron.

When I get back home the phone is ringing but no one answers when I pick it up and ask who's there. I hear what sounds like asthmatic breathing followed by the sound of a radio in the background. Then the dial tone. I cradle the receiver in my hand for a few seconds too long and hang up. Then I pick it up again and start to dial Emma's number but stop, hang up again, look at my hand, where I've written Kim's number, and dial that instead.

Sometime in the small hours of the night as I feel her warm body lying across mine I begin to wake into a darkness unmoving and total and for a moment see in the shape of the open door what looks like a human form that fades by the time my eyes have opened all the way. No light from the moon or stars creeps in through the window. Once completely awake I lie on my back and stare straight up, unsure whether I'm looking at the ceiling or just the darkness between it and my eyes. I think about tomorrow, imagining or dreaming another grey day moving toward the beach as a soft rain mixes into the sand and the sun moves slowly across

the sky. I think of Henry and whether I could have said or done something, anything. As sleep begins to take me once more and she shifts her weight off my chest I think that maybe it wouldn't have mattered if I had tried anything else because maybe he knew what he was doing and outside it's cold, outside the sun is setting and the dark is coming each day earlier and in that darkness anyone could be lost. Outside it's raining with snow soon to come, winter with no view of spring to follow and something not quite enough and then nothing again. I close my eyes and am able, for a moment, to forget that it's only a matter of time before I have to open them again.

You know what scares me? she asks in the morning.

What's that, I ask.

Death, she says.

Try not to think about it.

What do you think it's like?

Dying?

Yes, she says. Dying.

Dreaming. I think it's like dreaming.

Like dreaming about what?

Waking up.

First time I heard about the Ballard kid was a Wednesday, during lunch. I'm sitting there, just trying to eat my meatball sub, when Bagshaw comes in and tells me I have an assignment. No knock, no excuse me, nothing. Guy just barges in there like he's checking in on his kids' slumber party or something. I could have been in there with a *client*. Could have been doing something *important*. But does he care? Of course he doesn't. Just throws some papers on my desk, tells me the kid's been missing a few days already, and it's my mine to deal with.

I knew even then I probably wouldn't find the kid. If people wanna disappear—or disappear someone else—it'll usually work. I can ask around, trace this, connect that, but here's the thing: even if there's a pattern to follow, it's only gonna last so long. One thing might make sense if you line it up next to something else, but so what? All you've got then is a collage of semi-related facts, ideas, and people, and what does it add up to?

Anyway. I followed the leads, sure I did. Went to the kid's house. Mother doesn't know anything, father either. The maid, though—nice little thing, she was—tells me the kid was never home. How old was he? I ask her. She says 21. This kid, this Henry, didn't live at home, big as the house is. Parents put him up in his own apartment, and now they're surprised when they can't keep track of him? So the maid says ask the sister. Ask the friends. The parents, she says, and then cranes her head back and gestures like she's taking a swig.

So I go to the apartment. Landlord gives me shit but lets me in after a few minutes. No signs of anything there, of course. Some dust, some messages on the machine about Henry where are you and Henry you missed your dentist appointment. Brown carpet on the floor, nothing

on the walls. For a rich kid, this Henry lived a pretty Spartan lifestyle, which does nothing to make *my* job any easier. Little to go on, even less that leads anywhere else. It seems suspicious but hey, so does everything. Whether or not there's anything there ends up being a matter of opinion, and in mine there's something fishy to all this but damned if I can *prove* any of it.

But the sister, let me tell you. Girl named Emma. She tries to keep her cool then gets *hysterical* after half an hour. I can tell she doesn't like to show it. All these kids, that's their problem: they'll never just say what's wrong. They expect people to somehow know what's the matter and hope someone else will notice and fix everything for them. Never works, of course. Just look at her brother, for crying out loud. Closest I got to caring about this case was when I was talking to Emma. If anyone's got a brain, it's her. Says she's thinking about moving up to her aunt's place somewhere in Washington unless something comes of this soon, and do I think that'll happen? I gave her a look that I meant to say maybe but she could tell meant no. Then she started crying again.

Then there's Thomas, the best friend. Real aloof. There's something going on there, but it's all under the surface and in the way he moves his hands when he talks. First I can't get him to say anything, then he won't shut up. Nothing useful, of course. Just all these memories about oh what a guy Henry was, he was too good for this town, yadda yadda. Seems like an all right kid, but useless overall. Only one who seems to give a rat's ass aside from the sister. Told me to keep an eye out for Carmes, some low-level dealer in Long Beach.

Simms, Aaron. Kid seems up to no good. Big house all to himself, expensive this, more expensive that. Asked if he should have his lawyer with him. I said, I don't know, kid, you tell

me. Got anything to hide? Of course not, says Aaron. Then don't worry about a thing, I tell him. Real tight-lipped, this guy, especially when I asked about this Carmes fella the other two mentioned. He gives me the usual: some dealer down by the beach, real small-time, works for a guy named Jason. I say to him, your friends were much more forthcoming, Aaron. Why do you think that is? Maybe they know more than I do, he says to me. Oh I doubt that, I say, and he holds off a smile and I can't get anything else out of him and a little while later I'm gone.

So I started driving up and down PCH near the beach, waste of my goddamn time, and after an hour I found the guy. Looked exactly like they said he did, real easy to spot in a crowd. A white guy with dreadlocks, my god. Anyway, takes a while for him to believe I'm not trying to bust him for pushing, but even then I can't get much out of him. Says he hardly knew Henry, maybe he sold to him once or twice, what's the difference? When I tell Carmes I know he's full of shit, know he's trying to hide something, he gets quieter still. Here's a guy standing a block away from the beach in one shoe, and he's trying to outsmart me. When I threaten to take him down to the station, he loosens up a little. Says Henry wasn't as perfect as everyone thinks, know what I mean? That there's all this shit out in the desert I don't even want to know about, and when I say yes I do he looks me right in the eyes and says: No. You. Don't.

But the guy's a middle-man, has it written all over his face. I say he's not really the one pulling the strings and he just laughs. I guess you could say that, he tells me. So what are you? I ask him. And he says, the mouthpiece of a very powerful man. A man named Jason.

Jason? I ask him. As in, the Jason who Aaron mentioned? One and the same, Carmes says to me. All right, then, I say: who, pray tell, is this Jason? Then the bastard looks at me with this

big, toothy grin, like he knows everything there is to know in the world, and he says: *A ghost*.

Anyway, this was all weeks ago. The sister, she called me up the other day to ask if anything had changed. I breathed real heavy into the phone, more than I meant to, and told her there was nothing. Well, she said. All right. If you need anything, call this number — then says she's moving out of state to live with her aunt, maybe start school. Good kid. Smart to get out of the city while she still can. So is there something there? Yeah, maybe. Not enough to go on though. A feeling's a feeling but it's not proof. Far as I know, Henry just left. If these people were my daily life, I probably would too.

## *Waiting Room*

The woman sitting next to me has been humming the same song for exactly eight minutes and thirty-three seconds. I know this because of the clock on the wall, the huge kind meant for old people losing their eyesight that are probably sold along with those monstrous remotes with buttons the size of my head<sup>1</sup>. What I don't know, what's bugging the hell out of me, is the name of the song she's humming. I'm sure I've heard it before — on the radio I think, though it can't be anything recent and I'm leaning toward something 80s based on how old she looks — forty-two, maybe?

At least she doesn't have a kid with her. Earlier, when I first walked in, signed my name<sup>2</sup>, and gave the okay-looking receptionist my co-pay, some brat was running around screaming his head off while his mom or dad or whoever was inside, probably begging for a prescription of something to make living with the kid more bearable. I didn't have the nerve to yell at the little bastard but luckily the receptionist<sup>3</sup> did, and once the kid finally shut up I mouthed a silent *Thank you* to her. After a minute or two of him sitting there silently I started to sympathize with him, though not much. I was never like that as a child. I was always quiet, lost in thought; Ruth was the loud one. In situations like this she'd have been even more obnoxious than this kid is and, because I was older, my mom would make me watch her while she went inside. It would be me who dealt with the stares of everyone in the room as Ruth cried or laughed or screamed. When I got the chance I'd just sit there staring into space but even that was problematic because eventually I'd start thinking about black holes. I thought one would sneak up on our house at night and my family and I would all be sucked into it like

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<sup>1</sup> My grandmother had one of these. I remember being amused by it as a small child, and I wonder now if she was happy to see my smiling or if it only reminded her that she was old and on her way out.

<sup>2</sup> I've always hated my signature. Simms is hard to write in cursive, I don't know why.

<sup>3</sup> Joy. I think her name is Joy.

dust in a vacuum cleaner. Not even the cat was safe. It was the babysitter's fault for telling me that could happen—she was also the one who told me that if you died in a dream you would die in real life the next day. Fucked up my sleeping pattern for months. At night I'd look out the window, past the power lines and street lamps, keeping my eyes fixed on the empty space between the moon and stars, where I thought the black holes would come from. Eventually my head would find its way onto the cool pillow and I would slip into what was at first blankness, then restless or fevered dreams (I forget the difference) of me and my mom and dad and Ruth and the cat whose name I don't remember floating into the night, more gently than I'd expected.

The door opens and out comes a woman who collects the brat from earlier followed by the receptionist<sup>4</sup> calling out a name, not mine. Then a tall Mexican guy with hair down to his waist gets up and follows her into a back room, leaving me alone with an old Asian lady, some dude in a suit, and the chick next to me, whose humming has persisted for exactly fourteen minutes. I clear my throat loudly, hoping maybe she'll take the hint, but the bitch is in outer space at this point, nose-deep in the months-old issue of *Time* I was looking through at the dentist's office the other week. I remember the best article was about a Colombian drug lord with a full-on compound out in the jungle somewhere, armed to the fucking teeth and surrounded by all these coked-out underlings with machine guns and gnarly ass guard dogs. Bullmastiffs, I think they were—mankillers, those things. For a while the government didn't know what to do about him but after the third round of headless, limbless torsos were dragged from this river a few miles from his hideout some commandos went in to take him out in the middle of the night sometime last summer—late July early August, fucking dog days,

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<sup>4</sup> Not Joy but Jayne; it was the weird spelling with the *y* on her name tag that confused me.

man—but only managed to kill a few of his underlings and all of the guard dogs. That part pissed me off. The guy, César something or other, pulled off this gnarly escape, either through a series of underground tunnels leading to the capital or in a helicopter, depending on who you believe, and hasn't been seen since.

The dude could be hanging out with Henry by now for all they know. I mentioned this to Carmes after reading the article and laughed but he didn't think it was funny. He's been weird since Henry went missing, I don't know why. No one knows anything. It seems like everyone's been on edge since it happened and it might be selfish but ever since the accident I find it hard to care about most things. All it takes is a few tons of metal, a split-second, and all of a sudden your family tree loses a branch or two. What's left to fear after something like that? Not the dentist or flying in a plane or even the earthquake everyone swears is coming. Thomas was complaining about having a bad dream the other day and I asked him if it was worse than being awake, joking but not really, and he gave me a look that made me realize I might have just given too much of myself away. It seems strange to display those feelings on top all the time. Same thing happened when I told him that nightmares are for people who've never had anything real happen to them. What's real, he asked me, and I thought about my family and Henry and everyone else but decided not to say anything.

Thomas says I'm paranoid and Emma thinks I'm resigned. I don't know what to do with that. But maybe it's why I sit and wait for the next thing to hit: I want to see what could actually happen. What the end looks like. Where I'll go and who I'll see—my parents? Ruth? The cat I used to pet when I couldn't sleep because of my black hole dreams? I doubt it.

Fifteen minutes, twenty-six seconds. Right before she started humming I turned my gaze

toward the clock, waiting for the second hand to start a new minute and the moment it did, at precisely 11:57, she started. The more I try to ignore her the louder she gets. The entire room is teeming with little movements and barely noticeable sounds—the humming, the ticking of the clock, that Asian<sup>5</sup> woman shifting in her seat as she turns a page in the paperback she's reading—and eventually all I can do is join in, stopping my hand from shaking by drumming lightly on my armrest and tapping my left foot on the ground.

And now the heat is on for some goddamn reason and I still have seven minutes until my appointment. I can't think clearly once it reaches a certain temperature. I'll take two, sometimes three showers a day during the summer if it's hot enough, like the day in I want to say September when Henry got back from Death Valley covered in sweat because the air conditioning in his car died on the way back. Fucking miserable, man. Just looking at him was enough to make me want to do a few laps in the pool. I couldn't, though, because instead I had to sit there and listen to this crazy fucking story about how he got chased through a pharmacy “Jason” made him break into by a junkie with a syringe half-full with who knows what. Henry, man. I can't even touch that one. Some things are easier to just not think about. Black holes, people who've passed, whatever. After not very long things tend to change, usually for the worse.

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<sup>5</sup> Vietnamese, maybe? I know she's not Korean because half of my friends in high school were and her features seem off. From freshman to junior year I was even in Korean club: It started as a joke between me and my friends but eventually I got into it. I remember on the last night of freshman year, after the club banquet at a Korean BBQ on Sepulveda, a two of them—Chadwick and Jon, I want to say—came to my house, and the three of us watched *The Thing* and played video games all night. The two of them were in summer school that year and, since I lived closer to school than either of them, they would always come to my house afterward, around the time I woke up every day, sometimes but not always bringing me a teriyaki chicken bowl from a restaurant on the way to my house where they always got lunch. I say Vietnamese because Tony, who cut my hair from the time I was eleven until the end of high school and whose name probably isn't actually Tony, was, and she kind of looks like him.

A ladybug landed on my sunglasses the day before I left the city. I was waiting for Thomas to meet me at the Pier when it happened. I'd just gotten off the phone with the detective—nothing new—and the ladybug sat there for a moment, where I could just barely see it with my left eye, and then flew off again.

I showed up to the Pier fifteen minutes early to wait at the end of the mostly-empty boardwalk and watched a few Mexican kids fishing. A salty breeze was blowing my hair into my face. I threw some bread for a seagull that wouldn't leave me alone. Thomas showed up I don't know how late and asked what we were doing here.

Let's go on the ferris wheel, I said, changing the subject.

The ferris wheel? he asked, looking over at it. That's why you invited me here?

It'll be fun, I told him.

He frowned, looked at the water and the sky—both grey and murky—then back at me.

The view from the ferris wheel wasn't much but it was enough for me to know I wasn't sad to be leaving. That was all I needed: to go up there, to what used to be one of my favorite spots, and know I wasn't doing the wrong thing. Tell me the name of the town again, Thomas said.

Where I'm moving, you mean? Gig Harbor, I told him.

And it's near Seattle.

I nodded. From below, I saw a child let go of his balloons and watched them float into the sky. The bright reds and yellows looked strange against the grey sky. So, I said, less tactfully than I meant to, Carmes. You trust him?

Thomas looked into my eyes. No, he said. But I don't think he knows anything about

Henry.

The sun was setting when we left. Last night here, said Thomas. You want to go to Mel's or something? he asked. I told him I was going to drive around a bit, who knew when I'd get to sit in L.A. traffic again, and I'd call him later. He watched me get into my car and drive off.

The streets seemed stretched, almost rubbery, after the light rain that had fallen the previous night. I tried to make out the faces of the drivers in the other cars but couldn't. At a stoplight a strange-looking car pulled up next to me, then two others behind it, all of them black. I turned on the radio and looked out the other window at a seagull flying toward the beach. Last night, the voice on the radio said, there was an earthquake halfway around the world. Fifty confirmed deaths so far; it'll be a hundred by tonight. Maybe we'll get lucky and some of that light will shine on us here in the City of Angels, he said. Then my phone rang.

May I ask who's calling, I said.

You know it's me, Thomas said.

I don't know anybody named Me.

The voice on the radio reads a headline from the newspaper: *Rising sea levels, temperature inevitable in California; state must prepare.*

You're not just driving around, he said. I could tell from the way you said it you were lying.

Why, I said, looking at everyone walking on the sidewalk, whatever gives you that idea?

I know you better than you think, he said. Seriously, what are you doing? I know you're not at Aaron's.

And how do you know that?

Because I'm sitting outside his house, about to go inside.

To do what?

Hang out, he sighed. Come over if you want.

Maybe a little later, I lied. I have one last thing to take care of first.

I got to Long Beach twenty minutes later and waited near Cameron and Locust. Carmes wasn't there yet but I knew he would be soon. I couldn't leave without talking to him first. It wouldn't have been right. Cars streaked past me, going this way and that. I waited.

Carmes showed up fifteen minutes later. He didn't notice me sitting in my car, I don't think. We hadn't met that many times—usually I wasn't the one to deal with him—and hadn't seen each other at all since before Henry went missing. He recognized me when I walked up to him, though, and I could tell he wasn't pleased to see me.

Listen, he said, before I could get the first word in, everything I know I already told the badge.

Carmes was wearing a hood but I could still make out his dreadlocks, his leathery skin.

Somehow I doubt that, I told him.

That's not my problem. Unless you're buying, kid, our business here is done.

How much would it cost to get you to quit bullshitting me? I asked him.

He gave me the kind of look I'd been getting a lot recently. You're serious, aren't you?

I pulled out my pocketbook. Of course I am, I said.

Carmes spat. You want to know the truth? he asked me, waving away the money.

Yes, I said. Tell me.

The truth, he said, leaning in real close, is that I have *no idea* where your brother is. Henry finished his last job for us a few nights before you say he disappeared.

Dude, quit the act. I know *you're* Jason, Carmes. Or should I say: There *is* no Jason.

What you know, he told me, could fill up one water drop in the whole goddamn ocean. Open your eyes, kid.

Just tell me where to look, I said. Please.

Telling you won't do you any good if your eyes aren't open when you go looking, said Carmes.

What? I asked him.

It's a good thing you're leaving, he said, changing the subject.

I sighed. And why is that? I asked.

Something's coming, kid. Something you're not gonna want to be here for.

Coming? What's coming?

Carmes looked off and shook his head. Just something, he said.

I left it at that, I don't know why. It's not that I believed him so much as it is I just wanted it to be over. Carmes didn't watch me as I pulled away—he didn't need to, he didn't care. He believed all the things he told me—even if they were lies—and I envied him that.

Thomas and I were sitting at the beach by Aaron's house. Aaron hadn't come with Thomas to meet me there. It was late then, I'm not sure what time. The moonlight on his face made him look ghostly. He asked what time the taxi was picking me up and I told him: Early. So early he'd probably still be awake but I didn't want him to drive me.

Why not? he asked me.

It's just easier that way.

Yeah, he said. I guess so.

What are you going to do? I asked. Once I leave, I mean.

I'm not the one whose tomorrow is going to be anything new, said Thomas, a slight smile on his face. I'll do the same things I've been doing, which isn't a whole lot.

That doesn't have to be true. Nothing's stopping you from doing something.

I get what you're saying, said Thomas, and you're probably right. I just don't see things the same way you do.

Maybe you should try harder.

Thomas just looked at me. What if Henry comes back? he asked.

Then maybe I will too, I said. But I don't think that's going to happen.

I pointed up at the stars.

Cosmic, he said.

Don't do that.

Do what, Thomas asked.

You know what, I told him.

But he just laughed. I don't know why. People always laugh at things that aren't funny.

Later, while I was packing, I couldn't find one of my socks. It was half of a pair that Henry had given me with the Hollywood sign written all over it. He'd given me them as a joke but I'd grown to like them. One was there, but not the other. I think that's when I realized I would probably never see him again.

My eyes were still puffy when I got on the plane the next morning. Traffic was horrible and

my taxi driver barely got me to LAX on time. I was lucky, though: I got a window seat. It's nice to be able to see everything. Once we took off I looked out the window of the plane, into the big blue of the sky and, though I thought I already knew, wondered what might be there.

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A memory: Henry and me on vacation in Death Valley with our parents. I was six and he was eight. One night we drove out half an hour away from the Inn and looked straight up at the stars, amazed, terrified. Our dad told us that we were looking at suns hundreds the size of our own and other galaxies, each with their own sets of planets. Billions of them, he said. Trillions, even. Can you count that high? We both shook our heads no and I grabbed Henry's hand, cold in the summer night. And here we are, our dad said, right in the middle of it all. Then he showed us the polestar and a few constellations that I can still see when I look up at night and try to make sense of the night sky, wishing for the smog and light pollution of Los Angeles that used to block it from my view.

SNAKEBIT IN FURNACE CREEK

He woke halfheartedly into the soft darkness feeling robbed of his sleep. Through the windshield he saw a night sky cloaked in stars and knew he wasn't in the city anymore. He'd been asleep for what felt like too long and didn't know where he was but he remembered this dream: a scavenger hunt, all across the city and ending near the beach. Nothing there—what had had been looking for? he wondered. Windswept grass jutted out of the sand. A pair of soft hands, not his, danced in front of his eyes and closed themselves around the sun. And over all of it came a whispering voice. He couldn't hear what it was saying.

Where are we going, Wes asked, rubbing what was left of the dream from his eyes.

Place in the desert I've been telling you about. Rendell's voice came from behind the wheel and sounded calm. You have a nightmare or something? he asked. You're sweating.

I don't think I'd call it quite that.

Got you pretty worked up, whatever it was.

I've never seen anything like it.

You and your dreams. Just take it easy, man. We'll be there soon enough, probably around sunup.

Wes looked out at the road and saw a sign for Deep Springs. Repeating the name aloud, he asked, That where we're going?

We're going to Furnace Creek. Wanna tell me about your dream?

Wake me when we get there.

The truck came to a stop outside a diner. Rendell was right: just as he pulled the keys from the ignition and lit a cigarette, the first traces of sunlight were mixing with the cold morning air.

For a few minutes he sat there smoking, listening to the soft crackle of the engine as it cooled down, knowing Wes was awake and deciding to let him get up at his own pace. Wes didn't speak as he readied himself, noticing once he stepped into the morning breeze that theirs was one of only three cars in the lot.

You hungry? Rendell asked.

I could eat.

Good, said Rendell. You're paying.

The diner was empty except for one other man—a truck driver by the look of it—sitting in a corner booth near the window. Rendell tipped his hat to him as they walked in. They sat at the counter and were served two cups of black coffee by a middle-aged waitress with greying hair and something like a limp. Pigs in a blanket, Rendell said. Goddamn does that sound good. Wes gave a weak smile as he perused the menu, not especially hungry. He ordered in a monotone markedly less enthusiastic than Rendell's voice, a contrast the waitress, whose name tag read Tammy, seemed to notice. Her eyes darted between the two of them as she wrote down their orders. Rendell asked for a newspaper and noticed Tammy's hands shake as she handed it to him. Wonder if she's all right, he said under his breath as she walked away.

What's that? Wes said, snapping out of a daydream.

Nothing, said Rendell. Tammy just seems a bit on edge is all.

Who's Tammy?

Never mind.

Something in the paper caught Rendell's eye as he ate. Listen to this, he said. They're saying it's earthquake weather again.

No such thing.

It's something about the dry heat making those plates underground shift around.

Half of this state's a goddamn desert, Rendell. It's always a dry heat. What the hell kind of newspaper actually talks about earthquake weather anyway?

The *Desert Springs Daily*. Think it's the same people with the radio station.

And you believe it?

Just making conversation, Wes. That dream of yours sure put you in a mood.

Just then Tammy came back, speaking, Wes noticed, for the first time: Will that be all?

The trucker in the corner got up and left, nodding to Tammy as the bell above the door rang.

Rendell looked at her. Just the check, please, he said.

Tammy frowned as she walked away. A minute later she was back with the check, having just turned on the radio, which was tuned to static. Wes pulled the money out of his billfold and set it on the table, smiling faintly at her as he and Rendell got up from their seats. The gesture went unreturned by Tammy, who seemed more nervous than ever. The restaurant was now empty of customers and the almost fully risen sun was flooding through the windows. As Wes walked out the door he noticed Tammy had picked up the phone and was quietly murmuring something about heaven and the end of the world into the receiver which she held cradled to her ear.

They parked on the street in front of the house. Wes sat motionless in his seat and smelled wet grass and dew. On the side of the curb lay a bird, in the gutter and half covered in leaves and rainwater. A crow, maybe. Beyond the bird and the curb and the sidewalk was the house they were to enter once they'd collected themselves. Wes wondered why Rendell hadn't parked the

pickup in the driveway, why they were instead resting too close to the curb on one side and protruding into a red zone marked by a sign with the silhouettes of children on the other. Shriveled avocados lay scattered across the brown grass along the edges of the driveway. The garage door was open. In it, Wes saw an old car of a model and make unknown to him, decades past its prime and sitting in disrepair. Empty soda cans, cigarette butts, and fast food wrappers littered the floor. An old dog was asleep on a small carpet connecting the garage to the rest of the house, apparently preferring this resting spot to the grease-soaked cement floor. Sunlight glinted off the rear view mirror and into Wes's eyes. He blinked and then looked at Rendell, who returned his glance and threw what was left of his cigarette out the window and onto the yellow line separating the two sides of the street. Let's go, he said.

What's this guy's name again? Wes asked from the passenger seat.

Aleister Grey, Rendell said. Goes by Al. Old friend of my dad's.

I thought your dad was dead.

Doesn't mean all his friends are. When we get there I want you to let me talk to the guy by myself.

Wes looked out the window at a cloudless morning sky. That's fine, he said.

I've never met him but I hear he can be a bit hostile. He's an old timer, you know. Plus he's half-blind. Did I mention that?

No, Wes said. You didn't.

Rendell walked past the sleeping dog and stood in front of the screen door for a moment before tapping his knuckles on it, hoping to make enough noise for whoever was inside to notice. Wes thought he saw a look of worry on his friend's face for the first time since they'd

left the city. A figure appeared behind the screen door, stood still for a second, and asked, Rendell?

Yes.

You're late.

Carmes told me to be here at 8:30.

8:15.

Oh, Rendell said. Sorry.

Mr. Grey doesn't like to be kept waiting.

I apologize.

Yeah, well, the man said, might as well come in now. The man opened the door and Wes finally saw his face: tired eyes and stubble. Rendell passed the threshold first and nodded at the man as he stepped onto the plush brown carpet. Name's Jimmy, the man said. Mr. Grey's waiting for you in the living room.

In here, said a low, bellowing voice that came from the couch. Is that you, junior?

Junior? asked Rendell, taken aback as he took a seat in an armchair.

Your father was named Bobby James Rendell, yes? A name he passed onto you, his only son? The man was large, with grey hair that sharply contrasted his dark skin and glasses that hid his eyes from his visitors.

Carmes mentioned you knew my father, Mr. Grey.

Call me Al. And yeah, I knew your dad. It was years back, when you were just a boy. Your daddy had some business that forced him to come all the way out here from Chagrin Falls. Nothing so devious as our meeting here today, though. You know he wouldn't approve of this business between us.

Yes, sir, I do.

He'd probably beat me even worse than he would you, God rest his soul. Me being half-blind, that wouldn't stop him.

No. I don't suppose it would.

Al glanced at his two guests. Your friend's awfully quiet, he said, nodding toward Wes.

Carmes said it would be all right if I brought him along. Told me you wouldn't mind.

For once, Al said, Carmes was right. What's your name, son?

Wes, sir.

And you're just along for the ride.

I guess, Wes replied. The room seemed to go dark for a moment and he didn't know if the light had flickered or his eyes were playing tricks on him.

I suppose being a go-between beats another day in L.A., he said. Well boys, I hate to tell you this, but this isn't going to be an ordinary pickup.

Carmes told me—

Al put his hand up before Rendell could go on. I don't trust Carmes for a second, he said, and neither should you. Snake in the grass dealer, nothing more. He likes to play dumb, which he is, but not as much as he lets on. Since I don't trust him, I need to trust you.

Why would you trust me if you don't trust Carmes?

Because Carmes isn't worthy of my or anyone else's trust, and I have a feeling your father raised you well. Far as I'm concerned, your hands are clean, unlike Carmes, and I'm giving you the benefit of the doubt.

I'm not sure I understand what you're getting at.

No, Al said. I don't suppose you would. Thing is, I don't have the suitcase. Not here at least. Do you know what's in it?

I have an idea, Rendell said. Wes knew he was lying.

Then you know it's valuable and, considering the men you're working for, it wouldn't exactly be a good idea to leave it lying around. Now, Al said. Here's what's going to happen.

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In the car Wes squinted open his eyes and tried to remember why he'd agreed to this. Maybe just boredom. He looked at the empty driver's seat to his left and wondered why Al had asked to speak to Rendell alone and why he still hadn't come out of the house. He opened the glove compartment. No map. A chill ran down his spine as he sighed, took in the mild rays of the morning sun, and closed his eyes. First there was nothing. Then he felt himself walking through a long hallway that looked like a museum. The ceiling was low, domed, covered in stars, and there was a railing separating him from the scene on either side of him. The view ahead was long and narrow and the room felt cylindrical. He walked forward and for the first several minutes all around him was dark, empty, but not far ahead could see a glimmer of light. When finally he reached it he realized what he was witnessing: a panorama of the desert he was in. At first it was blank, just a night sky stretched over the sand, but then the stars came out. And then the sun and clouds. Bathed in light and color, it went on further than he could see. Balloons and fireworks floated into the sky and for a moment seem plastered there as he held his breath in anticipation of some great moment. Then there was nothing again.

It was almost midday when he woke up. They'd been back on the road for a little more than an hour. The noontime sun was directly overhead and palm trees and cacti were passing by in rapid succession as Rendell veered the truck off the road and onto the hot desert sand. The sky was blue, cloudless. Wes closed his eyes and relished the darkness for a few seconds as if it would change what he saw when he opened them.

Where are we? Wes asked.

Badwater. Dried up lake or something, remember? Just salt now.

I didn't sign up for this, Rendell.

You didn't sign up for anything, Wes. I asked you to come with me and you did.

I have things to do, you know.

Like what? Go back to Aaron's and wait for the next party to start? We were just there last night, for god's sake.

Like not drive around the desert and listen to some crazy old man spout off nonsense.

Why did you come with me, then?

I was bored.

I guess that's why you spend most of the time asleep, too.

I guess.

Tell me about them.

About what?

Your dreams.

If I could, I would.

I don't think I believe that.

You don't have much of a choice, Bobby.

Don't call me that.

Why not? It's your name.

No, Rendell said. It was my father's name. I don't go by it and you know that.

Wes looked through the rear window and saw two shovels in the bed of the truck.

What are those for? he asked.

I'll give you one guess.

Wes paused. You fucking kidding me?

Al said the spot's right near a sign marking the elevation and we just need to wait until dusk to start digging.

This is insane, Rendell.

No. For now it's just another day. We'll see where it goes from here.

Night fell slowly. It was getting dark, the streetlights had just started turning on one by one, and already Wes was drowsy. Rendell decided to let him nap. Under his breath, like a mantra, he kept repeating something Al had said to him: Only he who raises the knife gets Isaac.

What? Wes asked.

Rendell hadn't realized he was still awake. Nothing, he said. Just something Al said.

What else did he say?

I told him I didn't understand and he said I don't need to. All we need to do is what he told us, he said. And he's right. Wondering about it won't do us any good. I just want to get this stupid suitcase and bring it back to Carmes.

Wes was looking out the window. I heard someone Aaron knows got it bad from what's his name, the guy that orders Carmes around.

Jason.

Right.

That's just a rumor.

Thing about rumors, Wes said, is sometimes they're true.

Yeah, said Rendell, and sometimes they're not.

An hour later the sky was covered in stars, they were drenched with sweat, and Wes and Rendell still hadn't found anything. The task seemed endless. What do you think it is that

makes us the way we are? Wes asked as he started a new hole.

Why would you ask me something like that right now?

Just passing the time.

Time doesn't need your help passing, Wes. Does just fine on its own.

I mean it, though. Just look at us right now, at how absurd this is. Almost funny, isn't it? Look where we are, man. Don't you ever look in the mirror and wonder where the time went, how you ended up like this?

Like what?

Just how you are. You think it was out of your control all along, that once one thing happened, it was like a row of dominoes?

All I think when I look in the mirror is that I don't feel like shaving.

I'm serious.

So am I. We're out in the middle of the desert, digging what'll likely end up being our own graves, and you think it's anyone's fault but our own, that there's some hidden hand playing a game with us right in the center of it all? If you're on some sort of carousel ride right now, it's because you decided to get on it. All you have to do is step off.

What about the one controlling the ride? Wes asked.

There's just you. It's only you and it always has been.

I think I found something.

What?

Wes poked his shovel against something. I think this is it, he said. Then he reached down into the dirt and picked it up.

What's in it?

Let me see —

A sound like thunder rang out and Wes dropped the suitcase.

The fuck was that?

Move, Rendell said as he picked the suitcase back up off the ground and started running. Get to the truck.

What direction is it coming from? Wes yelled. He heard gunfire once more and before he knew it his feet were carrying him and he was opening the passenger side door to the truck and jumping onto the worn leather seat as Rendell started the engine and started to drive. Wes looked back and through their wake of dust he thought he could see a figure in the darkness but he wasn't sure. What the hell kind of jackpot have you gotten us into? he asked.

Fuck, I don't know. Al didn't say anything about this kind of thing happening. Said it'd be easy.

They drove on in silence.

Jesus, Wes said after a while, where the hell did this day go?

I don't know. But we went with it. Still got the suitcase?

Yeah. Should we open it?

No, Rendell said. I don't want to know what's inside.

Wes started fumbling with the lock, trying to pry it open.

Did you not hear me? Rendell asked. Cut it out.

Wes was close to opening it.

Wes. Are you listening to me?

Not really, Wes said, finally relenting and dropping the suitcase to the floor. Wake me when we're back in L.A.

Out past the salt deposits were the hills, beyond them just the stars sky and moon. The two men were perched against a rock, staring into opposite ends of the darkness, and the sky was turning a troubling shade of dark blue as the last remnant of sun died out for the night. Howard could already make out most of the constellations, and just then he was staring at one whose name he didn't remember—the arched back, the sword pointing east. What's east of here? he asked.

Just more desert.

And why are we doing this?

You know why, goddamnit, Verne whispered. Jason's giving me two hundred bucks, and I'm splitting it with you for driving. I know what you're trying to do and it's not going to work.

What am I trying to do?

You think that if you go on about what a bad idea this is then I'll agree with you and then say we can go home or something. That's not how this is gonna go down, though, so you might as well get comfortable against this here rock. Verne paused for a second, then spat before continuing. Besides, it'll be over soon enough. All your bellyaching is just making it feel longer. If you hear something and get scared, duck your head and shut up because it's probably just bats. And don't say anything about the stars: I can see they're out, same as every other night, but that doesn't mean you have to blab about them like usual.

He could hear the wind blowing through the sand. The cold came down quickly once the sun went down. They'd been making their way through the basin for over an hour already, whispering to each other the whole time even though this was Death Valley on a January night and they were alone for what seemed miles in every direction.

It had rained the week before, and the last of the greenery was fading.

They could scream into the night and no one would know it. Or care if they did. Howard passed the time looking around, counting the cacti while the stars got brighter and everything else got darker. The cacti seemed strange to him: so much inside, but so little to say about them. He thought about pricking his finger against one to see how numb his fingers had gotten.

Verne just sat there, silent except when spoken to, gun pointed at the shack. Through the darkness, Howard could see Verne's tattered shirt sleeves partially covering a tattoo of a gecko on his biceps. The skin around the ink was tan, almost leathery.

Wait, Howard said. Explain this to me just one more time. We sit out here in the dark and the cold, wait for these two city boys to show up and dig something out of the dirt by that shack over there, and *then* you shoot the blanks?

For the fiftieth time, yes.

And you're shooting *at* them, not just into the air, because this Jason guy wants to scare them.

That's right, he whispered through his black goatee.

Okay, I get all that. But did we really have to park half a mile away?

If we didn't, they'd know we're out here and none of this would work.

What if something goes wrong?

It probably will.

But we'll be stranded.

I know it.

There was a pause, and then he asked, Doesn't this seem kind of stupid to you?

Not as stupid as turning down a hundred bucks for a couple hours' work.

Howard wouldn't even have been there if Verne hadn't gotten his license suspended a week earlier. There was only one cop in the whole county and he'd caught Verne speeding enough times to keep him off the road for the next year. Bad luck, Howard had told him, and Verne said the same thing he always did. Howard laughed until it dawned on him that all this meant was that he'd be driving Verne for the next twelve months.

Neither of them said anything for a few minutes. After a while Verne started breathing more heavily. Howard thought it must have been nearly freezing out. He could just barely see Verne's breath before it vanished into the air. Aren't you cold? Howard asked.

Verne adjusted his hat. Dark peach fuzz covered his head. No, he said.

What do you think's in it?

In what?

The suitcase.

I don't know, man. Why don't you ask them when they get out here and dig it up?

I'm serious.

How the hell do I know? Jason didn't tell me and I didn't ask. It's that simple. Quit asking so many questions already, would you? The fucking thing could be empty for all I care.

Howard's eyes went wide in the darkness. Empty? he asked. Why would it be empty?

Same reason Jason would pay me two hundred bucks to shoot blanks at these guys: Life's weird and it doesn't make any sense. Sometimes that's all there is to it. You could spend all night thinking about it but in the end it just doesn't add up to anything then there's no point in trying. You need to quit looking for some bigger meaning all the time—the sooner the better. The least you could do is keep it to yourself and shut the fuck up for a couple minutes.

Howard ran a hand through his dirty blond hair. Still, he said, an empty suitcase?

That's just fucked up.

I didn't say it was empty. Just that it might be. Now shut up.

He thought Verne had been different when they were younger. Less of a cynic, maybe. Howard remembered backyards and telescopes and a warmth to the winter months that seemed to have faded. But he wasn't sure, really—maybe he was just remembering things that way.

After ten minutes of silence he heard something and thought it was bats. Then he looked up and saw a pair of headlights headed straight for the shack. There was no other light but the stars and moon. His hands felt clammy. The headlights came like a slow-moving wave out of the spot where the sun had gone down. Truth, Howard thought. Here comes truth. Verne's breathing became more visible through the darkness as a cloud moved in front of the moon. It was nearly pitch black for a moment. He couldn't even make out Verne's face anymore, much less figure out whether the goose bumps on his arm were from fear or cold.

Verne's voice was barely audible now. All right, he whispered, just keep cool for a little while longer, okay? We don't want to fuck this up now.

Howard was sweating. Fuck it up how?

By scaring them before they dig it up. Jason wants them to deliver it to him.

Wait, Howard said. The suitcase is going to Jason?

Didn't I tell you that already?

No, you crazy asshole.

Well I'm telling you now. Why does it matter?

It matters because you said you thought the suitcase was empty.

So?

So why would Jason have them drive all the way to Badwater and back just to bring him an empty suitcase?

Verne was a mere silhouette at this point. Jason's weird, he said.

The stars got blurrier, the air colder, and finally the car pulled up to the shack. It stopped fifty feet away from them. Howard peeked his head up from behind the rock and saw that it was a pickup truck. The city boys got out and started talking to each other, quiet enough to just sound like mumbling to Howard. The stars were glowing at this point, almost blending in with each other until one couldn't be distinguished from the next. Like a blanket across the sky. Verne didn't say anything the entire time: he just sat there silently, waiting. His sweaty face glistened in the starlight. The two men got their shovels from the truck bed and broke ground just behind the shack.

Hey Verne, whispered Howard. What's in the shack?

Don't even start with me.

The clouds moved past the moon and over the constellation he'd been looking at earlier. When the city boys started digging, Verne finally started to shiver. Nothing like a night in the desert to remind you how far from the sun we are, he whispered.

Ninety-three million miles, Howard said. How long you think it would take to count that high?

Longer than we have.

You mean until they finish digging?

Verne didn't answer.

After an hour of sitting in the cold dirt, watching the city boys dig, Howard started thinking.

He thought to himself, If *they're* working for Jason, and *Verne's* working for Jason, then that means I'm the only one who isn't. I am getting half of Verne's money for driving, though, so really it's like we're all getting fed from the same hand, even if we're on different sides of this rock and they'll never even know we were here. Then he thought about how he'd never even met Jason. He didn't think Verne had, either: whenever he went to L.A. it was someone else he saw. For all he knew, not even the guys with the shovels had met him. He couldn't see their faces through the darkness but by the sound of their voices they seemed as confused as he was. And the suitcase: had Verne been kidding, or might it really be empty? Could something exist and yet be nothing?

Eventually he asked, How much longer you think it'll be?

Verne sighed. You always ask me questions you know I can't answer, he whispered.

And you always act like you know what's going on.

Bullshit, he says. I've already told you I think this situation's as fucked up and confusing as you do. Only difference is that I'm not sitting here bitching about it. I swear, you've *always* been this way.

Maybe, but *you* haven't.

What do you mean, asked Verne.

You weren't always bad luck.

What do you mean?

Some things are good luck and some things are bad luck, he said. You find a penny face-up, it's good. You kill a ladybug, it's bad. Every time I'm around you, it's like I've broken a mirror or walked under a ladder.

Verne scoffed. Bad's the only kind of luck, he said.

Howard sighed. Things have changed. *You've* changed, man.

No, Verne said, his voice now raised above a whisper. Things don't change at all— maybe the way you see them does, but not the things themselves. Look around, Howard. See the sand, the hills? Hell, even the stars? This place will look like this forever. People are the same way. You come see me in twenty years and I guarantee you I'll be the same man I am today. If you think I was somehow different when we were kids then you're remembering wrong. It's only in your head that there's some cosmic *whatever* bringing everything together and making things go on the way it wants them to. If you're looking for truth, you have find it yourself out here, in the desert, in the *real world*, where things just are until eventually they're not anymore. He paused, then said, For someone who's so into luck, you sure have a hard time letting go of things you can't control.

All I'm saying is —

Wait, wait. Hold on now. I think they're done.

They looked over and saw the taller of the men from the city poking at something with his shovel. Then the other walked over and they talked for a second before lifting the suitcase out of the ground.

Verne didn't warn him to cover his ears. He just pulled the trigger. The gun went off, louder than Howard expected, and Verne laughed as he fired it a second time for effect. Stupid assholes, he said, and for a moment Howard become very aware of everything that was happening just then, how stupid the whole thing was, and he felt sick. His hands, legs, and face all started to tingle. He took a step left, then right. Then he lifted his head up, toward the blurry stars, which were brighter than ever, and tripped over a rock.

He couldn't tell what kind of snake it was. Faintly, he heard the sound of the city boys driving away. Verne, he said.

Verne was still laughing.

Verne, Howard said again. The snake was a foot away from his ankle.

You see that shit, man? Highlight of my fucking week.

Howard couldn't move. He felt frozen. *Verne*, he said, watching it stick out its tongue.

Its scales were black under the stars, and it was coiled like a garden hose.

Verne finally looked over. Holy shit, he said.

What kind of snake is that? Howard asked. What do I do?

Just take it easy, Verne said. Don't panic.

What kind is it, goddamnit?

Not sure. Rosy Boa, maybe. There are a lot of them out here.

It was moving closer to Howard's ankle. Is it poisonous? he asked.

I don't know. Hold still for a second.

What are you gonna do?

Verne cocked the gun. What do you think?

Everything was loud. Then it was quiet again. In the sky, the moon seemed lower than ever.

Howard looked down at his ankle and realized the pain was from when he fell and that he hadn't been bitten. A few feet away was the dead snake, its body in several pieces. Howard was surprised how dark the blood looked in the moonlight.

There was still dust in the air from when the city boys had taken off in their truck. Howard sat upright against the rock and waited. At first he'd been in too much shock to feel much pain but it was there now, moving from his ankle to the rest of his leg until there was no part of his

body that didn't feel as though a current were running through it.

You all right? Verne asked, genuine concern in his voice.

Yeah. Thanks.

No problem.

Howard had a look on his face that Verne hadn't seen all night. I mean it, man. You at least stopped one thing from going wrong tonight.

Call it luck, said Verne.

I was thinking about what you said earlier. You're partially right, I guess. But you're wrong too, he said. *You* look around, Verne. This used to be a lake. It wasn't always a desert. And the stars will burn out eventually.

Verne rolled his eyes. Fine, then. Some things change, but it takes a thousand years and they only ever get worse. You happy now?

Howard looked at his ankle. Not really, he said.

Then it looks like we finally agree on something.

There was a pause.

I'm the one who's sitting here snakebit, Howard said.

You and me both, bud. You and me both.

At least those guys from L.A. got what they came for.

They didn't speak after that. Howard looked past the shed toward the expanse of rock, taking little comfort in the now-dim stars that lay across the sky. He sat staring at the dead snake, thinking: *This used to be a lake.*

Carmes was preaching again.

First you're born, dig? Only what if that's not really first? I'm not talking chicken-egg here. You're not getting off that easy. I'm saying gobs of dough waiting for a cookie cutter. Sounds good, doesn't it? Be a lot easier that way. What if and wouldn't it be nice but I don't think that's how it goes.

He paused for a moment. Under an empty black sky he could say anything and think it was profound. Whether or not anyone else did wasn't a question he asked himself. Listening to him were a few bums standing around a trashcan fire and some kids, runaways who'd most likely get bored or scared and be back home by morning.

How long you think it takes to get to Sunset from here? I don't mean by car. You're not getting off that easy. I'm talking *camel*. Old world ways, man.

Camel? Why? asked one of the kids.

Because that's how you'd get to Jerusalem if you were a pilgrim way back when. How many days? Do you even know?

Jerusalem is in, like, the Middle East or something, the kid said. You couldn't get there on a camel from here. You'd need to fly.

Carmes spat. You're missing the point, he said. I'm talking about the apotheosis of neon lights here. I'm saying hookah bars and strip joints far as the eye can see. I'm saying A Sunset Boulevard of the Mind.

Okay, said the kid. Here to Sunset on a camel? Shit, I don't know, dude. Couple hours probably, depending on traffic.

Carmes came here for two reasons, both of which he was happy to recite on command: One, this city needed him. Two, this was his favorite street corner.

There are no other places like Sunset I know of, he said. Some people say Vegas, but fuck that. Nowhere compares to how the sun goes down here and things get brighter, clearer because of the street lamps and those new electric billboards. But then you look down the street and it's like a maze, high beams going this way and that way and then right into your eyes. The way no one walks around, they just drive. You know how long they have to sit around waiting for a clear day to take a picture of downtown for the postcards? Almost every time they try all you see is the smog. Low angles, high angles, they try everything. But all you can do is wait until the day after a rainstorm when you can finally breathe in real air and not the smell of other people and then boom, there's your picture to send to your family back in Montana proving you were here and maybe it's not as bad as they thought.

Wait, the kid said. People actually live in Montana? I thought that was just, you know, in the movies.

One of the bums got up and walked away. It was later than it felt and there were no stars out.

What's your name, kid?

Red, he answered.

Well, Red, I can't say. I've never been to Montana. Never met anyone who has, either. I'm told people really live there but who's to say?

It was his favorite spot for another two reasons. First, the names of the cross streets: they were perfect. His given name and his favorite plague from Sunday school. A sign of things to come, he thought. Two worlds joining together, Carmes in the middle, Carmes the only survivor.

What about the beach? Red asked. Couldn't we just go there?

The *beach*? Carmes was glaring at him. The fucking *beach*? Hell on earth, kid. What do

you do when you go to the beach?

Swim? he asked. Play frisbee...

Wrong. You look at the girls. All those heavenly bodies in two pieces glimmering in the sunlight. Greasy with sunblock. Lying on their stomachs, tanning the way they do with their strap undone. You know what I'm talking about. *Kills* me, Red. And what can you do? Nothing. So you stare. Stare at all these beautiful women you'll never fuck or kiss or touch or even see again probably. That's life right there, he said. A beach full of women you can't fuck.

Sunrise, Sunset. His eyes were glowing in the light of the flame.

Red didn't say anything.

That's right, Carmes said. No point denying something when you know it's true. Now get out of here, kid. You're bugging me.

Red and the others disappeared into the night, muttering to each other. One bum was still standing there, staring into the trashcan, unable or unwilling to take his eyes off the fire. Carmes decided to say nothing. Then the pay phone across the street rang. He walked to it, knowing who it was, and said nothing when he picked up the receiver, waiting for the voice at the other end of the line to speak first.

Carmes? he said. Carmes, it's me. We got it.

*We*? Who the fuck is *we*?

Wes came with me, said the voice.

You mean that kid you hang with who's always falling asleep?

Look, we'll be back in the city in a couple hours, Rendell said. Just tell me where you want us to meet you.

Carmes told him.

One more thing, Carmes.

What's that?

I'm never doing this again.

An orange tabby cat sauntered across the street. Carmes hung up the phone, looked around, and decided to follow her. She led him to the park a block away across the street from where he'd parked his car earlier that night. She rolled in the grass, basked in the moonlight. Then a mouse caught her eye and she ran off toward the jungle gym. From a bench a few feet away there was an old man watching the cat silently. He was smoking from a pipe when Carmes walked up to him.

Got a light? Carmes asked.

The man lit a match and cupped his hand around it. Without asking, Carmes sat down next to him and stretched out his legs. So, he said. What brings you out at such an hour? Pretty late, you know. A lot of unsavory characters haunt these streets at night.

The man didn't look up. This is where I get my best thinking done, he said.

Carmes smiled at this. You know, he said, I'm a thinking man myself.

Is that so?

Yes. That's so. But that's not why I'm here tonight.

A pigeon flew by. Rats with wings, people said, but Carmes had always liked them. He liked all birds. The way you could get close but never close enough. Or how there were more of them in the air than there were people on the ground. What did they watch from that empty blue sky?

You say that like it should surprise me. What's your name, thinking man?

You can call me Carmes.

Carmes, the man repeated. A strange, troubling name. It sounds made up. Are you

here to sell me something, Carmes?

Just passing the time, old man.

Above him the stars seemed to scream out in a language he couldn't understand.

You know, Carmes, there was a time when the elderly were revered, and wisdom was thought of as something cumulative. The older you were, the smarter and wiser you were said to be. And—listen to this—people treated their elders with respect, addressing them by words you've probably never heard of, like *Sir*. Can you imagine such a thing?

I can imagine more than I care to.

He blew a ring of smoke. Of course you can, he said. You're a thinking man. These thoughts you say you have, what do you do with them?

What any responsible person does, he said. I share them with the world. What I know isn't meant for me alone. Everyone should be blessed with the knowledge I have. Listening to me is the only chance they have of getting out of here.

Out of where?

Carmes shook his head. Just out, he said.

What, in your twenty-some years on this earth, has angered you so? That hair of yours—dreadlocks, yes? Disgusting—why do you hide your face behind it?

There was another guy with hair like mine. Maybe you've heard of him?

Bah, he said. You're not doing yourself any favors with comparisons like that.

Now wait here, Carmes said. I—

Don't interrupt me. You say you're a thinking man, yes? Then think on this: we are each of us granted an undetermined amount of time to whittle away as we please. Is brooding the day away really what you wish to do with yours? Have you never looked upon a tree and smiled? Do you not sink your toes into the wet sand just across the way, inches above the

sand crabs, and think of all the life you're connected to at any moment?

Sand crabs? Don't get me started on the beach, man. Let's not go there. I could spend all day with them and all that'd end up happening is they'd get stepped on and my feet would hurt. Pretty zero-sum, don't you think? And sure, I could choose not to think about this kind of thing. But then I'd be no better off than those goddamn crabs with their heads stuck in the sand.

There's what could be called a movement of people somewhere in the Pacific Northwest who've attributed to the phrase *Fuck it* the same meaning some Easterners put into the idea of letting go all earthly concerns. You might look into it, Carmes.

The two of them looked up and saw the first signs of daybreak. In the trees all around them birds were chirping more loudly than they had been during the night and the city was waking up.

Now look at that, the man said.

Another goddamn day. Shit, said Carmes. What time is it?

Just look up. It's morning.

The drive from the park to the beach was short. He could have walked there in ten minutes. It was half past six by his guess and though he didn't think Rendell would show for another half-hour he wanted to get there first. On the way over he saw what he thought was the tabby from earlier running across the street. Get out of the road, he said under his breath. That's not where you belong.

He took a deep breath of the sea breeze and closed his eyes. Salt and sand and the sound of seagulls in the distance. It was as though the sun had been waiting for him to rise into the distance, into the day to come. Others were gathered on the beach but he paid them

no mind, eyes fixed on the grey water lapping at his feet. In the mostly blue light his blonde hair looked dark, almost enough to make the others on the beach think it was brown. The old man's words were still in mind as he ran his fingers through his knotted hair, and he realized he hadn't asked his name. He turned around and saw Rendell parked on the street, waving from the window of his truck.

Carmes walked up to him. Yo, Rendell, he said. Where's that narcoleptic friend of yours? Not asleep in the passenger seat, I hope.

I dropped him off already. So you and I could talk alone.

Carmes stood there for a moment, looking past the man in front of him, and for a moment he thought himself changed in some way. Usually, he said, this isn't a time for chatting. I hate the beach, Rendell. Fucking *hate* it. And I hate that this is where Jason makes us meet. But you've caught me in a good mood, so I'll say okay this time.

This was a lot of trouble, Carmes.

I'm sure it was.

And I meant what I said on the phone earlier. I'm not doing this anymore.

The desert nights aren't cutting it for you? Shit, man, I love it out there. No water far as the eye can see.

We got fucking shot at, Carmes. Over some briefcase that only matters because you and Jason say it does.

Shot at? Who would waste a bullet on you?

Fuck if I know, man. We were digging this stupid thing up and we got shot at.

Did you see them?

No.

Well, shit. You were in the desert, man. It was probably some redneck shooting at a

dingo or whatever the fuck. That's what they *do* out there. I see you got the briefcase, though. Didn't try opening it, did you?

Hell no, said Rendell. I don't know what's in it, and I don't want to know. I just want to give it to you, go to sleep, and hopefully never hear from either of you again.

At this, his thought from a few moments ago passed. You mean you're not interested in Jason's plans for the future?

Rendell sensed the shift in his voice. Aside from pushing dope on street corners, sending me to the middle of nowhere, and ordering you around, you mean? No, I guess not.

A pelican flew over them and sunk its head into the water, coming up with nothing, and the last traces of the night were fading into daylight. Drag, Carmes said. You could have come to the top with us. With Henry out of the picture, you were our rising star.

Top of what, Carmes? Quit speaking in code and tell me what the fuck you're talking about.

Carmes paused and made a silent decision. Jason and I are gonna hit it big, he said. Got a real sweet deal going with this drug company from the South Pacific, dig? Can't say which one, though. Ah, what the hell, I'll give you a hint. It starts with an *S*.

Deal? What kind of deal? And why the hell do you have anything to do with it?

Jason is a people person. Good interpersonal skills, which is more than I can say for you. And—rightly so—our contact at this company believes that Jason and I are just the people to distribute their product stateside, starting right here on the coast. Says she'll be out here sometime this summer.

What does this have to do with the fucking briefcase?

I thought you didn't want to know, Carmes said. Even without the fire there was a glimmer in his eyes.

Humor me.

I'd like to draw it out in straight lines for you, he said, but that's not how it works. You're not getting off that easy. Now, if you wanted to keep at it, see where it takes you—

I already said no.

The first clouds had formed and they were moving through the sky like ants. You seemed so down before, Rendell. Such a roll-of-the-dice kinda guy. What happened, you go soft? Just look around, man. All these sad fucks walking around, dreading their shitty jobs, wishing they could just say fuck it and go for a swim. I could do that right now, just jump in. Not that I would. Stick with me and Jason and you could still make it big.

Big like you?

Exactly. Just like me. I used to be the guy Jason sent into the desert every few weeks, and now look at me. I'm getting ready to sit on a throne made of cash.

Why are you telling me this?

Man, I'll tell anyone who'll listen. That's the problem, though: people tend not to. Difference is, you happen to be in a position to do something about it.

Carmes, what the fuck are you talking about? You work for a guy named Jason the Drug Dealer. You're an underling, for fuck's sake, and everyone thinks you're homeless.

Some of the light went from his eyes. You're not looking closely, Rendell. I thought that desert air might do you some good, but it looks like you'd rather breathe in smog for the rest of your life. Keep at it, then. When shit goes down this summer you'll see what I've been talking about. Now hand me that briefcase.

Rendell gave it to him. Here, he said, as he started to walk away.

One more thing, Carmes said.

Rendell stopped and turned around. What is it? he asked.

Guy I knew once told me that L.A. was like the sequel to a movie he hadn't seen. Think about that for a while when you're deciding whether or not this is where you want to spend the rest of your days. Then he spat, paused for effect, and said, You'll be hearing from me soon, friend.

After Rendell had driven off, Carmes went back to his car and placed the briefcase on the passenger seat, wondering what was in it and if Jason would ever tell him. The first-month cold was mild as he drove with the windows rolled down. He passed the park on the way there, saw only an empty bench, and kept driving. Then he got back to the corner from the night before. For a moment he sat in the parked car and watched a single frond fall from a palm tree on the other side of the street, trying to guess how many bugs were on it. Would they get used to the ground, he wondered, or would they scatter back to their tree?

ODDS AND ENDS

The sunlight that filtered in through the curtains seemed unnaturally bright. From outside he heard the noise of chickens—gentle rustling of wind through feathers, the idle pacing and scratching of the flightless—and thought it odd that the rooster hadn't woken him that morning. There came a sound from inside the house, as if a letter had fallen through the mail slot, and Mo looked over without knowing what he was doing. Then he righted himself, looked back at the chickens, and went into the bathroom. There had been no mail in or out of the house in months.

Books lay stacked on a table by his bedroom door: *Square Foot Gardening*, *Possum Living*, *Basic Butchering of Livestock and Game*, *The Encyclopedia of Desert Living*. Each was endlessly dog-eared and underlined as if read through several times, and next to them were Mo's own notes, his own plans.

After he finished in the bedroom he carried the humanure outside, where he looked over the gridded garden. Each crop was encased in and separated from the others by a square-foot box. For soil he used a mixture of peat moss, compost, and vermiculite. The day before, he'd harvested tomatoes—his favorite crop: easy to grow, large yield—and was planting a new batch. He planted the seeds, spread the humanure, and quickly rinsed his hands. Then he cracked his knuckles and walked over to the rabbits.

His silver tooth glinted as it caught the reflection of one of the solar panels on the roof. He looked at the animals: ten does separated from three bucks by a small fence within the enclosure that kept them from running off. It occurred to him then that it had been almost

three months since he'd bred them. He'd have to do it again soon. He picked up one of the doe, which he knew was good for at least three meals, and gently picked her up. She did not protest.

Once he was done with everything else he threw out the rabbit's skin. The day was cloudless and just cold enough to give him the slightest goosebumps running down his leg as he checked on the chickens, who were moving about quietly. There were fifteen of them and he couldn't tell any of them apart. His eyes met the rooster's, who stared at Mo for a moment, cocked its head, and turned away. Mo thought then of a goat he'd kept as a pet when he'd first moved here and how it was almost six months before he'd admitted to himself that she was more trouble than he could afford to take on. He'd traded her to the nearest farmer for some chickens and the promise that she would be kept alive.

His shopping list for that month was the same as it had been for the last three years: soap, oil, toilet paper. Everything else, save the occasional tool, he already had. His yearly expenses hadn't totaled more than three-thousand dollars since he'd started living on the ranch, and two nights a week at the station was more than enough to cover that.

He came in with the eggs and rabbit meat and placed them in his chest fridge. The appliance used one-tenth of a kilowatt of energy per day. When he looked around the small garage the first thing his eyes were drawn to was a map pinned to the wall: *See Desert Springs*, it said. *Population 4,208*. There were markers for the city's modest downtown and the hot springs but not the radio station, where he'd started having his mail delivered, and not his small home on the outskirts of town. Desert Springs had known renown in years past as an oasis in the

middle of the desert, a small pulse in an otherwise dead land, but it'd been a long time since the outside world had thought of the town.

Next he got on the bike-powered generator. He liked the idea of transferring his own energy to the house. Electricity was flowing first in him, then through the generator, then into the battery. He'd barely started sweating by the time he was finished for the day.

He walked into the living room. A test pattern on the television and the sound of wind blowing outside. Dust covered everything in the room and there were stains on the carpet which he'd long stopped noticing. Each cushioned step he took toward the couch could be heard in the silence of the 600 square-foot house. When he sat down and started eating he noticed that the rabbit was slightly undercooked. He ate it anyway.

The food was heavy on his tongue and it made the inside of his mouth feel strange. Just hours ago, the small animal had been alive. How little time it takes, he thought. He drank his water from a cup on the coffee table between the couch and the television and then turned his thoughts to how this food, this house, all of it, was the result of his own hard work and nothing else. He kept eating.

Once finished with his breakfast he sat up and stared at the test pattern. The colors made him think of things he'd seen little of lately. He walked to the window, opened the curtains, and spent almost an hour watching the desert sun move across the sky.

After the sky had gone from blue to grey the phone rang. There was only one person with his

number.

Hello, he said flatly. There used to be rises and falls in the way he inflected certain sounds and syllables in normal conversation but they were gone now, replaced by a monotone that sounded unfamiliar even to him except when he was on the air.

Mo, the female voice on the other end of the line said, it's Sam, down at the station. Just calling to remind you you're on tonight.

He looked at his watch. It's Friday already? he asked.

The days just fly, Mo.

His house sat at the top of a slight hill, alone for a mile in every direction. When Mo walked out the front door he looked around as if to confirm that the night was still silent save for the occasional coyote and the land was still of a brown tint that cut into the green of the fields that stretched between his home and the city. The light on his porch was the only one that didn't come from the sky. Living there made him sometimes feel like a tubercular settler from ages past, the kind who had abandoned towns with wet, humid air for a dry climate which wouldn't cure them so much as delay what they already knew was coming. More and more he felt that he had more in common with the dead than the living, and again he thought: This is what I wanted.

His reflection in the rearview mirror surprised him. Such stubble on his face, such dark, outgrown hair jutting out of his scalp. He didn't remember being so pale or having such green eyes. When he looked at his watch and saw that it was half-past eleven he pushed down on the gas until he was far over the speed limit. It was several minutes until he saw another car on the road and he passed by it without looking to see who might be driving it. A moment

later he caught his reflection in the mirror again: wrinkled skin on his face, bags under his eyes. Then he looked out the driver's side window, toward the cactus fields, and listened for the sound of coyotes baying in the distance.

The station's sign was visible from halfway across town, and he smiled when he saw the bright, neon green letters burning in the night: DSPR. As he pulled into the parking lot he thought, This is our beacon now, our lighthouse, broadcasting truth for anyone willing to listen. But that's the problem, he thought: Not enough people do.

Every spot in the lot was full and he had to park on the street. This was never a problem on the dayshifts. Before he got out of the car he took a moment to brace himself. He locked the passenger side door, stepped onto the road, and walked past a woman he heard say *It's going to be an orange soda kind of night*.

Sam was sitting at the front desk twirling her hair when Mo walked in. She was a slight woman, and Mo knew he made her nervous. Before he said anything he looked around the inside of the station, at the incense burning and the dim light cast by the lights hanging from the ceiling. When am I on? he asked.

Soon, said Sam. John wants to see you first, though. He's in his office, but give him a few minutes before you go in—I think he's still on the phone.

Who's taking calls tonight?

I am.

Then who'll be out here?

No one, said Sam. We'll lock the doors till morning.

All right. Any mail for me?

Sam looked around the semicircular black marble desk. Just one letter, she said, sliding it over to Mo. He picked it up: *Maurice Oultier; c/o Desert Springs Public Radio*, read the envelope. He recognized the handwriting and decided to leave it unopened.

In the hall leading to John's office were pictures of all the DJs—Pat, Jus, Mo, a few others—as well as framed pictures of the landing site at Roswell, the aftermath of various natural disasters (partial successes, John called them), and iconography. Along the way to Room 14, where John was, were several other offices, marked only by small, laminated signs: *Theories and Research, Senior Eschatologist, Paranormal Interpreter, Endtime Preparation*. As Mo passed by each of them he heard voices from the other side of the doors. He reached John's office at the end of the hall, the sign to which merely said *President/Revelator*, and knocked on the door.

Come in, John said from inside.

Mo walked into the office and shivered, remembering that John kept it air-conditioned no matter what time of day or year. He felt even colder when he looked at his boss, who was imposing even while sitting in his chair. John was large and bespectacled with tufts of white hair resting on his dry, flaky scalp. He raised a tree trunk of an arm and beckoned Mo even further into his dimly lit, musky office with fingers that were too small for his pink hands. How are the chickens? he asked.

Fine, said Mo. He looked at his own feet, at the walls, then finally into John's eyes. Quiet today, now that you ask.

Is that unusual?

Mo shifted in his chair. Usually they make more of a fuss after I kill one of the rabbits, which is every few days. Like they think they're next. But today they didn't seem to mind.

I guess they're finally used to it, John said over his glasses. Do you know why I asked you in here?

You want me to do more shows.

You're quick, Mo. Which only serves to strengthen my point: you're the best we've got, and you know it. Pat brings in a good deal of listeners with his *Isle of Patmos* show, but his numbers are paltry compared to yours. People want to hear Memento Maury. They want to hear *you*, Mo. Doesn't that mean something to you?

Mo thought about this for a moment. Not really, he said.

John shook his head and looked down. When you're doing your show it's like you're channeling the dead, by which I mean you've got charisma.

If people got more of me, Mo said, then they wouldn't want me anymore. That's just how it works.

But two days a week? That's it?

I'm busy at home, said Mo.

I know your chores only take a few hours, Mo. What about the rest of the time? What is it you *do* all day?

Mo thought of his notebooks. He thought of the books he'd read and his plans for when things went south, which he knew they would eventually. This and that, he said.

This and that, John repeated. At least I know it's not because you care about your carbon footprint. I just wish I knew why, that's all.

I wouldn't waste too much time worrying about *why*, John. You of all people should know that.

In other cases I would, said John. But I know you're up to *something*, even if I don't know *what*, and I'm sure you've got a damn good reason for it. Even if it's one that only makes

sense to you.

Mo's answer was simple. It works for me, he said. But he was really thinking: people. It drained him to walk through the cereal aisle at the grocery store and wait in line at the bank. Only the station had his phone number and address. All his hard work was an effort to limit his human contact, and only on the air did he feel some semblance of connection with anybody.

The whole conversation struck him as odd. The Revelator himself, whose coverage of Jonestown had brought the station the most attention it had ever received, was slipping. All of a sudden John seemed old, outdated. Instead of saying anything Mo averted his eyes and looked at the walls, which were covered in photos of the grassy knoll, annotated versions of the moon landing (with each aspect thought to be faked identified by red arrows), and an early poster design for an abandoned film financed by the station: *Apocalypse Wow*. Mo found the presence of the paraphernalia comforting, cathartic, and finally said, I've got a good feeling about tonight.

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Good morning, eschatologists. This is Memento Maury, your host, no, your *guide* through this long, dark night called existence, taking over for Pat, whose current whereabouts I'm forbidden to reveal. I'm sitting here in lovely Desert Springs, California, listeners, and I find myself very calm tonight. Why, you ask? Because I know I'm in good company. I'd ask what you're all doing up so late if I didn't already know: you're waiting, just like me. You're quietly filling your crawlspaces and basements with bottled water and canned goods; you're eyeing the neighbors suspiciously; you're listening for voices in the night. What's it gonna be, friends? I've heard a lot of reputable seismologists swear that this is earthquake weather; they say Northridge was practically twenty years ago and we're due for the Big One. Borrowed

time, friends—is there any other kind? I'll open up the lines and see what you think.

On the other side of the glass, Sam was looking at a phone with more flashing lights than she could count. She chose one at random, transferring the call.

Caller, Mo said, you're live on Desert Springs Public Radio. I'd ask your name, but we've decided to err on the side of caution lately and maintain anonymity—a lot of small minds out there. Anyway, caller, what's it gonna be?

Wait, am I on the air? asked a female voice.

Yes, caller. What's on your mind?

Annunaki, said the woman. You know what I'm talking about, Maury?

Lizard people, yes. Go on.

It's crazy, Maury. People just don't want to believe it, and of course the mainstream press won't cover the stories. That's why I love DSPR—you're the only ones who aren't afraid to talk about the truth.

Although I'm not personally convinced by the idea that a race of reptilian humanoids secretly rules the world, I'm thrilled you feel comfortable discussing it with me. What have they done now?

Well, Maury, I'm out here in Santa Monica, where my friends and I picket every Saturday, you know, trying to open peoples' eyes to what's really going on, and one of my friends just got arrested today.

Arrested? For what?

Some pig started getting in his face, telling him to move out of the way, and my friend overreacted.

Overreacted how?

He tried to stab the cop with his sign.

I see. And where's your friend now?

Well, he's in jail. That's the reason I'm calling, Maury. To try and get some other supporters in the area to help me raise bail for him.

Well, I'll transfer you to our First Amendment Liaison to see if we can do anything for you. Out of curiosity, though, what did your friend's sign say?

*Lizard people rule you all.*

Mo checked his watch. Short and to the point, he said. I like it. Just one more question, though, since it is the official topic tonight: What are your thoughts on earthquake weather?

Total bullshit, Maury. No such thing.

Sam motioned for Mo to cut to commercial.

All right listeners, he said, we're going to take our first break.

Sam started speaking over the headphones as Mo watched her blonde ponytail bob up and down to match the trembling in her voice. Good news and bad news, Mo, she said. Which do you want first?

The bad.

You may have to stay on for a while longer than planned, Mo. The phones are ringing like mad.

Mo thought of the chickens. Okay, he said, but why?

Well, that's the good news. Something's going down in L.A., not sure what. John got a tip from one of his cop friends that they're planning on shutting down all the roads.

What do you mean something's going on?

I'm not sure. John didn't say and I didn't ask. I'm not sure *he* knows yet, if you can believe that.

Should I say anything on the air?

Not yet, Sam said. John says he wants to wait until he knows more about it. It's weird, Mo. He seems *nervous*.

About what?

Sam shook her hand. Break's over, she said. Okay Mo, we're back on in five, four, three....She finished the countdown with her fingers.

It took Mo a second to gather himself. All right, listeners, he said, this is Memento Maury, for DSPR, back on the air. What's on your mind, caller?

DS High Football rules!

Mo rolled his eyes. I'm not going to justify that with a response, he said. Sam transferred the next call.

So, caller, Mo said, what's it gonna be?

The caller sounded young. I saw the whole thing, Maury. I saw all of it.

All of what, young man? Where are you calling from? Mo asked.

Long Beach, said the kid. You guys hear anything about this yet?

First I've heard of anything tonight, caller.

Then I'm the first one? Holy shit, man.

Can you tell me a bit more about what it is you're seeing? Mo asked.

Only what I can see from my window—I'm in an apartment building, looking down on the intersection of Cameron and Locust, these two nothing streets, you know? No reason anything would happen here. That's the craziest part, man, that *I* got to see it.

Please, caller.

Red.

Excuse me? Mo asked.

My name is Red. I don't want anonymity, I want people to know my name.

Okay, Red. Go on with your story.

So I was on the street when I first saw it, but I booked it and came up to my room when the fuzz showed up. You see, I had something on my person that —

Mo was losing patience. Red, please, stick to what you saw.

—I shouldn't have and, right, sorry, Maury. So there was this guy, right? Just standing in the middle of the road. No big deal, lots of crazies and bums around here. See em all the time, shit, sometimes I *talk* to these dudes. But usually they move out of the way when people start honking their horns and all that. Not this guy, though. Just *stood* there, kind of hunched over, like he didn't know where he was. After 10 minutes there were people shouting from their cars, real pissed off, and finally the cop showed up. Kept his distance at first, asked him to move, nothing. The guy must have been on PCP or something, the way he lunged at this fucking cop, except for how *slow* —

Mo looked at Sam. The look on her face let him know she'd ended the call. Without saying anything, she transferred the next call.

Mo sat there, serene as he sat bathed in red light, and said, Caller, you're on the air..

Hi Maury, long time listener, first time caller here. I just wanted to say that Earthquake Weather is real, you know. People like to be dismissive and say it's not science, but that just isn't true. You know who first discovered it? Aristotle. That's right, the Greek. You like democracy, don't you, Maury? Cause that's from the Greeks, too. You don't get to just pick and choose with those guys: you take it or leave it. Take me for instance. I believe in everything, Maury. You can't afford not to in a world like this. Shiva, Buddha, Satan, all of em. Anyway, Aristotle: now there's a guy who knew what was going on. He said that there were these underground caves, see, and what would happen was the wind would get trapped

in them. How, I'm not sure, but that's not the point. The point is it was *there*, even if you couldn't see or even *feel* it at first. All that wind with nowhere to go, see? It would just blow around these caves, and eventually it would warm the surface so much that it felt unnaturally hot outside. Anyway, I've been feeling it lately. Like there's a staleness to the air that means foul things are on the way. A sort of slow buildup, like the calm before a storm. And then *whoa*.

In the mornings he collected rainwater. Every day he walked up three flights of stairs to the rooftop and the buckets were almost always empty. There never was much rain to begin with, he thought, and though he didn't really believe it, he sometimes wondered if there had been more since it started. Since they came. Something else he thought: maybe he only went for the view. From up there he could see what was left of the city stretch out and sigh in front of him like a sleeping concrete giant as if there were still something there. After a while the quiet would get to him and the effort wouldn't seem worth it. But every so often, in that blink of an eye between sleep and consciousness when he was rising from some dream or another and into a morning colder than the night that had come before, he I felt the storm clouds descending on that city and believed, against his better judgment and if only for a moment, that there was something to it all. As though it might actually have added up to some greater force exerting itself on him, on everything. Wanting him to keep going. Then he would open his eyes all the way and remember where he was and everything that had happened and dismiss all thoughts of meaning and reason. Like rubbing the sleep out of his eyes. Thinking about it felt like walking into an empty house he hadn't been invited to and once inside finding there were no doors, no exits.

A man named Lopez lived in the room next to him on the fourteenth floor of the Denizen. Lopez kept a journal and sometimes Avery saw him mark the day's entry with a number written at the top. The day before, Lopez had told him they were on day 196 as if this carried some special significance and Avery asked him, Day 196 of what?

Since they hit, Lopez told him. Since the nasties showed up.

How many months is that?

Almost seven.

I must have lost track of time. Guess it doesn't matter much anymore.

Guess not, he says.

He'd been at the Sunset about five days. More, maybe. The exact details didn't matter much in the way things turned out but he tried to hang onto them all the same, convincing himself that even now they counted for something. Like a way to attach himself to the way things were. He sometimes thought that maybe it wasn't that different now, just quieter mostly, and the thought always stopped him for a moment. He don't know what to do with such a notion so he would look out the window, wondering if the clouds outside would finally bring some rain. And when he did, all the buildings and streets looked the same as before, save for the lack of people, and this reality was just as troublesome. He remembered when the reports broke out on the news: Some said they'd come on ships like the plague, a failed science experiment from an island somewhere in the South Pacific, though they weren't sure which one. Others thought it was holy retribution, god's wrath, something to that effect. But even the men on the street preaching their endtime message ran when they saw them coming down the sidewalk. Dropped their signs and everything. The first time he saw one he didn't believe it. He thought he'd strayed into a dream or a movie and it couldn't have been real. On the news they called it an isolated incident and said not to panic but were proven wrong later that night. God, how it spread. More and more people falling down and waking up as something else. After a few days he knew perhaps a dozen people who still picked up the phone when he called to ask if they were okay. After a week all he got was their machines telling him they weren't at home but could he please leave his name and number and they'd call back as soon as they could. He didn't bother.

Up on the roof he found the buckets empty for the fifth day in a row and decided to check the rope going across the way to another hotel used as a safe house. Call it a last resort, Gus had told him. A way to get from one to the other should something happen. Half a block down the street he noticed something that hadn't been there the day before: A billboard had the letters XST painted over it in bright red paint. Gus, he yelled across the street. After a minute the only man left in the entire building poked his head out of a window and looked at Avery, who pointed at the billboard. Gus looked at it, shrugged, and asked, What do you make of it?

Don't know, he yelled. That's why I called you out here.

They couldn't have done that, Gus shouted back.

No, Avery said. They couldn't have.

Gus shrugged and for a moment both men were silent.

What kind of name is Gus anyway? Avery asked.

Short for Gustav. Why?

That a Russian name?

Swedish. Does it matter?

No, said Avery. I guess it doesn't.

Anything in the buckets? asked a voice from behind. Lopez.

No.

Five days now, he said, waving across the way to Gus.

I know.

There's still enough food in the stockrooms for months but we're getting real low on the agua, he said.

Hey Gus, Avery shouted. How you doing on water over there?

Just fine, he said. I've been telling you guys for weeks it's safer over here.

Fuck that, Lopez said to Avery, as Gus's head disappeared back through the window it had come out of. I told you we can't go over there. Our generator's got more juice and we have more food in the storeroom down in the basement. It'll rain soon enough.

Maybe, said Avery.

It's stupid for us to even risk walking across the street. We don't know how many are left.

We're all that's left, Lopez. Nothing and no one but us.

I guess you've forgotten about our friends with the slumped shoulders crowding the streets, he said.

It'll be a while before I forget about them.

Lopez pointed at the sign. You know what that is? he asked.

No. Do you?

Ran into them a few times before I got here. and of survivors stocking up on weapons, water, and food, then planning on making their way out to the desert, building a stronghold, something like that. Almost joined up with them until I realized they weren't much more pleasant than the nasties. Real asshole of a leader, forget his name.

You never mentioned this before.

Didn't think you'd be interested.

Well, Avery said, thinking about it, I guess you're right. No reason to risk going out into the open like that. Not yet at least. We've got everything we need right here.

For now, Lopez said said.

Yeah. For now.

Avery stayed up on the roof for a while after Lopez left until at last he saw a small patch of white breaking through the greyness of the sky, knowing it was the same seagull that had been coming there for weeks speeding up as it flew closer toward him, finally landing on the westernmost ledge of the rooftop. From his pocket I pulled out a small bag of chips and emptied it out onto the ground in front of him. Don't tell Lopez, he said as the bird ate. He doesn't like scavengers. When the bird finished eating she flew off and Avery knew that she only came here because there couldn't have been much food anywhere else, but he considered a few minutes of company a fair trade.

The difference between me and everyone who went around screaming *why why why* is he lived long enough to stop asking. For a while he waited for an answer but one never came. Unless you think of its absence as an answer itself, which he supposed might be comforting to be some people. For him it felt like being passed over. If there was anything out there it had decided that he wasn't part of it. There wasn't any sense to any of it. No reason either. Getting through the days got easier when he stopped asking *why*, save for the boredom, though the reasons seemed to grow clouded. He remembered reading once in a newspaper when such things were still common about a black hole they'd recently discovered. They said it was massive as eighteen billion suns, the biggest they'd ever come across. Four billion light years away, they said. *Eighteen billion suns*, he thought. He could barely fathom such a thing. But he still knew it was out there, whether he could envision it or not. Just like those things that were out there now. If you'd asked him one day before they came whether or not he could picture such horrors actually existing on this earth he'd have kindly said no. Yet here they were.

Sometimes he turned on the television set and channel surfed between the static and test patterns, wondering if there was anything else to be found. Sometimes for a minute, other times for hours. The different frequencies of white noise hummed like a bird and after a while the shrill sound it made each time he switched the channel created a sort of rhythm to which he could tap my foot were he so inclined. Usually he wasn't. But he had to pass the time somehow, and it seemed to go just as fast doing this as anything else. Lopez occasionally shouted through the wall, always something about the high-pitched noises hurting his ears. Avery, he yelled once, quit wasting the power, man. Your dad was a cop, right? Still think it's illegal to shoot someone? After that he would turn the volume down, sometimes falling asleep with the set still on.

One night he and Lopez started a trashcan fire on the roof. A way to pass the time. It'd been weeks since either of them had seen one and every entrance to the hotel was pretty well-barricaded, so they figured what's the harm in a little light? In the glow of the flames Avery could see every detail, every line of his friend's face and for a moment it worried me. What's on your mind, Avery asked.

Nighttime, man. I hate it. I barely ever sleep anymore.

Why's that?

The fuck kind of question is that? You been keeping up on current events?

Yes, said Avery. Quite a bit.

Then you should know why I can't sleep. I have dreams about them every night. Fucking nightmares, man.

Haven't had one of those in a while, Avery said. I don't think my mind could conjure up anything worse than what's already happened. You get to a certain point where you

confront everything you've ever feared and then you come out on top in some small way. Where do you go from there? What happens when you get to the end and you find out there's still more?

Hell if I know, said Lopez. I try not to think about it.

So do I. I guess that's the best you can do.

Probably. But sometimes I can't help it.

I understand that, Avery said. But there's a danger to getting distracted with things like that. It's like this building we're in, the Denizen—you ever notice, going up the stairs, how the floors go straight from the twelfth to the fourteenth? We live on the thirteenth floor, whether you think about such things or not. Were I superstitious—and I suppose I was, once—that might worry me, might make me think it's bad luck.

Like there's any other kind, he said.

Well. You might be right about that.

It's hard to accept, Lopez said in a far-off voice.

You can accept whatever you like, Lopez, but that won't stop what you refuse to believe in from coming. Never has before, and it won't start now. It's like time. I think about the past, be it a day ago, a year, doesn't matter, and I wonder how did I jump from that moment to this one. And if I did it then, can't I just do it again, think myself into some future where all of this has ended? But it doesn't work, and every time I see one of those horrors, scattered as they are these days, I still don't fully believe in them. I think just as I did the first time that I've wandered into some dream or hell and I wonder will I ever wake up. Still haven't yet.

Lopez said nothing. The look in his eye was enough to tell Avery how he felt.

Lopez, he said, looking him directly in the eye. Tell me more about XST. I get the

feeling you know more than you're letting on.

That right? he asked.

Yeah. That's right.

I told you all that's important already. I was walking down a road one day and saw them coming from the other direction. The guy at the front of the line told me they were going to build some kind of compound here in the city where they'd be able to see any of the nasties coming from a mile off. Shoot the bastards graveyard dead on sight, the guy told me. Send them straight to Hell. He told me I'd be safer with them but something about this dude gave me a bad vibe, you know? Something cult-like about this group, like they were the types who preached this kind of thing way back when. Talked too much about salvation and holiness, shit like that. So I told him I'd rather fly solo, avoid a crowd that's just gonna draw attention, and he started calling me a fool, saying I wouldn't be saved and all that jazz guys like him love to rant about. After that I just kept walking. Never heard of them again until I saw that billboard.

All right, Avery said, taking it in. I'd have done the same.

That's what I figured.

For a moment neither of them spoke. Then Avery broke the silence: I guess what scares me the most, he said, is that things don't seem too different to me anymore. Quieter, that's all. Almost reminds me of home.

That's right, Lopez said. You're not from around here, are you?

No. I guess I'm not. I didn't used to be, at least.

I forget where it was you said you used to live.

Place up north. El Sobrante.

The trashcan flames were dancing. Never heard of it, said Lopez.

Just as well, I say. I doubt there's much left of it. Wasn't much there to begin with, to tell you the truth.

El Sobrante's a Spanish name, Lopez said. You know what it means?

Of course I do. It means *The Leftovers*.

By the time Lopez showed up he'd barricaded most of the entrances to the hotel and grown a beard. Why the hell not, he thought. He heard a shot ring out and had thought it was just Gus on one of his kicks about target practice until he heard a voice he didn't recognize cry out from below. It was Lopez, having just ended one of them, shouting over what he must have considered some sort of victory. Then he saw two more lurching down the street and started running. Avery whistled to get his attention, pointed toward a side entrance to the hotel, and started making his way down the stairs. By the eighth floor he was gasping for air and after two more his hands were shaking and somewhere in the middle of all this he heard three more gunshots and finally made it to the side entrance, where he cleared away everything blocking the door, finally opening it to the light of day and Lopez's face, covered in blood that did not belong to him. The two men looked at each other wordlessly.

The next morning he walked into the hallway. Lopez, he yelled through the wall. I'm going downstairs to check the generator and get some breakfast for us. No answer. The emergency lights covered the corridor in a dim yellow light as Avery made his way toward the stairwell at the end of the hall, the door cast in a sort of faded neon green by the slowly-dying exit sign. When he opened the door to walk downstairs he heard a noise in the darkness of the stairwell and knew immediately that the fire the night before was a bad idea. Avery held his breath without closing the door and then saw it there, staring at him with hollow eyes, moving slowly

on the landing between that floor and the one below, and he reached for the pistol. Not there. Still in the drawer in the room, he remembered—he'd thought it was too quiet a morning for it, as if such a thing existed, and then he was running, back in the hallway now, screaming to Lopez. Halfway to his room Lopez burst into the hallway and before he could even tell him to Avery got down on the ground as Lopez aimed his rifle at what was following behind, now directly underneath the exit sign, and fired an otherwise useless piece of lead into something that should never have been. The hall went silent. Jesus Christ, Avery said.

Jesus? Lopez said, looking down at it. No, I don't think so.

It's still moving, said Avery.

Lopez loaded another round into the chamber of the gun.

I wonder if they dream.

I don't, Lopez said. Then he shot it again.

Lopez went to check on Gus and Avery went back into his room to get the pistol out of the drawer. His hand shook as he gripped it and for a moment he felt like he was going to vomit. Then he steadied myself and sat on the corner of the bed, waiting for Lopez to come back. After several minutes of sitting there he heard a gunshot from across the street. Then another. In that moment he knew Lopez would outlive him and almost immediately decided not to do anything, not to risk going over there to see what had happened. Instead he opened the blinds as a soft rain began to fall, then started to make his way up the stairs toward the roof, keeping the pistol drawn the entire time. Each step felt more arduous than the one before it and he couldn't begin to imagine what might come next, how there could be a past or a future, only a perpetual now as unending as those stairs. Once he got to the top he saw that the bird was there, as if waiting for him to show up before flying away for the last time.

Gus is gone, Lopez said as he walked in the door.

What do you mean gone.

You know what I mean.

Did you take care of it?

Yes.

Why were there two gunshots?

One for the nasty and one for Gus.

Did he say anything?

He said he could see.

See? See what?

All the colors of the dark.

What?

Don't ask me.

How much longer you think we can hold out?

Not very. An El Sobrante fortnight sounds about right.

A what?

Expression from up north.

I gathered that. I'm asking you what it means.

It means that I don't know. An El Sobrante fortnight could be anywhere between two weeks and a decade.

Christ. So what do we do?

You're asking me? I'm not the cowboy here.

You've made it this far.

So have you.

Quit fucking with me, Avery. I'm asking your advice.

You're looking at it. No choice but to keep going on same as we have been until we can't any longer. If you're thinking of joining up with your old friends, that's something you're going to be doing on your own. My experience with groups any larger than ours during a time of crisis is that they panic and start pointing fingers. I don't think I'm willing to go out looking for anyone or anything else until we've no choice left.

You're saying this is all there is.

Yes. I'm saying that.

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The view from the window in his room didn't offer as much as the rooftop. Looking at the extinguished neon sign of the old hotel across the way or down the street lined with palm trees as far as his eyes would take him was not as overwhelming as attempting to take in the vastness of the entire city at once, from the ocean and sand to the rolling hills and buildings. All of it stretched out underneath the white of cloud and blue of sky that extended beyond his view and covered everything unseen, unimagined. He knew what was out there but from here he couldn't see it and some days that was enough. From here he didn't have to consider what was past the horizon line. From here he could close the curtains and pretend there was nothing there at all.

*Ours is a quiet lot. Days dark and nights darker still but rarely is there any noise. Even the worst of it is like clockwork now: when we see one of them coming from beyond the gates the only sound is of a gun ringing out in the cold, lifeless air. What panic we hold inside we keep to ourselves and only let it out in that one moment. Then nothing. I've grown used to the sound of gunfire from the courtyard and it no longer wakes me but whether it alters my dreams I can't say. Sometimes I lie here, unaware of these strange surroundings for just a few seconds, and think I know what bliss means.*

•

Her eyes adjusted to the darkness. The morning air outside was still cold and the sun was just now rising but inside the living quarters it was almost always dark. She put her hand in front of her face, blinking repeatedly and trying to identify her fingers as they danced in front of her eyes. Then she looked at her watch. The battery was dying and the light it gave off was turning from blue to grey. In its slowly-fading glow she could barely make out the time. She had twelve minutes before her shift started. Gatekeeper, they called her. On duty with either Les or Dmitri today, she wasn't sure. Half of the dozen or so cots in the room still had sleeping bodies in them, eyes twitching behind their lids as if thinking something their conscious minds couldn't. She lay in bed a few minutes longer, running out the clock and wishing for another hour of rest. Even fifteen minutes. She looked through the open door into a dark hallway and wondered what could be out there, what might be lying in wait. God, she thought. Don't let today be the day. Then she grabbed her rifle and made her way out to the gate.

The palm trees that lined the street had remained mostly untouched in the days and weeks and months since it started. Dae didn't notice them most of the time. In the past they'd seemed

distinct from the towering buildings and miles of cement but now it all blurred together, united in decay. Each tree had been rigged with explosives should the need arise. It hadn't yet. She looked across the lot, gun in hand, and saw Boris, her bullmastiff and the group's guard dog, meander over to the other tower. Dmitri was surveying the surrounding area with boredom in his eyes. He nodded at Dae when he noticed her staring in his direction. She nodded back and noticed that a few bodies lay dead in the road in front of the gate. It was nearly ten in the morning and no one had gone out to either burn or get rid of the corpses yet. She found that odd.

Toward the end of her shift she saw a figure making its way to the gate and realized after fixing her scope on it that it wasn't one of them. She called the other guard off, slid down the ladder, and called out to the man walking toward her. Too much noise, she thought.

What's your name? she asked quietly.

My name's Ricky Ricardo, he said. Who the fuck are you?

I'm Dae. You want to tell me your real name?

The man sighed and ran a hand through his waist-length black hair. Lopez, he said.

I don't see anybody else here with you, Lopez.

Neither do I, he said.

You're alone, then.

Am now.

Now? Not before?

No. Not before.

You're really into making this difficult, aren't you?

Lopez glared at her. Had a friend with me up until a few weeks ago, he said. Guy

named Avery. We were holed up in a hotel on Sunset.

And where's your friend now?

Checked out early.

I'm sorry.

Don't be, he said. I doubt he feels sorry for us.

Dae looked at him strangely. Right, she said. Do you know who we are, Lopez?

Yeah. I know who you are. Ran into some of your patrols or whatever a couple months back. Maybe longer. What are you, the welcoming committee?

You could say that. More welcoming than some of my friends, at least.

I noticed that before. Probably why I didn't come over here sooner.

Then why are you here now?

Because now this beats the alternative.

•

*Some days when the sun came out we could look up at the cloudless sky and almost touch it. Taste and smell the air. Look at it like we were seeing it through a prism, like we were seeing it for the first time and basking in its newness. It felt like walking through a dream where everything was the way it used to be. Before they came. But when the clouds came out the sky moved quickly and brought rain and grey days spent inside wondering what might be outside, just beyond our view.*

•

Lopez followed her through the lot, observing everything as they walked: two guard towers, a somehow-untouched main building, and a few smaller structures the group had clearly built itself. The dog was glaring at him but it never barked. Lopez had gotten used to estimating heights while living in the hotel and the building he was walking toward seemed only five

stories tall. Every eye in the lot was on him.

Tell me where we're going, he said.

I'm going to introduce you to someone.

Who?

You'll see.

On the guard towers, in black spray paint, he saw the same three letters he'd read all over the city for more than half a year: XST. The sight of it made him uneasy and for a moment he wondered how not at any other point but now he should end up in their stronghold. The only band of survivors he knew of. Dae opened a side door into the main building and Lopez couldn't help but laugh: they were in a film studio. There were props, lights, tables. Sitting in the director's chair but missing the hat was a man who probably wasn't as old as he looked. His hair was dirty, somewhere between brown and grey, and even in his chair he looked over six feet tall. He was poring over a stack of papers with a bald man whom he waved away when he saw his guests walk up to him. This is Bagshaw, Dae half-whispered.

Bagshaw spoke softly. A new recruit, he said.

Maybe, said Lopez.

Name?

Lopez. He was staring into Bagshaw's piercing blue eyes, looking for a hint of personality where there was none.

Dae, please wait outside. You can take the rest of the day off. I think Lopez and I should chat alone for a while.

Dae nodded and left the room.

Welcome, Lopez. You've stumbled upon the new utopia. I must admit I'm surprised to

see you. It's been months since we've met anyone new.

I can see that.

You must be wondering who I am, Bagshaw said.

By the look of things, you run this show.

You could say that. But this is no show, Lopez. This is the real deal, the future of the world. It isn't about farms and living off the land anymore. Canned food. Water filters. Cement. That's what keeps us alive now.

Yeah? How long you think it'll last?

As long as it takes. Do you realize how long it's been since these things showed up?

347 days, Lopez said.

Bagshaw missed a beat. That's right, he said. Almost a year. We're stronger than ever, Lopez. You could call it a waiting game of sorts. The weakest of the flock has been thinned out. I wouldn't even be talking to you if I couldn't tell you're a true survivor, you know. No point in ruining a good thing now, not after all our hard work. Soon, when we're sure the last of them are gone, we'll reclaim this city and shut it off from any more threats. Start over the right way.

This city's dead, man. Has been for a long time. You ever think of leaving? Heading out to the desert? What people I've seen in the last few weeks have all sworn there's some sort of oasis near Deep Springs. They say the nasties don't like that dry heat.

Don't tell me you're part of the rumor mill here already. My guys have been talking about that for months. It's a lie. There's nothing out there but sand.

So it's sand or cement, said Lopez.

Bagshaw thought about this for a moment. If that's how you want to put it, he said.

Lopez had already made up his mind. Mind if I sleep on it? he asked anyway.

Bagshaw said no and dismissed him. His advisor from before came back and they talked in hushed tones over the same stack of papers from before. Bagshaw looked up to confirm that they were alone in the studio. As he looked back down the room seemed to grow dark around him.

Lopez found her in the common room stoking flames in the fireplace. Her eyes were fixed unblinking on the dancing flames. Before he said anything he looked around, realizing he was in a sort of renovated green room.

Bagshaw's kind of a kook, he said.

He's a great leader, Dae said. We're safe here. Think you'll stick around?

Doubt it. I've spent enough time cooped up inside, waiting for something to go wrong. I know what's out there and it isn't any worse than the feeling that all you're doing is running out the clock.

It's not so bad here. A little boring, maybe.

Boring. Man, that's the exact word for it. This whole time I've been so fucking bored. I've felt more alive in the last few days since I left the hotel, moving from place to place and avoiding the nasties, than I have in the last six months combined.

But you came here, Dae said. Why?

Supplies, mostly. A place to sleep for a night or two before I head out to Deep Springs sounds good, too. I heard the nasties never made it out there. And even if they did, there's nothing but space out there. Elbow room, you know what I mean?

Risky, was all Dae said.

You ever see the desert at night? asked Lopez. Before, I mean? Stars like you wouldn't believe. Even with the power grids down there's still too much light pollution in L.A. All the

smog's still hanging in the air.

You're willing to risk everything to see the Big Dipper?

This place isn't that great, you know. It seems safe, but it's boring. Cold, too. I didn't leave that hotel just to find a new place to hide. You stay here long enough and it'll go from a fort to a tomb, like it did for my friend Avery. I'm not going out that way. So yeah, I'm willing to risk it.

You're crazy, she said. You go out in the open like you say you want to and those things will find you in a day.

Don't tell me you've never thought of getting out of here.

A few times, sure.

So what's stopping you?

It's quite a roll of the dice to just pick up and leave. I wouldn't know where to go, what to do. Which places are safe, which aren't.

That's easy, he said. None of the places are safe.

Some things aren't so simple.

Everything is that simple.

How can you think that?

It's gotten me this far. And it'll keep getting me where I need to be until it doesn't anymore. And that'll be that.

I don't see how you can be so calm about it, said Dae. How can you ever prepare for something like that?

Not much to prepare for. You close your eyes and then you don't open them again.

•

*Some nights when I try to sleep all I can see in my head are rows and rows of makeshift graves. Unmarked,*

*unknown. All the restless dead dreaming down there, waiting for something, just like the rest of us. That's what scares me the most. Our dreams get buried along with everything else.*

•

It was still dark when Dae woke up. She hadn't used an alarm in months: her body simply knew when to wake itself into the day. Her head felt heavy and she didn't want to leave the warmth of her bed but knew she had to. Gatekeeper again, like every other day. A few cots away she saw Lopez still asleep. Boris was on the ground next to him, nestled in a dream. She found that odd. They usually kept Boris outside during the night, on guard or at least as company. The room was awash in moonlight and everything looked blue. If she'd dreamt she didn't remember it. She let out a long, deep sigh. Today was her double: sunup to sundown in the tower. There was still sleep in her eye as she got up, grabbed her rifle, and made her way out to the gate.

Another slow day. All morning long she shivered and rubbed her hands together as she waited. It seemed wrong for June to be so cold. Up in the tower her gun was at the ready but she didn't use it once. Across the way, in the other tower, Les looked just as bored. She'd have shouted conversation to him if it were allowed. Sometime in mid-afternoon Lopez appeared in the lot. Boris followed behind him, wagging his tail. Lopez walked around, made small talk. Everyone seemed to like him. She guessed she did, too. Lopez looked up at her and she somehow felt foolish, sitting in a tower with a gun in her hand, waiting for something to happen.

When she slid down the ladder at the end of her shift a few hours later, Bagshaw was standing there waiting for her. The two of them pondered one another for what seemed a long while.

The sun was starting to go down. Her black hair was shoulder-length for the first time in months and it dawned on her, as it did every so often, that she was the only woman left in the camp. That made her nervous.

You talk to your friend? asked Bagshaw.

Not today. Why?

Took off ten minutes ago. Went out the back way. Crazy asshole wouldn't even wait til the morning.

It makes sense, I guess. They almost never come out at night. For all we know they're asleep.

They don't sleep, he said. They don't sleep and they don't dream.

Okay, said Dae. Lopez is gone. Is that all?

He took Boris with him. Dmitri tried to stop him but he said it was okay, then started saying something in Mexican.

Mexican? You mean Spanish?

He was headed east, I think. Go catch up to him if you want.

Dae whistled to Les in the other tower. Get ready to open the gate for me, she said. I won't be gone long. Then she ran back inside, grabbed a bag of supplies, and walked up to the gate. In the quiet of the lot her footsteps echoed softly. Before she left she felt a chill and thought it might rain.

•

*Time feels like sliding down a slope, helpless. Or walking a plank. I can picture myself holding my hands out to protect myself from whatever fall is coming, like in a dream, but I can't picture the pages of the calendar turning from month to month the way everyone says they have, a year of space between the day they came and today. It can't have been that long, can it? The Fourth is coming up. I wonder if there'll be*

*fireworks.*

•

Lopez was easy to find. Dae had guessed he was reckless and she was right: he'd made no attempt to be quiet as he darted through the empty streets. After searching east for half an hour she caught up to him a few blocks from the XST compound and fired a warning shot into the air. Too much noise. She didn't care.

I knew you were bored, said Lopez.

Dae ignored him. Boris is staying with me, she said.

Then you'll have to come with us, cause there's no way this dog can take that place any longer. Look at him, man. He's more bored than I am.

Dae contemplated the dog for a moment. She thought he looked fine. You can risk your own life, she said. I'll worry about his. Then she looked at the sky, darkening and full of clouds. Why do you care, anyway? she asked.

Probably the same reason you do: I like him, Lopez said. Just come with us. I could tell from the way you were sitting in that tower today that you're as sick of it there as Boris is.

Quit talking about him like he's a person. Boris is a dog. He runs around. He eats from a bowl and sometimes he shits on the floor. Most of the time he's just there.

You act like you think he's one of them, said Lopez. He's not.

Before Dae could say anything she stopped herself. Something wasn't right: Boris was barking. That could only mean one thing. Fuck, she said. Fuck fuck fuck the gunshot. Lopez, they're coming.

She saw them then, at least two dozen slow-moving decrepit bodies coming at her en masse, traveling through the street like a circus come to town, all freak show with no ring leader. Indifferent to the miserable sound of their own moans. They were no more than fifty

yards away and bound to close that gap quickly once they sighted Dae and Lopez. He turned to her then, waiting for a response. We're going to lure them into that alley right there, she said without thinking. Get Boris out of the way and stay here for now. Hand me my rifle and be ready with a Cocktail when I yell for you. Do it fast. I can only hold them off for thirty seconds, maybe thirty-five. Before Lopez could say anything she'd darted across the street and taken cover behind an overturned car with a bumper sticker that read *Only death is real*. After a moment Lopez realized what she was doing. She set the butt of her rifle on the side of the car and took aim and Lopez blinked at the sound of it then saw one of them fall to the ground headless in a shower of dark red blood. When she was sure the rest of them had seen her she ran into the alley and started climbing up the fire escape. By the time she'd made it up two flights she'd been joined in the alley by more of them than she could immediately count. After ending two more of them with her gun she saw Lopez dip a rag into the open bottle of alcohol and light it before she'd even called for him. The flames spread quickly as he threw it and within seconds a dozen or more of them were aflame but she kept reloading and firing all the same. When finally she'd used her last round there was only one left and Lopez walked calmly into the alley and shot it in the head.

He looked up at her. That's six for you, eight for me, he said.

She found herself panicked, breathless. The surge of adrenaline was too much and she stood crouched forward with her hands on her knees. Counting the breaths and trying to even them out. Lopez looked on, saying nothing and letting her take her time. When she regained her composure and apologized he shrugged his shoulders and told her that her plan was a good one and she'd done well even if he'd stacked up a higher body count.

You keep track of that kind of thing for too long and you'll end up as mindless as they

are.

I'm more mindless than you know, he said. If I just sat around thinking all day I'd drive myself loco faster than Avery did.

We have to find somewhere to rest, she said. Though I doubt we'll get much sleep around here.

Try counting sheep, he said. That's what I do.

The sky changed colors quickly. Clouds moved sideways. They spent the rest of the night in the backroom of a gas station a few blocks away debating what to do the next morning. Dae thought about going back to the compound right then but something more than the threat of more coming stopped her. Chance might have gotten you here, Lopez said from his makeshift bed on the floor, but chance won't help you decide whether or not to come with me. Boris was wagging his tail as Lopez pet him. Dae made her choice.

•

*Boris is getting old. He liked it here at first—eating the lizards that Mo catches for him, basking in the dry heat—but I know he doesn't have much time left and when I see him hobbling around it's all I can do to stop myself from crying. The only thing that hasn't changed about him is the way he sleeps. So...what's the word. Animated. He makes noises, moves around, but never seems distressed. I know he's dreaming and he seems more at peace than at any time since he was a puppy, long before any of this happened. It's the only time I don't worry about him. But then he wakes up and looks at me as if I can tell him where his dreams went. As if I can somehow explain why this world is so different from the one he's been dreaming of. So I just rub his head, whisper in his ear until he falls back asleep, and hope that when death comes to him it's while he's asleep. And I hope he keeps dreaming.*

It's getting dark and Aaron and I are by the swings in the middle of the park as the fog begins to cover the trees and moon. I'm not saying anything because Aaron told me not to, he told me to leave, to do whatever I wanted, but what I wanted to do was stay with him because it's his birthday and he can cry if he wants to. Emma's been gone for a month; I don't even remember how long it's been since Henry disappeared. *The band's name is a vision of tattered flags in a circle with a child wrapped within them.* I don't remember where I first heard this but it keeps repeating in my head and I've decided to let it. The fog is getting thicker and I'm seeing shapes and forms that I don't think are really there. The wind is blowing lightly and then harder, moving plastic bags around, I think I see an animal walk by—a cat, raccoon, or skunk maybe—and I'm gradually getting more and more nervous. The tallest tree in the park is swaying gently in the breeze and the more I pay attention to it, the more it unnerves me. It's like the longer I look at it, the more enthralled I become as everything blurs around it, losing shape, losing form, until all that's left is this tree and the wind blowing it, changing it somehow. *The band's name is a vision of tattered flags in a circle with a child wrapped within them.* Looking up at the moon as it disappears and then comes back, I notice for the first time that it has become very cold. Occasionally I mumble something to relieve the tension, but for the most part the only audible sound is the creaking of the swings as Aaron slowly rocks back and forth. I don't know what he's so worked up about. Something to do with all the assholes at his party, I guess. Birds are chirping in the trees as they're gently rocked to sleep by the wind, something Aaron doesn't seem to notice. He coughs and at the same time a lighthouse sounds in the distance. Finally he gets up because he's tired of sitting on the swing in the cold and we walk back to his house without saying anything. *The band's name is a vision of tattered flags in a circle with a child wrapped within them.* From his backyard I can still see the tree swaying in the wind, moving to a silent

rhythm, hidden, hidden.

You sure you're all right? I ask Aaron once we're both back in the house.

It's just weird, he says, a look in his eye that I'm not used to seeing. First Henry disappears, and now Emma's up in Washington. It's just you and me now.

I look around Aaron's crowded living room, gesturing toward his guests.

Do you know any of them by name? he asks me.

I think about this for a few seconds. Well, there's that guy Wes, right? Anyway, I figured you did, at least.

Wes took off already.

How do you know? I ask.

Point is, he says, changing the subject, none of these people are really my friends. They just show up to my parties.

I didn't know you distinguished between the two, I say over the sound of trance music.

Aaron picks up a half-finished White Russian off an antique bookshelf and gives a forced laugh. Maybe you're right, he says.

A girl walks by us, falling out of her top.

I would, I say, nodding at her.

You would what? Aaron asks me.

Not sure if he noticed her, I say, Think about it.

You'd think about what?

Never mind, I say, thinking he's playing dumb for some reason.

For a while we're both quiet.

I hope I don't wake up tomorrow, one of us says.

We both laugh, I'm not sure why.

No, but seriously, he says.

I leave it at that and walk back outside to call Emma. She doesn't answer and I don't leave a message. It's even colder than it was a few minutes ago, but the light from Aaron's house makes everything seem more real and less interesting. I look through the window, sigh, and walk back inside.

When I get back the lights in the room are bright, too bright, and I keep squinting and putting my hand over my eyes in an attempt to shield them from the lights but they keep changing colors and finding their way through the spaces in between my fingers as some strange music I've never heard comes out of the stereo as if it's been summoned. I leave the room for the darkness of the hallway and start pacing through Aaron's house as people laugh and whisper secrets to each other, wondering what it is about nights like this, the way the faces and muted colors of the walls and furniture blur into one another, the way it all slows down around me before I can grab onto any of it and ask the questions I'm somehow still afraid of. No one seems to notice the door close as I leave, paying too much attention to the incense as it slowly burns and its smoke fills the room like a nerve agent, leaving them with naught but the ash and their memories of the night as it unfolds ever so carefully and speeds up as it gets closer to its anticlimax. Instead of escaping their problems they're magnifying them and going home more depressed than they were when they arrived, thanking their host for his hospitality and the scars that they know they'll keep forever, knowing never to forget nights like this because it teaches them about the cycles that keep repeating, about beginnings, ends, and the middles that end up overwhelming the rest of the story as it gets written down on paper for what

probably isn't a very good reason at all. They'd be better off if they could forget nights like this, the kind where everyone seems to have trails following their every move, where I want to slow things down long enough to hold onto something for just a moment, and where I feel like I've been holding my breath since the moment the sun went down. And I know that, later, as I try to fall asleep, I'll start hyperventilating, knowing I should probably leave the city like Emma did, even though I won't, and I'll wonder where the night went and what happened to it and who are these people who make up my world and who am I, who am I

I look across the room and see Aaron flirting with the girl that walked by us a few minutes ago. He looks like he's having a good time, like he wasn't upset just a few minutes ago. I decide to go to my car and pass out in the backseat.

•

When I wake up I start driving and Emma calls back and I don't answer. I don't know why. Not to spite her, I don't think, but after the party all my energy for dealing with people is gone and I start thinking about what she said to me, how I know I should change things but for some reason I don't. Sometimes it's just easier to keep things the way they are, I guess. I drive aimlessly for over half an hour before I realize I have no intention of going home. First I go to the Santa Monica Pier, where there's ash in the air from the brushfires in Malibu, and stare at the ocean for a while. A pelican swoops into the water without catching anything in its huge mouth and decides to just float there for a while. It's noon. The bird seems old and sluggish and I realize that I like the idea of pelicans more than I like pelicans themselves. No one looks at me as they walk or bike by and I don't look at them. The waves are loud, foamy, and grey. My phone rings again and I walk past the ferris wheel on the way to my car and pull out onto the road and start heading north along the coast, avoiding the highway and getting stuck in traffic anyway until, after an hour or so, I'm almost out of L.A. I have to drive near the fires

first, though. Once the roads clear up the air does too and I can breathe without inhaling the smell of fire. For some reason it reminds me of Henry.

The only cloud in the sky looks like a guy with a beard.

After a while I lose the signal to DSPR and all I get is static, which I listen to for a few minutes. Then I turn off the radio and try to hear the ocean but can't.

At a gas station in Santa Barbara I meet someone with the same first name as me who looks like Jimi Hendrix and tells me about eating mushrooms out in Joshua Tree last month. He says he forgot who he was and thought that he was dead. Sometimes, he says, you forget that there's this whole world out there, man. And the only thing you can do is go out there and *see* it before time runs out. I tell him I was once served mushroom tea and, misunderstanding the situation entirely, drank a whole cup without realizing what I was doing. He doesn't seem impressed.

Later, in a motel room near Pismo Beach, I fall asleep watching a horror movie called *Night of the Shape*. It costs \$9.99, is almost three hours long, and takes place in a town in Hungary I've never heard of. I decided to watch it based solely on the synopsis, which read: *Director Andre Pesz's nightmarish vision comes to life more vividly than ever in the stunning and surreal conclusion to the Shape trilogy. Rusnak's struggle against the enigmatic force known only as the Shape finally ends. (R, 172 mins.)* Then I wake up at I don't know what time and call Emma from the room phone and she doesn't answer so I close my eyes again.

When I wake up the room is completely dark and I remember about the blackout curtains. For the first few moments I'm awake I forget which town I'm in and don't know what's on the

other side of the curtains. I open them, just barely, and have to put my arm in front of my face it's so bright. Before my eyes adjust to the light I close the curtains and go back to sleep. Then I have a dream not unlike the one Henry described to me the last night I saw him, and at its end I get the feeling that maybe whatever happened to him wasn't something of such great importance, that maybe it's okay to die.

•

When I get home the next day, there's a letter from Emma:

*Thomas,*

*I'm always amazed by time's ability to pass. A month I've been here already—is that a lot or a little? I can't decide. My aunt showed me this article about how time doesn't really mean anything. Big surprise there...*

*I was talking with a girl I met at school and she was explaining what is exactly that she does as an Animal Sciences major. I told her it was terrible what they do at beef packaging plants, how the cows were shitting themselves all over the place because they could smell death (this is what I read!), and she was saying that it's not like that at all. That yes, the cows are shitting themselves, but that's pretty much their lives, and that they couldn't smell anything because of some elaborate trap door, so until death they were chewing cud as usual and thinking about grass or whatever. I don't know, I guess I just see a world where people are pretty much thinking about death all the time. Isn't that part of what we do, or why we do what we do? To deal with death? On a farm, you would see death all the time, but probably not think about it as much. I wonder which is better.*

*The other thing I noticed about our conversation was that all her stories were about overcoming something, and I don't think I have a single story like that. Is this a California thing? Will it change now that I'm up here? Could these stories only come from some other world where the amount of work you put it*

*has a direct relation to the success you have? I'm not saying this is a better world, just that it's different. What was that study about rats with the food pellets? I remember that the rats who were randomly shocked when given food went crazy and electrocuted themselves trying to get the pellets. Someone dismally said that that was what life was like, which I thought was pretty hilarious and pointlessly dramatic. Of course, all my reading on memory would say that this is the unintentional warping of an event in order to tell a more satisfying narrative arc about redemption or some such thing. But again, I have none of these stories. Life, in my experience, is pretty absurd. Enjoyable, too, but not particularly rational or logical.*

*Did I come to that conclusion based on experience, or how I choose to remember things? I'm not sure. Anyway, you probably know where I'm going with this. I don't have to follow this anywhere, but how do you manage both? Can you have absurd things happen to you and still believe in a logical world? Anyway, something to think about. I could probably go on; I won't, but I so often do. There's more to life than all this theoretical bullshit! For instance, my fabulous dresses that are coming in the mail. Or my striped shorts that I can't wait to wear. Really thoughtful Christmas presents. Clementines in season. All this and more—at last there is something to look forward to.*

*See you soon,*

*Emma*