

YELLOWSTONE EXODUS

by

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ABSTRACT

Yellowstone Exodus, a novella, is a reminder of society's fragility in the wake of naturally occurring catastrophes. The first of three parts, *Yellowstone Exodus* is book one in a trilogy of novellas intended to entertain, inspire, and forewarn its reader. Beginning in Denver, Colorado, this story redefines brotherhood and friendship as two best friends, Clayton Rudd and Raymond Montero, set out on a journey to reach the Montero family home in Fort Gibson, Oklahoma. Obstacles awaiting them include a nightmarish environment caused by the Yellowstone supervolcanic eruption, hostile enforcement of state borders in a nation stripped of its federal government, and the prisons of their own physical, mental, and spiritual endurance. The struggle of these men dwells deeper than simply living during the time of the great American diaspora, as they will need to deal with addiction, PTSD, depression, and denial. Encounters with strangers, along their way, establish impressions and illuminate an understanding of a super-power nation's freshly dispossessed population.

For Alexander

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I

The shovel leaned in the corner of the garage, and the cotton gloves, grass-stained and worn nearly through in the clutch of the palm and the tip of the thumb, were in a drawer of the dead man's workbench. These gloves were the same pair the late Mr. Atwood pulled weeds with, and planted flowers, each Saturday, when he waved to Clayton from his knees in his front yard. Mr. Atwood's greeting, called from across the street dividing him and Clayton, was always the same: "How are you doing, soldier?" The moment repeated once a week, the man gardening and Clayton returning home to Ray's apartment in the complex down the road.

Then an earthquake, on a Friday, and Saturday's routine with Mr. Atwood was lost.

The first hours following the quake were still unreal in some sense. Neither Clayton nor Ray could clearly recount all the events. Probably a result of shock. Shock, and the familiar blur of intoxication. Night had arrived prior to their making a go of it, leaving the apartment for the house they now scavenged.

There'd been so much to do: pack their gear, study the maps, choose their route, and then the crash course in what he simply called, "people management," that Ray had definitely needed. If Ray had any concerns for Clayton's well-being, prior the earthquake, seeing him now, in full survival mode, in command, ought to crush his doubts. Clayton was a survivor in his natural element, a guppy finally dropped back into his bowl of water. He'd assumed the role of leader so naturally that he hadn't noticed the surprise in Ray's reaction to this shift in him. The earthquake was only the first shockwave for his friend.

It'd been dark out when the two entered the home through a large window already shattered. Most of the interior appeared unharmed but near the rear of the home the ceiling had

caved, plaster and wood and insulation all piled atop where the man and woman had been seated, maybe to an early lunch.

Never having seen a dead body before, Ray had been stunned and managed only to find a seat on the carpeted ground of the home's living room. Through his tears, Clayton went to work, removing debris and salvaging the couple's remains. The house was quiet except for the grunts of his struggles. He used a flashlight for his only lighting, standing it upright, its beam aimed at the dilapidated ceiling. Ray gradually recovered and tried to help with the corpses of the strangers. Outside, the city of Denver transformed into an unfamiliar territory.

Clayton remained so calm, so in charge, that it must have been another shock to Ray to see him flash into tears upon discovery of the bodies, the dead man and his wife in their home. His own emotion came as a surprise. Yes, it was difficult when, unexpectedly, one finds human remains, but he didn't really know the couple, not even their names. From the man's wallet, Ray had pulled a driver's license and read the man's name: Adam Henry Atwood. So, it was to a Mr. Atwood that Clayton had waved. *How are you doing?*

The double-car garage was well-maintained, cleaned and organized by Mr. Atwood in his life. Clayton rested the shovel against the workbench and set down the gloves. Organization was important to keep a clear mind. He'd need to remember this and to share the thought later with Ray. If this really was the post-apocalypse, then cleanliness was godliness. Not that there was a god.

Parked on the other side of the garage was the Atwood's white Honda Civic. It looked to be a slightly older model, maybe a 2012, but, like the garage and the yard, the vehicle's appearance didn't cry of any lack of care.

Along with the gloves, he placed two large flashlights and some candles Ray had found in the wife's crafting room. Then he put a pack of painter's dust masks, a dozen, next to the lights and candles. These would come in handy later, once the stronger storms carried the heavier ash their way. Atop the workbench, he also set his Zippo, his K-bar, an eight-ounce flask of Ray's high-proof moonshine, and the twelve-gauge Benelli Montefeltro shotgun they'd discovered in the house's master bedroom. The gun was a silver and gold edition, one that he'd never seen before. At his feet, where Ray had left them not long ago, were the two bug-out bags, packed with their gear from earlier in the day.

Hanging from the ceiling directly above the workbench space was a sixty-watt lightbulb. Like a spider at the end of its silk, a lone bulb hung from a cord. When the bulb flickered, the contents of the garage were hidden in darkness just for a moment. Then, the light steadied, and Clayton continued his work. A seventy-five-watt bulb, attached to the center of the garage's ceiling, ran on the electricity supplied by a single 12kW generator. Starting the generator was a first step, since the house's power was already off-grid when they'd arrived.

Ray was inside the house, on a search mission for more supplies that might be of use, once the two were on their way to Oklahoma. He was guided by the list Clayton had given him of suggested items: first-aid kit, sleeping bags, tarp, bug repellent, cell phones, and rope, among other things. The shotgun and flashlights were among their first finds, and finding these items had validated Clayton, giving him the confidence that he'd done right bringing his friend here prior to heading east.

Ray's apartment was suited for college life, but until the power had remained off for several hours, it'd been easy to overlook its lacks for basic survival. Ray didn't own very much

gear necessary for a trip of this extent. Electronics would soon be rendered irrelevant once batteries wore down and could not be replaced. Cellphones and radios would die, signals dimming like stars in the sky of a rising sun. GPS systems would suffer the same loss of power, though their friendly satellites would continue to orbit a nonresponsive planet. All of it a futile circling, he had tried to explain.

But Ray wasn't having it. The world was not ending. This was like the World Trade Center collapsing, or when Pearl Harbor had been surprised by the Japanese, or like when that maniac, James Holmes, murdered those moviegoers in nearby Aurora. Shit was fucked up. Definitely. But the world wasn't ending.

"All the same," he'd argued, "you don't have what we need to go as far as Uncle Sal's place." Ray's response had been to explain how he'd made the trip in less than eleven hours. That they'd only need to gas up before leaving town. That it was Clayton who was freaking out, and must still be high if he seriously thought that they'd ever consider abandoning the car on I-70, if the road was too congested to move. Their argument halted when he'd snapped at Ray, "Do you think you're the only person wanting to get out of dodge?" They'd finished packing in silence.

The Atwoods were robbed of any chance to get out of dodge. Crushed in the quake. Clayton could only imagine how surprising the sudden collapse of their ceiling had been, eating turkey sandwiches one moment and then gasping for air in the next. Hopefully it was quick.

In the garage, there weren't any windows. Its large, aluminum door had held up well during the quake. It faced the east, and a smaller, side door faced to the north. The smaller door, too, had held intact. Fortunate, no doubt. The road from Ray's apartment to the Atwood's place

was lined with homes devastated by the quake, some leveled to the ground. To have this space to work, well, a small bit of luck to say the least.

Compartmentalization was key. Something they taught young recruits at Paris Island. Something Clayton had learned while in training there. To keep your mind on the task at hand and your emotions under control. The gore inside the Atwood's home, the meat which had greeted him and Ray without warning, was testing his mastery of the skill. As well as he appeared to be on the exterior, managing his work, there was collecting, persistently, a heaviness in his chest. It was guilt, he knew. Guilt was a familiar companion. He'd been outrunning it for years. Heavy, yet, oddly motivating. He needed to do something to stay in front of the feeling, to outrun the guilt like trying to outrun an avalanche. He'd do the only thing he could for the dead man and woman. To keep from being buried, he would bury them.

#

Raymond struggled to understand his friend's motivations for the burial. As recent as back at the apartment, Clay had preached about the importance of time management, and how the sooner they left Denver the better off they'd be. Now Clay was guilty for delaying. There was no denying that. Their trip was halted, and unnecessarily so.

"We didn't even know them," he argued. Clay was finishing with getting the portable generator started, the lighting in the garage came to life. After spending several minutes searching for some linen sheets at Clay's request, he remained even longer to observe his friend use them to prepare the bodies.

Clay ignored him while laying out each linen as a square on the ground and placing the stiffened bodies onto them, commencing to wrap each one. At one point, Clay stopped to drink

some water from a bottle they'd found in the fridge of the house. Clay held the bottle toward him. He shook his head in stubborn refusal. But Clay's arm didn't lower, just as stubbornly, and so after a moment passed, he accepted the bottle and drank some water. Then he set it on the washing machine by his side. How long would this take?

On the cold cement floor were the remains, wrapped in white sheets like mummies. Outside, the chorus of sirens and wails and chatter had become a consistent background sound, white noise, a rhythm of chaos. Only the volume changed, some moments more intense as a vehicle passed the house or a fight broke out nearby. Most of the time, however, the gunshots they heard were remote. When he had broached the subject of what was occurring out there, all Clay had said was that they were hearing the sounds of a city dying. Apparently, he'd heard the sound before, in Fallujah and in Kandahar.

The sound wasn't entirely foreign to American soil, he knew, although this country hadn't heard it for at least a century. If there was something Americans were successful at, it was keeping the dying cities in other countries. The World Wars in Europe and Asia. The Cold War in theory alone. The Civil War was a different case, America was deciding its own identity at the time, what it would stand for and stand against. In that case, the country wasn't quite itself. And, of course, there was the Revolutionary War to consider. But could a war to decide a nation's independence truly be considered that nation's first war? After all, wasn't it the conclusion of the war that determined the nation's recognition?

The sound of American cities dying, the sound Ray thought of first, thanks to his mother's lessons, was that of the Principal People, the Cherokee during the Trail of Tears. The terrible sound of wailing pain, like that which he and Clay were forced to hear from outside,

must have been the same cries his ancestors had made during the tail end of the 1830s. At that time, *Americans*, under orders approved by President Andrew Jackson, enforced the Indian Removal policy, herding westward all Cherokee like buffalo. And they didn't stop until reaching Oklahoma. It was no accident that his uncle, Salal, remained in the town of Fort Gibson, a popular destination for the dispossessed Cherokee.

Ray's thoughts were interrupted when he noticed that Clay had finished wrapping the bodies. His friend was drinking water by the workbench and gazing over the various items resting on it, undoubtedly considering the proper tools for whatever he had planned next.

"You know, Chief," he said, "this would go quicker with your help." Clay was putting the gloves on without taking his eyes from the workbench.

"I am helping," Raymond said. He heard his frustration in his voice, but he didn't care. "I basically searched the entire house gathering all the things on your list." He pointed at the bags near Clay's feet. And then, as Clay kept silent, handling the second glove, Raymond said, "This all would go faster if we just left right now. Before the sun rises and before more people get on the road."

He hated arguing with Clay. For some reason that was beyond his comprehending, Clay had developed an attachment to this person, Adam Atwood. That was a rare thing these days, for Clay to find anything worth attaching to. But, he couldn't deny his own reasoning. He was supposed to be the emotional one. He was supposed to be the one crying, or acting unreasonable. Clay was supposed to be the level-headed cynic, the stoic warrior guide. That's what Clay had offered him, hadn't he? Time was vital to helping Hialeah. Every second here was time forsaken.

The lights flickered, the men's shadows disappearing before reappearing on the cement floor of the garage.

"You're right, Chief," Clay said. "That is help." He was bending over and grabbing the feet of the woman's mummy, dragging her wrapped body closer to the side garage door. "Why don't you see if there's anything else left inside that we could use."

"I already checked off your list," he said.

Clay stood, "Then stuff not on the list."

His friend moved to the man's mummy.

"Like what?"

Clay bent for the man's feet. "I don't know," he said. "Plates, cups, silverware. Other stuff. Make up your own list." Clay grabbed the feet and pulled Adam Atwood along the floor, placing him beside his wife's remains.

"But we already have those things," he said.

His friend was breathing heavy after moving the body. Clay looked up at him. "I'm putting these fucking people in the ground, man."

The words were anchors in Raymond's blood. They held him still. Clay sighed heavily and moved to where the shovel was leaning.

Raymond regained the ability to speak. "I think I saw some bars of soap."

Clay nodded without making eye contact. With the shovel in one hand, his friend turned the deadbolt and unlatched the side door. Behind Clay, the door to the inside of the house shut hard, the sound it made swallowed by the cries of Denver dying.

#

In the darkness of night, a few hours before daybreak, there wasn't much difference between things and the silhouette of things. While Ray searched for useful items indoors, Clayton hunted for a proper spot to dig. He located a place in the corner of the backyard where a lone oak tree grew. He thought the tree to be a Live Oak, massive and weighted with the mass of Spanish moss, but he wasn't a hundred percent.

There was a tree, very much like this one, in the yard behind his childhood home back in Ellijay, Georgia. The long, swooping branches made the tree ideal for climbing. From a position at its top, he and the only girl he'd ever loved, Kate, would spy on his neighbors while they were busy doing yard work or enjoying barbeques or swimming in their pools. He remembered the tree had seemed larger than his house and had stood taller than it, too. Never did he enjoy more confidence than while standing at that height with beautiful Kate at his side. Now, he expected it might look much different. He'd learned that nothing ever seemed the same once you'd grown older.

As much as he tried to shake his childhood memories, to focus on how best to handle the situation with Ray once he finished outside, he was finding the task near impossible. He'd tapped into a deep, stubborn well of childhood images and was reminded, also, of his brother, Dougie. Much younger than he and Kate, Dougie would also stand on the oak's top branch, steadied by his big brother's arms around his waist, and peer over a world too large for him ever to know.

The avalanche of guilt was gaining momentum. He needed to compartmentalize, take control of his thoughts. Dougie was gone. His brother was already in the ground. Mr. and Mrs. Atwood were not. These were the facts. Facts that he was fixing, making right. Clayton focused on the flashlight in his hand. The rubber exterior made the flashlight easier to grip. The four D-

sized batteries it used for juice were responsible for the majority of the flashlight's weight. The beam of light spread wide while aimed at a distance but narrowed while shining close up. And soon, almost like magic, his mind was clear again. Instead of Kate and Dougie, his thoughts were now on the tree in the Atwood's backyard. The Live Oak would serve them well as a natural marker of the burial site.

To minimize the chance of being spotted by anyone outside, Clayton was careful where he shined the light beam. Better not to invite others by advertising his position. He wanted to finish the job as fast as conditions would allow and get the hell out of there. However, there were many obstacles in his way.

The winds were the first of these. They were increasing in frequency and the intervals were tough to predict. Sometimes an hour could pass without incident. Other storms were separated by maybe fifteen to twenty minutes. Some carried ash. Their duration was another matter, equally tough to predict. Each wind would bring more debris from the west, and with the debris would also come thunder clouds producing lightning and rain. He worried maybe hail, too. The last thing they needed was for a baseball sized piece of ice to crack the windshield of their car. Or imagine getting hit in the head with something like that. How would that feel? He would never see the strike coming, while digging at night.

He'd brought Ray here with the hope to help the Atwoods, and he'd failed. He could hardly help himself. Supplies would get low in time, and chances were that anyone they encountered would be in need of more than they owned. He and Ray needed to remain inconspicuous. The darkness would assist with going unspotted for now.

He would pay closer attention to changes in the air.

He would dig until he felt the breeze pick up or until he smelled the first hint of sulfur that foreshadowed the coming winds.

The burial was the last thing he could do for this family, and he would do it alone. This was important, maybe even selfish. Ray didn't understand, nor should he be expected to. He wasn't in Iraq. Or Afghanistan. Ray never had to dig a grave for a person.

Wearing gloves and a painter's mask, and with the shovel in hand, Clayton thrust the first strike into the ground. The top soil was soft and gave easily to the force of his shovel. The yard was lit by the single beam of the flashlight, which he placed at his feet so that it faced diagonal across the spot he chose to dig. Its beam ended at the base of the tree, illuminating the massive trunk of the Live Oak. He stood straddle-legged with both hands gripping the wooden shaft of the shovel, elbows bent while rocking back for momentum and then leaning once more for another thrust into the dirt. A foot deep, and the dirt began to give way to clay, its reddish rusted color also illuminated by the light.

The air was stiff and electric. It was quiet. He sometimes cringed when the shovel scraped past rock. Whenever this happened, a loud metallic sound like the unsheathing of a sword would cry out from the ground, loud enough to alert anyone near. He was grateful, however, for the six foot wooden fence posted along the yard's perimeter. It was impossible to tell how many storms had come through while he'd been prepping inside, but the earth was covered with almost an inch of dust—volcanic glass, a combination of silica, dirt, and who-knew-what-else from Wyoming. What used to be earth from a state hundreds of miles away, earth that until half a day ago attracted thousands of tourists year round to the northwest U.S. of A., was now blended with ash and drifting further east.

This layer of dust was strange, resembling snowfall in the summer. If an inch could get there in a day, how much more would arrive in the days to come? Clayton pondered these questions while continuing to dig.

Each thrust of the shovel got him closer to an acceptable depth.

Each spade full of dirt brought him closer to his final wave to Mr. Atwood.

But already he sensed a change in the air, a drop in temperature and pressure. Something dangerous approached. His progress would stall. He worked faster. He was lucky for the uninterrupted hour. Sweat had begun to seep through his clothing, especially under his armpits and down his spine. His hands were beginning to burn where the cotton was thinnest. Blisters would form tomorrow.

Then came the smell of sulfur, and the first round was over. Clayton grabbed the flashlight and hurried back to the garage. He made it inside just as a powerful gust slammed the side door closed. He'd mistaken how the bodies were positioned on the floor and tripped over Mrs. Atwood's leg, falling on top of the woman. He crawled backward off the corpse and searched with his hands for the flashlight he'd dropped, causing it to shut off.

Before he found the flashlight, he found a foot, a ribcage, a thigh. Finally, he located the cool rubber exterior and lit up the garage with its beam. Then he restarted the electric generator and relit the garage.

He sat down with his back against the dryer. Outside the door, the wind was howling. There was no sound coming from inside the house. Best to leave Ray alone for now. He would wait there in the garage until he no longer heard the wind, before digging more. The effort was taking much longer than he first anticipated, and so his plan was changing.

Originally, he planned to dig two separate graves. But if he wanted to be on the road with Ray by sunrise, one hole would have to do—the Atwoods would share.

The storm lasted longer than he expected, but when it quit, he hurried to the backyard. The hedges, the flowers, the small garden, they were all dusted and this somehow softened their qualities, rounded any edges, made them limp. There was a swimming pool, covered with a tarp to keep anyone from accidentally drowning. Probably been years since anyone had swam in it.

His mind was drifting to memories in the yard of his childhood, to the summer his dad rigged a homemade slip 'n slide from some plastic sheeting, laundry detergent, and a hose. Clayton remembered the thrill of sliding head first on his stomach, and how Kate and Dougie laughed and cheered him on since he was the fastest.

During one run, Dougie had blocked his path by jumping on the slide midway and took a heavy hit for his decision. At the slide's end he'd noticed a Southern Copperhead. Very poisonous. Dougie had saved his life. One bite could've been fatal.

Clayton opened his eyes, not realizing he'd squeezed them shut. He brought the shovel down hard into the ground. He began counting his thrusts as a method of clearing his mind. There was nothing he could do for Dougie now. Memories could do nothing to help, and the air was warning that round two was coming to an end.

Two hours later and the hole was deep enough for a body. The second storm had lasted longer than the first, and the third round of digging was limited to only thirty minutes. The third wind seemed to take even more time and it was becoming obvious to Clayton that he was ever only going to dig the one grave. Was the effort worth the struggle? His whole life had been a long back-slide down a steep hill. Lots of climbing. Ray had once told him the myth of Sisyphus,

always doomed to fail, regardless of his efforts. That was him. Clayton was certain. The more he wanted, the less he achieved. One grave would have to do. To the east, the faintest of natural light was perceptible.

#

Perhaps in part to his disinterest in the Atwoods, or maybe because of how badly he wished to be leaving town, Raymond was unwarily conjuring the events of the day, while Clay worked the ground outside. Like a spirit from an Ouija board, what began as any summer day in Colorado, synonymous with sunshine and lively air, had been shook and made into a ghost of the day, one which lingered as a haunting memory in the ether of his mind.

The day had started with the type of weather that drew the attention and attendance of almost anyone with a pulse. And this day was no different. The sun was shining to the tune of birdsong, and the perfume of flower blossoms cloaked with ease the city streets of Denver. If he or Clay had taken a moment to step outside the small, second floor apartment they shared, they'd have felt the pervading peace present on such days, and, perhaps, they could've found it possible to toss aside their mutual discontent.

But this day wasn't different, and they remained inside the single-bedroom apartment for which he paid the rent, while Clayton's "visit" pressed deeper into its sixth month—the living room sofa molded to the contours of his sleeping body.

The day was a Friday. As a full-time law student, he wasn't quite off his work clock just yet, so he was immersed in the required reading for one of his more demanding courses: Immigration Law. Out of habit, he read by lamplight. Not far from where he sat cross-legged on the couch, Clay was busy in the kitchen.

For ten minutes, he'd done his best to zone out Clay's rooting around the kitchen area. He couldn't be sure of what his friend was hunting, but he knew it wasn't food, since Clayton had lacked an appetite during his stay. And, from the context of how much time it was taking, Ray deduced that the hunt was not going well.

Then, just as he was preparing to say something, Clay yielded, in need of some help.

"Where's the aluminum foil?" he asked.

He'd tried feigning an attentive interest in the textbook, as if he hadn't been distracted nearly the moment his friend had entered the kitchen.

"Sorry, the what?" But, already, in his mind's eye, he was visualizing where the box ought to have been placed.

Fighting resistance, he dropped his book onto the coffee table before him. These interruptions were becoming too frequent to tolerate. Still, he stirred from his seat to help his friend. "There should be some in one of the cabinets above the stove," he said.

"Don't get up." Clay motioned with his hand, stiffened, for him to sit back down on the couch where he'd been reading. "I'll find it."

"What do you need it for?" he asked. And then the answer occurred to him even before his friend's odd non-reaction gave it away. To get high, or low, whichever it was he was chasing.

Clay hesitated, before swinging open the cabinet door above the sink, and ignoring the question. But his silence hadn't gone unheard. He'd checked his wristwatch for the time: quarter past eleven.

“Damn it, Clay. It’s not even noon.” He watched his friend swing shut the sink cabinet, only to systematically move from door to door, growing more agitated with each failed search. He tried returning to his reading of immigration statutes, but he couldn’t concentrate.

“Do you have to slam them?” he said. “Just relax.”

“I’m working on that,” Clay said, moving to the next cabinet. “As soon as I find that foil,” he paused. “Ah-ha.”

Clay turned the blue and silver box in his hands, admiring it as a museum curator would a precious relic. He must have feared there wouldn’t be any foil left in the apartment, that he’d find only emptiness instead. Without wasting a second, Clay set to work dragging a strip of the tenuous metal, a few inches wide, across the built-in serrated edge of the box, ripping off what he’d need. Raymond, glad to no longer have noise distracting him, had settled back into the corner of the couch, resuming where he’d left off in his studies. All had returned to normal, the status quo: Clay prepping his escape from reality and, for him, another hundred or so pages of case precedents to absorb—just another Friday in July.

And then the earthquake hit, and their world was shaking.

Upon the settling of the ground in Denver, and of the walls and floors and ceilings, all he could think about was the safety of his mother, Hialeah. Was she all right? If she was all right, then for how much longer would she be? Had Oklahoma suffered an earthquake as well? Did she need his help this very moment, calling for him, maybe, while trapped beneath something heavy like the structural collapse that had claimed the Atwoods?

Raymond! Raymond!

Her voice, he realized later that day, the mental voice shouting his name, was more real to him at the time than even the sounds coming from the hollow mouth of his friend who was in the same room.

Slowly, in the manner that vision was sometimes depicted returning to a person first waking from a coma, blinking, the world shifting from blurred shapes to fuzzy figures until finally recognition happens, bright hospital lights give way to the objects and people in the room—in this manner, the meaningless babel of consonants and floating vowels sharpened, became recognizable, signified meaning for him. His stream of worries was interrupted, if only momentarily, by what his friend was saying.

“The world’s on fire, man, and there’s no fireman to put it out.”

Each syllable forced smoke from Clay’s lungs, white and thick and lingering. Clay laughed, breathing out more smoke, and slouched, leaning against the countertop where he’d stood in the kitchen. Not an unfamiliar position, or sight.

“Where’s the fireman, Chief?” Clay said, striking the flint of his Zippo. Its flame held steady under the tinfoil in his hand, his elbows resting heavily atop the counter—like a tri-pod for a camera or the easel for a painting. Raymond couldn’t watch. He looked away, ignoring the ridiculous question, while his friend pulled another hit from the pill that crackled as it slipped down the foil. Probably OxyContin again. Clay was fucked up, and his timing couldn’t be worse. They’d just been dropped into a life or death scenario, and Clayton was as stoned as the winner of a Shirley Jackson lottery.

There’d be no use in sharing any of this with Clay, since his friend was almost certain not to know what he was talking about or who Shirley Jackson was.

He didn't know what to do. Car alarms were drowning the voices of others living in the complex, but calls for help and the overall stressed tones of these people, his neighbors, weren't entirely muted.

At first, he'd thought Clay's habit was responsible for the smoke he smelled, but, soon, he recognized the odors of rubber, gasoline, and wood, among other things, on fire. He'd already crawled out from under the coffee table, the place his gut instinct had landed him during the quake, and was now inspecting his surroundings, but in a flat, shock-induced manner, almost as if it were a dull practice, lacking any urgency—a slow-motion 360 degree turn.

There was damage to one wall, a fracture in the drywall running halfway from the ceiling toward the floor, exposing a white powder otherwise concealed with the earth-tone paint. Some bookshelves had collapsed, while others remained intact except that all of their contents were now scattered throughout the room: books and framed photos and various items used as bookends. One of the frames held a picture from around ten years earlier, back when Dougie was still alive. There they were, the three of them standing beside each other, posing, probably at the request of Mrs. Rudd—she was always wanting to take pictures of her two boys. He'd get grouped in with Clay and his brother if he was around the action. “You're the little Indian Chief I never had but always wanted,” she sometimes said. Her comments could embarrass Clay at times, although he found her words endearing and sincere. He was half-Cherokee, after all.

Dougie was half their age, almost nine. He had stood to the side of his big brother, half his height, decked out in his Pee-Wee football gear, helmet and all. He was scrawny, more pads and helmet than meat on the bone. And his face was almost all smile, especially since his eyes had closed while the picture was snapped. His teeth were whiter than milk. His jersey was

colored the amber of honey, except for its white numerals: identical ones to form an eleven.

The day the photograph was taken, Dougie had proclaimed he was going to be the team's quarterback, "or its kicker," he'd said. Clay had laughed at that, a real laugh. Hearing him crack up was still common then. Holding his little brother's head up by the single-barred facemask, he told Dougie how the two positions were like managing a McDonalds or flipping its burgers. Dougie said that his coach really wanted him to play both QB and kicker. He wasn't smiling, though, but with a serious demeanor, maybe too serious for a kid not even nine years old, he offered his reasoning for the indecision. If he did what his coach wanted, it meant that another kid on the team wouldn't have a spot to play.

Raymond had snatched the picture by its frame. Nothing on it was broken. The memory could continue to live on, matted behind the thin, transparent glass. Dougie had said one other memorable thing that day. Having freed his helmet from his brother's grasp, he'd asked Clay a question. The boy's dirty blond hair was grooved with marks from where the helmet padding had pressed. "Would you be let down, like, would you think less of me as a person if I chose to cook the burgers instead?"

There was never an answer to Dougie's question. The conversation was interrupted by Mrs. Rudd's enthusiasm for seeing her youngest son in uniform. Raymond honestly wasn't sure how his friend intended to answer his brother.

Even before the earthquake he'd thought flipping burgers would be an improvement in Clay's life.

"Look, Chief," Clay said, then he blew a cloud around himself. "My insides are on fire." He coughed and finished exhaling. The dog-tags hanging from his neck, one encased in black

rubber and the other one naked, clinked against the countertop before Clay straightened, taking the weight from his elbows. His friend's full-length was deceptive, appearing taller than he actually stood. The illusion might be due to the rigid posture instilled at Paris Island, or maybe thanks to the light tan Marine Corps issued combat boots. He rarely removed the boots, often times falling asleep with them still on his feet.

Ray approached his friend. "What do we do?"

"I'm burning up here, man," Clay said, the twang of his southern accent made heavier with his buzz.

"This is really serious. What are we going to do, Clay?" Ray pulled at his shirt, a simple white t-shirt, which was beginning to stick to his chest and to his back. When had he gotten so sweaty? His dampness had a transparent effect on the white cotton, and he could see the dark circles of his nipples through the material.

Clay was setting up his next rip, saying, "You know what they say—" If Raymond hadn't already known the trouble it would cause, he'd have swatted the foil, the drug, the lighter, the rolled up index card used to pull in the smoke, all of Clay's shit, onto the ground. He'd scream into the oblivious face of his friend until he could change everything that was happening. Instead, he cocked his neck, allowing Clay to finish.

"Where there's smoke," Clay said. And, with no intention of finishing the sentence, Clay sucked the last fumes from the unrecognizable black lump sitting at the bottom of the tinfoil, having left a black, slug-like trail in the pill's wake.

Raymond went to the tall window in the front of his apartment, stepping over broken glass and ceramic on the floor the best he could, then divided the blinds at eye-level and took a

look at the world. The thought occurred to him that outside appeared as it should, as if an earthquake had hit. People were already scurrying, and, from his second-story view, he watched them dodge various hazards like small fires, fractures in the asphalt, and piles of broken glass near trucks and cars. Most surprising was how everyone down there seemed alone, avoiding one another just as they avoided the shards of glass and the flames.

Behind Raymond, Clay reassumed his slouch, allowing himself to relax and give in to effects of his *medicine*. Standing must have become difficult for him, or at least uncomfortable, because he left the kitchen to take a seat on the couch. Raymond reached into his pants pocket for his cell phone and stepped back from the window.

Talking with Clay right then would prove pretty much pointless. He'd learned this over the last several months in which he'd lived with Clay, or, rather, that Clay had lived with him. He'd give Clay a little time to clear his head before engaging him with anything serious.

He dialed his mother's house line, but no one answered. Her houseline had rung out though, which he interpreted as a positive sign. Phone was ringing, at least.

The number was actually saved in his phone under his uncle's name: *Salal*. After she'd lost her husband to illness, Raymond's mother chose to leave their home in Ellijay and move in with her brother in Fort Gibson. Now, his Uncle Sal, who never married nor fathered any children, had someone to look after, and his mother would have good company. Raymond was grateful, certainly now, for his uncle's presence in Hialeah's life, but he only wished one of them would answer the goddamn phone when he called.

"Shit," he said, pocketing his cell. Nothing seemed to be going right.

"No aftershock," Clay said.

Turning from the window, Raymond studied his friend. “What?”

In the light from the lamp, Clay’s eyes were red, pupils dilated. “Aren’t quakes usually trailed by littler ones?” He sat forward on the sofa so that he could rest his elbows on his knees. He was holding a can of Coors Light with both hands. Where had he found the beer? Hadn’t they been out of beer? He was suddenly craving one himself. Clay continued, “I was just saying there wasn’t any aftershock. Is that normal, Chief?”

Raymond struggled to understand the guy in front of him, this old friend sitting on his couch, post-earthquake, sipping on a beer as if he were waiting for the halftime of a football game to end.

“*None* of this is fucking normal.”

From his lack of reaction, Clay appeared untroubled by the outburst. However, the slight altering of his tone was enough for Raymond to know he’d gotten a message through.

“Okay, easy,” Clay said. “It can’t be too bad. I mean we still have power.”

This was a good point. Their electricity had sputtered but never went completely out, even during the violence of the quake. Maybe the television was still working, too. He found the TV remote lying face down next to an arm of the couch. The television screen came to life under the command of his thumb.

Without hesitation, he switched channels from the ESPN Clay had been watching earlier to one of the local news networks. He didn’t care which one, since they’d all be broadcasting the same thing. He noted several stations reporting technical difficulties or nothing but those definitive bars, rainbow colored, standing vertical across the screen. He quit flipping channels when he landed on the first news broadcast.

The anchorwoman was a brunette with sharp, blue eyes that appeared even more so thanks to her bright blue blazer. She sat alone at the news desk. At the bottom of the screen, superimposed over the live camera feed, was a headline caption that read *Yellowstone Volcano Erupts!* She was holding a hand to her ear, apparently receiving the most up to date coverage. When she spoke, her voice was too eager for the information she shared. She was relaying death tolls like winning lotto numbers.

“We’re not even close to finalizing these counts,” she said, her hand lowered, holding a stack of papers with its counterpart. “But early estimates are in the tens of thousands, and this only takes into account those in the immediate area, those incapable of evacuating in time to avoid the fast-moving pyroclastic flow.”

“Volcano in Wyoming? What about the quake right fucking here?”

Raymond had become so absorbed in the story that he’d almost forgotten he wasn’t alone. He labeled his friend’s question rhetorical and returned his attention to the TV. Scrolling information raced by on a ticker at the bottom of the screen. It’d been added beneath the original captioning. He was hoping for any news about other states, wishing for an unlikely update about Fort Gibson or Tulsa or at least eastern Oklahoma.

“Christ,” Clay said between sips. “You’d think local news would give a shit about our own backyard.”

Raymond shook his head. “You don’t think this is related?”

“Volcano and earthquake?”

“Yeah,” he said. He was watching the screen and pointing at the news ticker. “They’re saying this thing caused a tsunami-grade wave in the Great Salt Lake.”

“No shit,” Clay’s voice trailed. “Utah, hunh?” He finished the beer with a large gulp. “Had to be a big mother fucker then.” He made a move to stand but thought better of it and stayed seated. “What else are they saying? Did it break Cali off from the country yet?”

“Let me see,” Raymond said, reading as fast as the info was fed. The anchorwoman went on excitedly spewing details and speculations concerning “kill zones” and “diameters of destruction.” He heard the sound of Clay crushing the beer can behind him. Probably on his forehead again. He regretted ever showing Clay that trick, having been surprised several times in the past week from the sudden crunch of compressing metal.

“They’re still reporting on that tsunami,” he said. “Hang on. I’m changing to another channel real fast.” But just as he began flipping stations by remote, the TV, along with the apartment’s lighting, suddenly went black. Power outage.

“Oooh,” Clay joked. The two men were still while waiting to see if it’d come back on right away. “Hey, who’s that touching my leg?” Clay was already laughing at his own joke.

Raymond shushed him.

“Well you don’t have to be—” Clay began.

“Quiet.” The firmness in Raymond’s command caught his friend’s attention but still didn’t stop him from finishing the thought.

“Rude, Chief. That’s what I was gonna say.”

He shot Clay a look that asked, “Really?”

And in the silence that ensued, the sounds coming from outside reminded them of their circumstance, more so even than the broken glass inside the room. Police sirens now joined the still blaring car alarms. Shouting intermingled with sobbing. One woman was especially

discernable as she repeatedly cried out the name, Matthew. Whether she was looking for her husband or brother or son was impossible to know, only *Matthew! Matthew!*

Hialeah's voice returned to his thoughts: *Raymond!* He found his cell again and tried Uncle Sal's line, but with the same result. Using the face of the phone as a light, he maneuvered through the living room and into his bedroom. From a drawer in his desk he removed a small stack of maps before re-maneuvering his way to the kitchen counter.

The countertop was littered with Clay's paraphernalia: aluminum foil, Zippo, cut straws, and other items, all of which Raymond shoved over, clearing space with an arm. Next, he retrieved a mini mag-lite from a catch-all drawer.

"Of course," he said. Then, in Clay's direction, "no batteries?" The question was more of an accusation than an inquiry. Batteries had recently become a source of contention between the two roomies. He bought them. Clay burned through them. Playing video games, maybe? Raymond couldn't be sure how his friend spent his days while he had to attend class.

Clay shrugged, then walked to the window. Light from outside poured into the room as he pulled the drawstring.

"Plenty of daylight, pal. You feeling all right?"

Raymond scoffed. "Are you?"

"Will be after Coors numero dos." Clay strolled by, ceramic crushing under his boots. The crunching was similar to the sound snow makes underfoot.

Raymond set down the map of Colorado atop the stack. "Hang on, bro." He grabbed Clay by the arm, but released his grip when he felt the arm tense. He made eye contact with his

friend's bloodshot eyes and again pulled his t-shirt loose from his own sweaty chest. "I need you to take this seriously."

The fridge light failed to flip on when Clay opened its door. He slammed the door shut, then he addressed Raymond.

"I am," Clay said. He was sobering, clarity returning to his speech.

"I don't think that you are."

"Come on, Chief. If the power doesn't kick back on, the beer's just gonna warm. You know the Rockies need to be blue to drink the stuff." Clay presented the can as if performing a commercial.

"See? That's the crap I'm talking about. This is an emergency crisis we're in, and you're cracking shitty jokes."

"Shitty?" Clay's faked surprise. "Really?"

"Yeah, as in *not* funny. Not good. Not appropriate. Hell, sometimes not even coherent." Raymond returned to his maps. "I could use your help," he said.

Clay quit the act and snapped back the pop-top of his beer. "What, now you want me to grab you a beer?" he asked. "Now there's your emergency crisis, only one left." He motioned toward the fridge. "Still cold though."

Raymond sighed. "No," he said. "I need your help with these maps." By this time, he'd already placed the Colorado map flat on the counter and was working to do the same with the one of Oklahoma. His arms felt weak and his hands shook a little as he finished the task.

He glanced at Clay, who was standing to his right. "Actually," he said, "I think I *will* take you up on that last beer."

Clay grinned. “Atta boy,” he said. “Now it’s a party.” A brief moment later, Clay returned with two more beers. He met Raymond’s gaze with another shoulder shrug.

“Guess I was wrong on my headcount, Chief.” Clay polished off his other beer, and Raymond went back to the stack, searching for a map of Kansas.

Crunch!

Raymond flinched. He was edgy. His beer was untouched, but now he grabbed ahold of a can. Clay had just finished opening his third, and he held it out in front of Raymond. “Cheers!”

Raymond recognized the dare in his friend’s eyes. This was a race, a stupid chugging contest. Screw it. He went to tap beer cans with Clay, but he was tricked. Clay stole a head start, pouring the Coors steadily into his upturned mouth.

Meanwhile, the noise of sirens had grown louder. Nothing else outside could compete.

“Done,” Clay shouted, slamming the can on the counter’s surface. But Raymond had also finished at the same time.

“A damn tie?” Clay said.

Raymond grinned at his opponent. “And *you* cheated.” The men belched as if in protest of the nearby sirens.

“Well,” Clay said, “you’d have won if I hadn’t gotten the jump.” They paused for a moment and listened as the sound of another siren joined the others in disharmony. “All right, Chief. You might as well have won that one, so you got my attention. What’s with the maps? You planning a trip somewhere?”

Raymond found his map of Kansas and added it to the others. Both of his hands grabbed the edge of the counter as he leaned over the three states. His t-shirt clung to his chest. Colorado. Kansas. Oklahoma. He looked up at Clay, his friend's brow still raised with curiosity.

"No, buddy," he said. Then he waved his hand between the two of them. "We're planning a trip somewhere." He paused, considering his plan. He'd need to control his emotions during the trip if they were to be successful. He was already fighting both excitement and dread, and he hadn't left his apartment.

Clay waited for Raymond to explain.

"You and me, Clay. We're going home." He forced a smile. He hadn't sold the idea very well but, then again, it wasn't like he'd had time to prepare before the jury. He was on trial here, his idea was anyway, and the verdict depended on help from his friend.

The emergency vehicles bombarded the walls of the apartment complex with their sirens, a relentless, inescapable barrage of sound. He hoped Clay wouldn't take long with his deliberation. He also hoped his friend would join him, Clay's past military experience and loyalty would be great help on their journey.

"All right, Chief. But, if we're going out in this shit storm, we've gotta do things my way."

Raymond nodded.

"We take the route I choose, the gear I choose, and the actions I choose."

Raymond nodded again. "So, you're in? You'll come with me to Fort Gibson, to my family?"

“I’ll take you home. But on my terms.” Clay’s stern expression cracked when he recognized the joy washing over his friend’s face. The two were smiling. Their future held new meaning.

Also new was the different sound that echoed between the buildings, competing with the sirens. It was the sound of gunfire. Shots fired rapidly from different locations, which meant multiple guns were in use. The two friends ducked, using their hands to cover their heads.

“On my terms,” Clay repeated, and Raymond nodded. “All right then, let’s go to your room and pack what you’ll need.”

“What about you?” Raymond asked.

“Ha,” Clay laughed. “My stuff’s always ready to go, Chief.” Raymond hadn’t realized this, and additional gunfire was preventing him from thinking further.

Still crouched, Clay lowered his guard. “Ray, you were right. This is serious. We’ll need any weapons you might have, okay? I’ll tell you more as we go.”

A heavy blast rang out as a shotgun was fired much closer to the apartment this time. Could that’ve come from downstairs? They needed to hurry.

#

Clayton sat on the floor leaning, against the dryer. His arm draped at his side with his palm facing up, having surrendered the flashlight to the force of gravity. He’d watched it roll its course along the cement toward the remains of the Atwoods. The room itself seemed dead. He’d made the mistake of pushing the limit of the storm. He knew it was close, but tried to finish the hole regardless. He was so close, too. Instead, the precipitation began to fall, and then there was a flash of lightning, so bright that for just a split second, Clayton was able to see exactly what he

was doing. In that split second, his eyes were opened and he became afraid. The air was dark again, the beam from the flashlight puny in comparison.

He managed to get back into the garage, but not without exposing the room to some dust. His chest heaved. The garage light drawstring swayed like a pendulum from the gust carried in with him. After a bit, his chest began to steady, raising less and falling shallower until like the drawstring, which had come to rest, his lungs were full and his heart was calm.

Clayton was tired and sore. He wasn't sure at what point he'd removed his gloves, but they were gone and his hands were red, agitated by the ash and all the digging. He checked his pants for them, and removed, instead, a handful of the bothersome dust. The ash collected during his time in the yard, and smelled rotten. When dropped, the stuff scattered like mist. His head fell backward in exhaustion, and he accidentally banged the dryer with his skull, creating a rattling bang like a Chinese gong. Silence followed. His chin met his chest, and he remained in a posture of defeat, while the winds blew outside, a torrent of whistling and whining that wrecked through the world. Was this the arrival of a new age?

#

The hole was deep enough to hold both Atwoods, though it would be a tight fit. Clayton's arms and back ached with fire as he dragged Mr. Atwood from the garage and into the yard. A clear path through the ash, down to the grass, was drawn by the body on the way to its grave. Clearing the path was the last thing the man would ever do, to provide a path for Clayton to follow through what had amounted to an inch of ash.

And he did follow the trail, returning to the garage to collect Mrs. Atwood. Her body made a dull thud as it landed on top of her husband, Clayton using his foot to push her into the hole.

A softer wind blew and the oak's leaves rustled, its Spanish moss clotted with dust. Clayton could see without a flashlight but the sun had yet to break the horizon. He checked the tree for any sign of life but there were no animals or birds—only the wind's caress moved the leaves. This softer wind blew through the yard like a whisper of something greater to come, maybe something bad. Clayton knelt where the Atwoods' faces were hidden by the white sheets. He said goodbye. The first clod of dirt landed on the linen figures in the hole.

When the grave was filled, Clayton walked to the Live Oak. How much longer would the tree live on? Already, the branches were heavy with ash, sagging toward the earth beneath the weight, yet bearing the burden with integrity. Clayton admired the branches.

He had brought his knife on this last trip and retrieved it now from his pocket. He placed a hand on the coarse trunk of the tree. In the fawn light, he could see all the bark's rigid grooves and imperfections. He could see the stub of a branch that had been snapped earlier. The branch had rotted. You could tell by its color. Beneath the stub was an oval, plate-sized knot in the bark. Clayton raised the knife behind his head and said, "I'm sorry." He stabbed the tree repeatedly. In the knot, he carved the date and their names.

Clayton studied his work: the letters in the tree and the mound of dirt in the ground. White sap bled from the carved letters. This moment was not to be forgotten.

His shadow was joined by another shadow on the ground. Clayton turned toward the early light in the East. Ray didn't say anything, so he didn't either. Sunlight was just visible over

the fence. The sky was red with the new sun. The world appeared on fire. Clayton followed the trail back to the side garage door, Ray at his heel. Clayton looked back to the west, past his friend, and in the morning light, the giant cloud mass moved rapidly in their direction. Dark and climbing high into the atmosphere, the cloud mass filled with heat lightning that flashed without stopping. A wall of dust and vapor. A dangerous contrast between skies promised tornados, maybe hail. Clayton had learned something from the Live Oak, to maintain strength even in a life that wasn't fair. In the east, the sunrise brightened the horizon, and, leading Ray, Clayton slipped into the dark garage.

#

II

Clay had delayed their trip with his stubborn need to bury the Atwoods. Strangers. Satisfying some engrained virtue of *leave no man behind*. However, along with the ensuing morning, the time to leave the home of the late Atwoods arrived, and the pair set on their way.

Clay felt guilty for stalling, although he refused to apologize. Instead, Clay quit arguing against traveling to the Arkansas River. Raymond would get his way in the matter.

After abandoning their car on the lost cause of a crowded highway, and having traveled for a few days on foot in route to the river, and still a great distance from any major populations, Raymond and Clay happened upon a double-wide trailer in the southern plains of Colorado.

The home could have belonged to anyone, but, more specifically, the home could have belonged to Hialeah. Raymond saw first the remains of a man, his back slumped over the arm of his recliner as if he had keeled over in pain or as if he had simply fallen asleep and ended in a position random but predestined where he shunned a world no longer needing him. The man was

not his Uncle Salal, but it could have been. Then, Raymond found a woman. The female corpse was in the kitchen, near the oven, cradled, except for one arm, in the fetal position. The oven door was left open, the woman's extended arm resting on the door, palm facing upward and fingers curled as if inviting others to join her. The woman was not Raymond's mother. But did a similar scene await them in Oklahoma? Why should this house be destroyed but not the house of his family?

Earlier that day, Raymond had witnessed what the Westerlies—the name by which Clay had begun calling the relentless winds chasing after them—were capable of doing. A plague delivered by a wind helpless to control itself, only obeying the physical laws of a world passing away. The Westerlies—foreign to many before the blast—would eventually be, Raymond predicted, a household phrase.

He and Clay had spent the day cursing these winds, racing them from shelter to shelter: empty houses, empty vehicles, large trees, desert caves and crevices. If there wasn't a shelter within reach, Clay would retrieve a tarp from his pack and they'd be forced to huddle beneath its tenuous protection.

The Westerlies, spreaders of smoke and ash, messengers and deliverers of death, hunger, and disease. Something from the book of *Revelation*, something from unwritten chapters that belong in *Revelation*. Riding on the crest of the natural wind, tiny shards of glass, obsidian like diamonds and coal cascading a dying landscape below. Each storm front was a sharp wall of microscopic doom.

Nothing that breathed could survive for long. Nothing that survived would ever really live again. Wave after wave of the Westerly fronts traversed the nation's width, not even ceasing

when confronted by the Atlantic. Outrunning them to Fort Gibson had long ceased being an option. Even Africa would taste the dirty breath of Yellowstone's eruption. Raymond had heard this said over the car's radio, and believed it to be true.

Inside the trailer, Raymond gathered himself and rose from the ground where he'd fallen to his knees. Raymond leaned against the entrance to the kitchen, an opening in the metal walls of the house. He'd seen enough and closed his eyes, but even then in the darkness of his nonexistence, he saw more than he wanted. Hialeah in her evening dress and apron. Her hasty reaction to news of the storm's approach. Maybe some last words to the man who was her brother for more than fifty years? He saw all this in his mind. Hialeah's refuge, her grave.

"Chief, you all right?" Clay asked from behind. Clay had followed Raymond inside, and now he was sure he should have led them into the home.

Raymond was not all right. What did that even mean anymore? Under his breath, Raymond said, "She was afraid."

From the face of the woman-corpse, a blind man could tell this was the truth, so contorted. The couple looked old, maybe older than they were.

Raymond's legs were unstable. They threatened a second collapse.

"You hear that?" Clay asked him. Raymond did.

There was movement coming from another room. Raymond looked at the wall, through which he first heard the sound, then back to the oven, then to his boots—borrowed from Clay. The pattern of ash on his boots rose just above the rubber soles, dampening some of the tan leather and blotting out the Marine Corps eagle, globe, and anchor. Raymond headed for the noise. He didn't pause again until he reached the corner of the hall that lead to where the sound

had come from. Raymond looked up from the dirty, beaten carpet. He was at the end of the hall, and he was face to face with a girl.

The girl was dressed for a dance, her high school prom, and encased within a plain black picture frame. The picture hung on the wall alongside other family photos and some nail heads recently relinquished of their responsibilities. The floor was proof of violence, covered with shattered glass and a mosaic of faces, smiling and not smiling, young and old and dead. A quarter-inch layer of volcanic ash coated the carpeted floor, a film of glass so fine to be confused with dust. With his thumb, Raymond cleared a crescent swipe across the picture of the girl, revealing her large brown eyes. Full of life and expectation. Raymond was reminded of Dougie.

He had never seen this photo before. Raymond lived far away from here. He was far away when this girl graduated from high school. But, now, as he removed the photo from the wall and held it in his hand, he could not remember anything that ever felt more important.

Clay was behind him, in the hallway, clearing the ash from other pictures, when the sound of movement was heard again. The sound was sudden and startling and now possessed their full attention.

Setting the photo down on the hallway bureau, Raymond crept to the door behind which the sound arose. The door, he was afraid, would lead into the girl's bedroom. Had she moved away after graduating? Was her dead body waiting for him too? Maybe she was causing the sound? Needed help?

This time, Clay stepped forward. He would lead Raymond beyond this door. Clay leaned against the paneled door, palm flat on the wood and gripped the knob. With his ear pressed, listening for any sound, Clay threw open the door—ready for anything, but not ready at all.

“Jesus,” Clay said.

Inside the room was a bed and on it rested the body of a young woman in a red sweater and blue jeans. It was her, the girl from the picture. She was facedown but Raymond recognized her in an instant. She lay absolutely still except for wisps of brown hair which pitched with each suggestion of the breeze blowing in from a broken window nearby. The glass must have shattered during a storm, allowing the Westerlies into the room and all that drifted in their path. This was mostly ash, some dust and scents, too, but mostly ash. With the winds also came clouds and not much light shone through the busted window.

In the dying light, Raymond could still make out the pink walls of the girl's room, adorned with honor roll awards, certificates boldly declaring *Dean's List*, her diplomas. She'd been smart. Between two blue ribbons awarded for spelling bee championships hung a framed portrait of a young man. Amateur work, but still good. Had she painted this? Was this man her lover? Did he know this girl was dead? Was the man in the portrait even still alive? All these things, the awards, the ribbons and paintings, hung on different walls. Raymond was surrounded by the dead girl's achievements. He became queasy. The room was a pink mausoleum.

The room was stale and smelled like water from city sprinklers. The odor was of trash dumps, and it entered from outside. Raymond felt like stone, unable to move an inch closer to the girl, yet unable to cast his glance aside. She was like a statue in a museum, there for study. Her hair looked soft and fine, hanging straight while draping the footboard of the bed.

“Michelle,” Clay said. He was at the girl's desk, rummaging through her papers. “I think her name was Michelle. The name, Michelle Ingram, heads all these papers.” The information was slow processing for Raymond. He'd never been in this situation before, but while watching

Clay, he saw him for the first time as a soldier. They might be standing in the pink bedroom of a dead girl, but the manner in which Clay said the girl's name, *Michelle Ingram*, they might be standing in the middle of a battlefield, gathering dog-tags.

“Michelle?” Raymond asked, confirming with Clay. Clay nodded.

Raymond spoke her name again, this time to the body of the girl. “Michelle.” She didn't move. He said it louder, “Michelle.” Still, there wasn't the slightest twitch. Finally, roaring her name as if asking a question, Clay at his side, holding back his chest as if he might feel compelled to approach the girl, “Michelle?” Only the swaying ribbons on the wall seemed to know they were there.

The sound returned, demanding attention—a banging noise, clumsy and inarticulate. Raymond switched from the dead girl to the closet off to the right. From a leg pocket in his cargo pants, Clay removed a seven-inch knife, gripping it tight. The blade wasn't new, but it looked strong, sharp. Raymond was content to allow Clay to do as he was trained, positioning the knife in front of him and approaching the closet door.

When Raymond listened for the sound again, there was only silence. He turned his ear toward the closet to listen closer and caught a glimpse of the dead Michelle sprawled on her bed. Raymond winced, closed his eyes.

Clay was focused on the closet. Doors, white and slatted. They were the kind of doors that you could see out from within but not the other way. Were they being watched? Who else would be here?

Clay held the closet door like he'd done Michelle's bedroom door just moments earlier, with the same hand and the same blank expression. It was with a deep breath that Clay cracked the closet open, listening to its old, neglected hinges whine a little.

A flash of white, of teeth and tongue, of black paws in the briefest of moments and then nothing but the darkness that was already inside the closet doors.

Clay bent forward, his hands on his knees, exhaling the air he'd saved. Raymond shook his head. A dog! Raymond knew the breed. An American Eskimo dog. The dog's collar indicated domestication, the gold bone-shaped plate on it claimed *Spit* was the dog's name. The dog, Spit, leapt past Clay and settled next to its master's body.

Clay seemed frustrated. He lowered the knife and sighed heavily. All worked up for nothing, he was probably thinking. Raymond stared at the dog lying obediently next to its nonresponsive owner—next to what remained of the girl. Spit looked up at Raymond. In the dog's eyes, Raymond registered something human, a knowledge of loss and a certain knowing of need. From deep within his chest, there came the sudden urge to just laugh. Out of frustration, or relief, or disgust, or pain, or fear, or joy—impossible to say—maybe something like the lava which had spewed from the earth earlier that week, an eruption of laughter echoed off the pink walls.

The time to leave had arrived once again. The home could have been the home of Hialeah's, but it wasn't. Raymond and Clay left the double-wide on foot, Spit following closely behind them.

#

Clayton exercised caution while directing the journey of the two men and their new canine companion. America was no longer the United States. Other than their shared geography, each state government had seized control of its own borders and sealed entrance or exit. Ash storms were busy sealing everything else. Within the two weeks following the eruption, America had transformed dramatically. The country now resembled something closer to Europe, politically, each state declaring autonomy. Add in the hostility between states and America now resembled Europe during wartime, like a black and white photo of World War II.

After burying Mr. and Mrs. Atwood, Clayton and Ray tried avoiding other people. Others might be dangerous. Still, they'd encountered several people along their route to the river. With so many folks fleeing, contact with others was imminent, unavoidable.

Spit did prove himself somewhat useful in this matter, often alerting the presence of strangers long before he or Ray could hope to. He remained unsure if this talent was yet enough to justify the added distraction the mutt had become, Chief ranking feeding the dog as important as fending for themselves. The dog must have sensed this difference in perspective, too, as it wasted little time in choosing Ray as its new master.

Clayton had managed to keep the two of them alive this long. Ray had quit counting bodies along their trail, so Clayton considered himself a success already. Still, they were about a hundred miles northwest of the river, near the town of Eads. That's when he and Ray saw her.

A woman, late thirties, traveling alone, stumbled onto the trail that the two men were following. The trail had been made by a farmer's tractor, lined with two dirt ruts. On either side of the trail were stalks of corn, four feet in height so she could still be seen over their tops while she walked. They saw her long before she'd noticed them.

Clayton stretched his arm across Ray's chest. Chief would have approached the woman right off. His friend had gotten into the habit of losing his mind at the sight of any woman near the age of Hialeah. This woman fit the profile, but she was, obviously, not Ray's mother. She was dark-skinned and had thick, black braids spilling from beneath the pale yellow hat which she wore. Her clothing, most of it matching the color of the hat looked to be an outfit suited more for churchgoing than hiking. And, either way, all of it was caked in earth and mud. Not so that the woman was entirely covered in it, but her shoulders, her ribs, and her hips all shared the dark shades of dirt—as if she'd maybe had a tumble.

She hummed softly. The song sounded like a whimper at first, but then registered simply as melancholy. Ray peeked at Clayton first, then tried speaking with the woman.

“Ma’am?”

She was still in the distance, a hundred feet away. She seemed much farther away, mentally. Her unbiased stare, even from where he and Ray stood at that moment, was familiar. A thousand-mile stare. One in which the item you were focused on couldn't be seen by anyone nearby because it wasn't nearby. A stare in which what was right in front of you was invisible to you. The thousand-mile stare had been drilled into Clayton while he was in boot camp, standing inspection, although he'd mastered the technique before joining the Marine Corps.

“Ma’am?” Ray called again. Her humming continued, along with the listless quality of her stroll toward them.

She was heading west. The act seemed wrong, counterintuitive, to Clayton. He wanted to help her, turn her around, point her in the correct direction. Clayton knew, though, that they

ought to bypass the woman, pick up their pace, and prevent her from following them. In the case she should decide to turn around after them.

Ray showed surprise, after calling to the woman for a third time, only her humming persisting without any recognition of their approaching her, that Clayton wasn't stopping the effort. Hell, Clayton was surprised himself. This was the first encounter that he hadn't acted to prevent.

Finally, when they were only twenty feet from the woman, her head lifted slightly, and her eyes fell on them. Her humming quit. Silence settled in as it does. For a moment, a crow not far could be heard, its caw carrying across the flatland.

Then, her screaming pierced the air and their ears. Her pitch was painfully high, her face bent with fear. Her back curled as she bent forward in projection, screaming with all the air in her lungs. The suddenness of her cry was jolting.

"Goddammit," Clayton shouted. "Grab her."

He and Raymond sprinted toward the screaming woman. She had yet to take a second breath before they reached her. Raymond took his friend's instruction and grabbed the woman's arms, standing behind her.

"Sh, sh, sh," he repeated in her ear.

Clayton cupped his hand over her mouth, her breath hot on his palm. The sound faded. Then, her eyes rolled and her body sagged before going limp in Ray's arms. Her dead weight fell into his friend's chest. Ray set the woman on the ground. She was unconscious.

Clayton wiped his hand over his chest. His palm had been moistened by the woman's hot breath. The two men shared distressed looks with one another, Ray from his knees near her head and Clayton standing at the woman's feet.

The silence seemed to settle again, the cawing crow still somewhere near but unseen.

In this part of Colorado, the mountains had long given way to the flat plains dominant in so much of America's center. Large expanses of wheat fields, corn, and patches of woods. Small tributaries irrigated the area on their way south to the Arkansas River, which they fed into.

Just outside the town of Eads, Clayton and Ray huddled around the collapsed woman, unsure of whether to remain at her side or to leave her to her own fate and continue on their way. They hadn't passed a soul in more than half a day, and so there was no telling how long it might be before someone else came across where she lay.

"We can't leave her like this," Ray said.

"I never said to," Clayton said.

"All right," Ray said. "What should we do?" He was still holding on to the hand of the woman. She wore a wedding ring. Her hands were calloused and wrinkled, the skin thin on top with a hazelnut complexion.

Ray removed her hat, using it to fan the woman's face. Trace gray hairs could be seen running through the braids now. Lying there, the unconscious woman appeared to age right in front of them. She looked closer to forty years old.

There was movement beneath her eyelids and then they began to blink and flutter. When they finally opened, the woman's eyes shined a bright brown, pupils large and then shrunken.

Her jaw dropped, and both men flinched in preparation for an encore of the woman's screaming, however, there was only a deep exhale, then nothing.

She closed her mouth and sat up, taking in her surroundings.

It wasn't night but the sun was weak. The woman appeared to have had a horrific day. How long had she been traveling alone?

Her first attempt to speak failed. She started several times, but managed only to stutter out "I." She brought her hand to her throat, coughed.

Clayton reached for his canteen in his pack, but Ray was already holding his out for the woman to take. She did, and nodded a thank you. After sipping some, she held up the canteen, and Ray took it back. This Good Samaritan stuff was great, but Clayton wanted some answers.

"Why are you alone?" Clayton asked.

"My family," she began, but her eyes fell to the ground along with her voice. She recovered, "My husband, Robert, and Kevin, my son." Her voice shook, weak. Her swaying head mimicked her trembling voice. "No, no, no." She repeated, her thousand-mile stare returning.

Clayton tried to help her respond. "Where are they?" he said.

"They're not here," she said.

They weren't getting anywhere and Clayton didn't want to waste more time than they already had. "Come on, Ray. We got to go."

"Where is your family?" Ray asked.

"Chief, let's go." Clayton's voice was louder this time. "We'll be lucky to reach the river by nightfall. And we'll need to, if we want to travel in the dark."

It was then the woman gathered herself enough to share her story.

“Robert was arguing with the guard. They wouldn’t allow us to enter into Kansas. My husband couldn’t believe it. He kept yelling at the guard, asking him what country this was. The soldier was just a kid. Maybe a handful of years older than Kevin, a foot taller only. This was all happening at Arapahoe.”

“That’s not far from here,” Ray said. “A little north.” He was still holding onto her hand. Clayton doubted if his friend realized that he was holding her hand.

Clayton nodded.

“We lived in Cheyenne Wells.” The woman was quiet again, somewhere in her past.

Clayton tried coaxing her along. “So, you and your husband, you packed your bags and your kid and decided to head east. Is that it?”

The reference of her family again registered on her face. A faint smile. She wiped her cheek, drying a tear that wasn’t there. Clayton thought a tear appropriate, maybe there’d been one and he hadn’t seen it. In any case, the woman was now on her feet.

“That’s right,” she said. “Robert had watched all the news reports. He said it would get ugly here before long, and that the farther east we could get the better off we’d be.”

Ray had joined the woman, rising to his feet when she did. Ray interrupted her then. “How bad did your husband say it would get here? The weather, I mean. We lost power. Didn’t see those reports.”

She’d sized up Ray, then, like he’d just landed from Mars. “Unlivable bad,” she said. She held out her arms. There wasn’t any ash raining down at the moment, but a layer from the last storm coated everything around them. “Isn’t this already unlivable? And it’s going to get worse.”

Clayton brought their conversation back to the woman. “So, what happened to your family? At Arapahoe?”

“Well, you two have already helped me so much. I’m afraid of where I’d have ended if you hadn’t snapped me from my nightmare and given me that sip of water.” Again, the woman, who would remain nameless, wiped at a phantom tear before continuing. “I suppose it’d only be right to return the favor and offer you a bit of advice.

“Without getting into all the ugly details—I just don’t think I’d come back from that nightmare a second time—you two should avoid the borders. At least in the places where most people try to cross. Robert was right, you know. This isn’t America any longer. You’re in a new country, one called Colorado. Kansas is the next country over, but it doesn’t want anything else to do with its neighbor, and your passport—if you even have it on you—isn’t a golden ticket into neither.

“No, Robert was right when he was yelling at that child-guard. I don’t know where I am anymore, except I know how I’m nowhere anymore.” The woman had paused, then a sad chuckle. Defeat. “I’m not even making sense, am I?”

Clayton and Ray looked at one another, unsure what to do next.

“Y’all go on your way. Just cross somewhere where there aren’t any guards. If you can find such a spot to cross. Or you may find yourselves joining me here, nowhere. Lost.”

Ray offered the woman to join them, although he must have expected her to decline. And she did, leaving them to their trip toward the Arkansas River.

#

The water shined, menacingly, a reflection of a sky which carried with it a promise of trouble to come.

“See?” Clayton said.

Just as he’d explained earlier to Ray, their newest obstacle loomed. Several hundred feet across at its widest, deep, and with a current swift enough to prevent their passage on foot.

Crossing the Arkansas River was a formidable challenge.

Setting his pack on the hard ground of the shore, Clayton studied the rushing water. Rain must be falling back west for there to be such a quick current.

“This is why I didn’t want to come here, Chief.”

Ray scoffed. “You owed me,” he said. Ray unfastened the straps to his bag, smiling, and let it lean against his friend’s in the dying grass. The two men searched the waterway for a clue, for passage. The dog from the double-wide, Spit, played his part, too. He scampered along the shoreline in search of something to eat.

The swirling, murky waters of river rushed past the two, swishing by in a hurry downstream. Clayton was first to sit, using his pack as a backstop.

“It was the right thing to do,” Clayton said, his voice just loud enough to carry the sound of the river. His friend looked at him before squatting and taking a seat of his own beside him.

“What was? Burying them, or bringing me to a river you knew we couldn’t cross?” Ray’s question lingered in the air before swirling downstream with the current.

“Both,” Clayton said. “Neither. I don’t know. Burying them was the one I meant.”

A subtle *humph* was all of Ray’s response.

By then, the slight breeze of the last few days had strengthened into a steady wind, along with the occasional gust. These Westerlies were the gusts that were responsible for spreading the ash from the volcano. Other than the graying sky, unusual for the summer in these parts, the ash carried in by the strongest winds served as the reminder for why this trip was important. Other than the small bit of foreign ash, and the somewhat noticeable dimming in the sky, Yellowstone might even be ignored in that moment by the river. A rare break from the usual onslaught.

Perhaps there was a fire somewhere near that could be blamed for the ash? Some dry woods, or a dry field? Maybe an early autumn storm-front was moving in, responsible for the clouds which continued to build thicker high above? Could there be a possibility that in only a short while everything in the world would be returned to normal?

Clayton thought the river was bringing these ideas to him from somewhere closer to its source. Maybe the moonshine he'd been sneaking from Ray was responsible? He shook his head. Ray glanced his way. And then, just as the river had brought them his way, Clayton watched as the water washed his thoughts away. All but the thoughts of another sip of moonshine.

Ray was leaning toward him, now. "You know, if we could manage to cross this sucker, somehow, we could avoid Kansas altogether."

"Go straight into Oklahoma?" Clayton said.

"That's right," Ray said. "Via its panhandle. You remember what the woman said about state lines?"

"The woman at Eads?" Clayton asked.

"Didn't sound like a risk worth taking, you know?"

Clayton heard his friend, and agreed with him, too. But still. How bad could it really be? Were they going to base their move on what a tired stranger had said?

Now, here they sat, two men and a dog, before a natural border made of flowing water. Needing no guard but potentially just as lethal as Arapahoe. If they headed east, toward the Kansas border, they'd make it to Holly, Colorado before the sun disappeared. Neither man felt sure if heading into Holly was a good idea, following the encounter with the woman and her story. Clayton was especially opposed.

"Do you smell that?" Ray asked. His question was the first words spoken in a while. Clayton put his nose to the wind. On cue, Spit sniffed along.

"Yeah," he said. "That smoke?"

Ray nodded. "Cigarette smoke."

The scent was the first unnatural thing they'd smelled in a day. Naturally, their attention was tugged from the river.

"You think it might be a way across?" Ray asked.

"Might be," Clayton said. "Might be no way at all."

Ray grabbed Clayton's pack and handed it to him. "Only one way to find out, right?" The three of them headed in the direction of the smoke.

#

Clay was leading with long strides, so Raymond stretched his own stride as best he could to keep up the pace. Spit followed close, his red tongue protruded at the corner of his mouth. The dog would eagerly attack the stalks of corn along the path, at random, then return to its preferred position near Raymond. For this reason, the animal's casual choice to return to him, Raymond

had an appreciation for Spit, for the companionship the dog gave him, that Clay could not.

Having had a quick rest and water from the river, Spit was especially energetic as they searched for the source of the cigarette smoke.

The Arkansas River sounded more distant than it really was. The path they followed, one formed by tractors used to harvest the surrounding fields, helped them to travel nearly parallel to the water. All the gear in his pack, and the stuff clanking in his pockets, however, removed Raymond from being fully aware of where he was. Instead of rushing water, the cacophony of metal utensils rattling, the scratch of fabrics building friction at the straps of his pack and in the groin of his pants, and the clap his boots generated each time they struck the packed dirt beneath them combined to enclose Raymond in his own private noise chamber.

Clay's voice successfully trumped all the noise, carried by the same downwind as the smoke. Raymond focused to hear his friend.

"There's no real way to say how far away our smoker is," Clay said. "Even without the wind, cigarettes can be sensed from hundreds of yards away."

"Sure," he replied. Clay's quickened pace had stripped him of his breath. Short responses now replaced any long-winded notions.

"Yeah," Clay continued, "but with this breeze, and add in how sound and scent travel farther across water, this guy could be a mile from here."

"Right," Raymond said. His mind, however, carried on where his lungs and mouth failed. Let's hope not a mile. Not even a half-mile. This person better be around the next bend or hill or whatever the fuck was in front of Clay, or else he'd have to be tied to Spit and dragged the rest of the way. Two long weeks, the longest of his life, were wearing on his endurance.

Thankfully, Clay halted in time. His friend had taken to a squat, so Raymond crouched also as he joined him. He kept to himself just how near to tears he'd come. He didn't intend to interrupt Clay, and provide fuel for his own future berating.

"You smell that?" Clay asked.

Raymond was breathing heavily, but he tried to smell what Clay did. In the place of smoke, Raymond could only smell the reek of alcohol rising off the pores of his companion. He checked himself before saying anything negative to Clay. He was the one stupid enough to allow his friend the right to carry the moonshine, which he was doubly stupid enough to give him.

"What is it?" he asked. Clay eyeballed him with glassy eyes.

"You kidding? Christ, Chief, my guess is Marlboro but could be something else. Winston, maybe?"

They'd closed the distance for sure, and the odor was much stronger than when they'd noticed it at the edge of the river. Raymond wasn't a smoker, and he couldn't tell the difference from one brand to the next. He hadn't thought Clay a smoker either, but he wouldn't be the least surprised when they found the person and Clay's guess of the brand was confirmed.

Pausing came with the unexpected effect of rooting Raymond in his reality. His noise chamber was gone, and returning were complete thoughts and sensations. The sound of running water returned as if the river was shifting and moving its way closer to where they held up between cornfields. Small creatures, hidden by the many plants, burrowed at the feet of the plants, moving soil and scratching their way into the ground. Raymond never got a clear look at them, only glimpses of brown fur and skinny tails. Field mice?

Raymond looked above himself. The noon sky darkened from the cloud cover. They were relentless, now, the clouds. No longer were the days when clouds were romanticized as the soft pillows of angels and cupids, or the carpeted flooring of Heaven. Clouds had taken on a more malicious nature, an evil mystery. Would they bring rain or ash? Figuring that out was impossible. Just like anyone else, he'd have to wait until the clouds tore like piñatas to learn their nature. His Cherokee blood lacked experience with volcanos.

But this wasn't the place to find out what type of candy these clouds had in store for them. If they weren't going to learn the hard way, then they needed shelter soon.

"Why aren't we moving?"

"Come on, Chief. Thought I taught you better by now." Clay dropped to a knee and slung his pack from his back to the ground in front of him. From it, he removed a pair of binoculars and handed them over to Raymond. "What do you see?"

At first, everything was a blur. He focused the binoculars, using the wheel in their bridge to dial in a sighting.

His world came into view.

Staring through the lenses, the river water faded until it was hardly there at all. The same for the invisible rodents perusing the feet of the corn stalks, their presence becoming all the more non-existent. The binoculars enhanced his tunnel vision, and that's when Raymond noticed what lay ahead.

"There's a house. Maybe a few rooms to it. It's on the river. Looks like the river bends there, and the house is there to reach its bank."

"Any movement?" Clay asked.

Raymond searched, but only the surface of the water and the incoming clouds appeared active. There were small birds, sparrows and crows, scattered in patches throughout the haphazardly placed trees and shrubbery. What looked to be an owl, several times larger than the other birds, rested atop the roof of the house, not far off from a protruding chimney. The chimney was smokeless.

“Any people, Chief?”

“I’m looking,” he said. “I don’t see anyone yet.”

Raymond removed the binoculars from his face but kept his gaze down the slight grade to where the house stood in the distance. Returning again was the sound of the storm-driven river water, and the incoming gusts tossed around the cornstalks like mere blades of grass, whistling on their way through.

“That cigarette wasn’t smoking itself,” Clay said.

Raymond held the binoculars out for Clay to grab. He was left reaching, however, as Clay stood and re-zipped his bag. He tapped the binoculars against the side of Clay’s leg.

Using a hushed voice, one that meant Clay had reverted to recon-mode, his friend spoke and ignored the binoculars.

“Let’s change our position and get a look from the other side of the house. I want to know what to expect before we approach. With any luck, there’ll only be our smoker down there living a solitary life on the water. But, since there isn’t a whole lot of luck going around right now, we might be dealing with a full house scenario. Might be better just to keep on moving along the river.”

Raymond stood also, and, taking this to mean *go-time*, Spit swiped one last time at a premature cob of corn before bolting down the sloping trail and toward the house. He refrained from yelling after the dog, though Clay was muttering angrily aside him.

Swinging the binoculars back to his eyes, he followed the dog's gallop all the way until he disappeared behind the far side of the structure.

"There goes any chance of sneaking past, unnoticed," Clay said, grabbing the binoculars. "Let me have these. Recon is done. Let's go get your dog."

They marched down the trail and approached the house. As they got closer, features of the structure became more specific. The strong aroma of fresh cigarette smoke was pervasive. Whistling, different from the kind created in the strong winds, came from inside the house.

Turning the corner, they saw a large wooden sign, natural in color, with the words *Heath's Ferry* burned into the grain with thick, black lettering. The sign hung on two large logs dug into the dirt exterior of the house. The house was made of wood, too. Raymond didn't know what type of timber, but it was weathered and dark.

The house was L-shaped and had a porch with a railing that lined the outside of the structure. There was a trough at the end of the porch but no horses. There weren't any animals, for that matter. A sudden urgency to locate Spit rose up inside him. "Spit!" he called. Clay might have tried hushing him, but Raymond didn't hear him, if that were the case.

Running was strenuous while carrying all the necessary gear. The pack on his back was filled so that its sides bulged, uneven and awkward. Some items were easily identifiable merely from the shapes they made in the canvas of the bag. The small cooking pot, for instance, was a prime example. Its smooth, circular bottom struggled against the sturdy canvas material, unable

to burst free but trying nonetheless, like a discontent, recent meal of a lethargic constrictor python.

Raymond was also in the habit of using his pockets for storage, and the camouflaged utilities he wore possessed pockets pretty much everywhere. There was no shortage for storage, and this contributed to the enabling of Raymond's likeness to that of the Michelin Man. In this post-world of loss and lacking, he'd found a way to *hold on* by becoming a collector of almost anything. At the moment, though, these items were making his search for Spit a chore. His calls for Spit were finally answered. But not by the dog.

"Cut it out, you. You'll wake Mr. Heath from his afternoon rest." Standing past the vacant troths approached a tall, dark man wearing only his jean trousers and an old pair of sneakers. He sported a hat, too, a bucket hat with a fully encircled brim. The hat was white, though it was terribly dirty, taking on the familiar gray tones of fallen ash, like most everything else. He didn't appear to mind the chill in the air.

The man's voice was low when he spoke again, having a gravelly quality. "You're not one of them fence-sitters from down the Ark, are you?" The man wasn't armed. That is, he wasn't holding anything. His hands, though, alternated, rubbing the knuckles of the other, one by one in an orderly fashion while he waited for Raymond to speak.

"Down the Ark, sir?" he managed to reply.

"Are you jerking me?" the man said. "Are you jerking me, now?" All the muscle of the man's chest and torso and his shoulders and arms were tensed. Raymond flinched.

"No, sir," he said. "I'm not jerking you."

“I told you boys to stay sitting on your fence down the Ark. Didn’t I? So what business you got coming back here? Want some more of what ol’ Lamar laid down last time, do you?”

The man raised his fists and shuffled his feet around like a boxer in the ring. Raymond backed away, looking for Clay, who’d disappeared. The man’s pectorals flexed, one and then the next, like pistons. They were distracting.

Raymond continued to backpedal, his hands waving off the angry man. He glanced at what was behind him. There was fifty yards of downward sloping ground before the bank of the river. A wire fence was posted lengthwise halfway up from the water, preventing direct access riverside. He imagined his unconscious body tumbling the slope until reaching the fence. At least he wouldn’t drown unless the guy tossed him in from there.

“No, sir,” he repeated. “I don’t want anything you’re laying down. I’m not whoever you think I am. I’ve never been here before.”

“You’re not a fence-sitter?” The man kept his hands up but quit the boxing jig.

Raymond ceased his backpedaling. “I don’t think so.”

“You’re not from down the Ark?”

“No, I don’t know where that is,” he said.

The man lowered his hands. “The Arkansas River, son. You standing right next to it, Christ’s sake. Follow it the way the water flows, and she’ll carry you into Kansas, directly. Don’t you know where you are, or has the storms got you going crazy, too?”

“Oh! The *Ark* is the river. Then, no, I’m not from down the Ark, sir. Me and my friend, we’re from Denver.” Again, he looked around for Clay without any luck.

Fortunately, the man no longer resembled someone ready to murder. Instead, he grinned and reassessed Raymond, undoubtedly measuring him for an odd and ill-guided fool. That was about the way he was seeing himself at the moment.

“Steady now, son. *We?* There’s someone here with you?” the man said.

“Yes, and—”

“Hang on, hang on,” said the man. He adjusted the brim on his hat with both hands while he talked. “This other, is he a fence-sitter?”

Raymond was becoming less fearful and more frustrated. The storms weren’t stopping and neither was, it seemed, this interrogation.

“Fence-sitter?” he asked the man.

“You know, the squirrel-shit, authority-craved, so-called state-line guards posted all along the Kansas border. Fence-sitters.”

“Oh,” he said.

“This other,” the man continued, “he one of them?”

“No. We’re from Denver. Like I said.”

“Then why the camouflage?”

Finally, a valid question. But just as Raymond began to explain his attire to the man who hardly wore anything at all, a booming voice came from up the slope.

“Lamar,” called the voice. “Lamar!”

Emerging from the wraparound porch was another man, short and stocky and white. He was fully dressed in a brown and maroon jumpsuit, zipped up to the bottom of his throat. He

wore a familiar painter's dust mask, so his voice was slightly muffled. Still, he spoke with an aristocratic air. This was clearly the proprietor.

“Mother father,” Lamar said to Raymond. “You gone and did it. Your dumb britches went and woke up Mr. Heath from his afternoon rest. Mother father!”

#

When they'd come upon the river ferry Clayton knew what they had found—Ray's ticket across the water like his friend had prayed for. Kansas was no longer a concern for them. They had a way into Oklahoma pop up like magic just when a way was needed. Because it felt too good to be true Clayton wasn't ready to believe their change of luck just yet. He reached for his pack, retrieved his scopes, and relayed them to Ray.

“What do *you* see?”

Beyond the main house was a smaller one at the end of the wing, and there was a shadow of a person stretched long in the dirty grass in front of the little dwelling. The owner of the shadow caught that afternoon sunlight so as to have three times his likeness in a dark length along the ground. The shadow crawled like a snake through the weeds, so Clayton was sure to have nothing to do with its owner.

Ray, however, was transfixed on the property and doggedly loyal to the mutt they'd attracted back in the southern plains of Colorado. Even with the help of the glasses, Ray had missed the shadow in the grass. Chief had broken every rule he'd set for them to follow with that stunt, hollering after the dog with the name Ray had given it just that same week. And, unreasonably so, Chief expected the animal to respond with behavior it had never had the training for. Insanity.

The outer wear on the wooden face of the house was a facade that gave way to a clean interior scented of the cedar from which it was built and the smoke of countless cigarettes. If the scent were a cologne, Clayton would wear it.

Clayton considered himself, briefly. He might be drunk, most certainly was, in fact, but he was still the only remaining constant that hadn't gone ape-shit after the eruption. The changing world hadn't changed him. *That* was a certainty.

Sticking to protocol, Clayton prepared to search the house for others, while Ray did what he had to before continuing on to the state line.

A women's voice spoke from an inner room of the house, her message faint but despairing.

"Lamar, you woke me again," spoke a man from the next room. "You're either in or you're out for this one. News says this storm's a bad one. None of this halfway," the voice trailed as the man entered the room.

#

Hanging, mounted, on the walls of the entrance room were a series of knots, ever increasing in the complexity of their tying. Clayton recalled his last attempt at a knot, tying the noose he'd made for his own neck, a series of thirteen loops. The ghost of Doug haunting him.

#

"If you can name to the seventh knot, you can live."

"How about I don't."

"Here's where I'd pump my shotgun, you'd hear the sound, there'd be an understanding exchanged between us as a result, and you'd start naming knots."

“But. I’m the one carrying the shotgun.”

“Like a burden.”

“Hmm.”

“Hands are going up, slowly.”

#

“Overhand, overhand loop, figure-of-eight—rewoven, sheet bend, double sheet bend, fisherman’s.”

Pause.

“It’s a trick. Should be a double fisherman’s next, but it isn’t.”

“Why should it? Keep the pattern? You’re right, though, I suppose. That one’s there by design to be the stumper.”

Pause.

“Well, mister. Can you name it or not?”

“It’s a lashing knot, round.”

“Impressive. I suspect you’d name all the rest if I allowed. But let’s not and say you did, huh, friend?”

“All right.”

“So, what are you, a sailor? Boy Scout?”

“Marine.”

“Ah, Marine. Of course. Glad to learn our military is still instructing the arts that matter. Knot tying has become sadly underrated, undervalued, if you ask me.”

Clayton hadn't learned knot-tying in the Marine Corps, but earlier, tying them as a boy. But, there wasn't any use explaining this to the man.

"My name is Jordan Heath, owner and operator of Heath's Ferry."

Spit ran into the room and payed special attention to Heath.

"And this fine fellow is yours, I presume?"

"More of my buddy's dog than mine. But you can say he belongs to us."

"I see. So, what can I do for you? And, would you be so kind as to lower that weapon of yours? I do prefer all my pieces where they are."

Clay lowered the shotgun to his side.

#

From the bottom step of the three that led to the deck of the porch, the man, who was presumably Mr. Heath, hollered from behind the painter's mask strapped to his face.

Inside Heath's house was a television, and with generators to power it, the set was a source of information for them.

#

"If we aren't booking soon, we may not be crossing her at all, boys," Heath said. He was staring into the sky, where a cloud front was quickly building. Lamar was gathering coils of heavy rope, and laying them aboard the wooden plank deck of the ferry.

"Hey, Lamar," Heath said. "What's your bet? How long do we have before all hell rips loose around us? An hour? Two?"

Lamar's arms shined with sweat, ceaselessly gathering rope, coiling and stowing it. They didn't pause, even for him to speak. "Maybe an hour, sir. Most likely less." He wasn't likely to say anymore. Raymond and Clay sensed this.

Raymond picked up the discussion. "It won't take long to get across, will it?" he said. He was talking to Heath, who was busy lighting another cigarette. He wore blue overalls and a red shirt underneath.

"Be as long as it be," was all Heath said. Raymond didn't know what to make of that. He glanced in Clay's direction. His friend shrugged. Not a fucking clue. Clay was drunk again, Raymond could always tell. Raymond blamed himself for not being more careful with the shine he'd brought along. Damn.

Following the trail of cigarette smoke had led to the ferry operation owned by this man who went by Heath, and his tacit laborer, Lamar. Seemed nice enough, except there was something strange in the way Heath kept eyeballing Spit.

Clay explained their need to cross the river to these guys, and then the odd looks the dog's way made more sense. Spit was the price for passage. They wanted the dog, or, at least, Heath did. Lamar didn't appear to care much about the situation, only that he finished the day's work in time to get home safely before the day's storms rolled in.

Raymond had fast become close with Spit, and the ferry operator's price felt too steep. He was going to argue with Heath, but Clay agreed to trade the dog for passage without hesitation.

"He's yours," Clay said. "His master died. The thing has been following us for days. Now, you guys wouldn't happen to have any whiskey out here?"

Only Heath and Clay laughed.

Once the rig was loaded and crossing the water, the four men were on the other side in no time. Raymond and Clay, with some help from Lamar, unloaded their gear. Heath stayed with the ferry, lighting his next cigarette.

“Good doing business with you,” the ferry operator said, apparently to them but not really to anyone at all.

“Same,” Clay said, waving the small bottle of whiskey Heath had tossed in for ownership of the dog.

Raymond paused once he was all loaded. “What do you want with a dog out here, anyway? It’s a house dog, you know?”

Heath was moving out of Lamar’s way, who was pulling up a coil of rope and preparing for their trip back across the river. He looked at Raymond. The ferry began to leave before he responded, Raymond had thought he might be ignored.

But all Heath said was, “I’ve got a house.”

Raymond spit into the river and turned to cuss Clay, but Clay was already distant from the shoreline. He’d have to wait until Clay sobered anyway, if he wanted Clay to remember being cussed. He tried cheering himself up. Next stop, Oklahoma.

#

III

One week had passed since Clayton and Ray made their way across the Arkansas River. Ray had been sour ever since they’d traded the dog for a ferry lift, though the deal felt lucky to Clayton. The two friends had begun to spend time alone, scouting the route ahead alone, then

doubling back to gather the other. This was exactly what Clayton was doing when he spotted some movement coming from the tree line.

Clayton had become accustomed to strangers greeting him, not with salutations, but with firearms. In this case, it was a man with a rifle and a girl, apparently unarmed. This was the third time he saw a gun before hearing a word. He should know better than to keep the pistol in his bag. He should keep the pistol handy. But he hadn't.

The three of them stood on the shoulder of the state road, as if they'd planned all along to meet right at the spot for conversation. They were a couple miles south of another highway, one which had faded from sight. Another wave of the Westerlies, those hellish gases and volcanic ash, promising to be as lethal, or worse, than the first cloud, was on its way.

Clayton was growing anxious, but the man wielded a rifle, so it was Clayton with his hands reaching for the gray sky.

"Who are you?" the stranger asked.

The man's voice was tired, strained, wispy like smoke, and without any bass. He was taller than Clayton, but his back hunched so that they were about the same height. His face jutted forward a few permanent inches from his body. He leaned as if he might have an important secret, or as if he were in the act of falling. On the man's head, an old ball cap. From the cap, the man's long, but thinning, reddish hair.

The girl stood a couple feet to the man's side. Maybe his daughter or granddaughter? Her hair was red, too, except more alive than her old man's. She was quiet, but something told Clayton that she had been told to keep quiet. Her posture suggested the fact. The unnaturally rigid frame of a soldier, or a hostage. If she was allowed to, she'd probably tell him to answer the

man's question. Clayton could almost hear her screaming from behind her stoic façade, *Speak. C'mon, tell him your name.*

"The name's Rudd," Clayton said. "What's yours?"

The man remained silent. His head cocked as if figuring calculations. Clayton nicknames the man, Chestnut. The color of the man's hair. It's the same method Clayton would use to name a dog. This felt appropriate, since he'd only heard the man's bark.

Clayton had heard of people who actually enjoyed silence. They preferred it to conversation, sought silence every day. The silence of others, however, was uncomfortable. When Clayton wasn't speaking, he was usually thinking. Wasn't the same for others? Silence forced Clayton to question what the others around him were thinking, especially so when the others were aiming a weapon at him.

Clayton's arms were at his side. When did he do that? Was it gradual or sudden? Chestnut hadn't lowered his rifle, so should he put them back up? Clayton's shoulders objected to putting his hands back into the air.

River Falls was whispered near his ear. Kate's voice. Clayton recognized the voice instantly. He ignored the voice, more PTSD. All in his head. *River Falls*, she repeats. This was confusing because there was a lot going on all at once. Clayton can only process so much at a time. Keep it together though. Clayton needed to if he hoped to make the trip back to Ray alive.

Kate was difficult to ignore. Some of Ray's moonshine had done the trick earlier, but he hadn't brought any along on this scouting. Unlike Chestnut and the girl, Kate wasn't standing in front of Clayton. She was dead. Except there was no convincing *her* of this, and so for days, Kate

had stood just behind Clayton, so that she couldn't be seen, always looming with her breath warming the air around his earlobe, her voice whispering words not her own, but his.

This damn silence. The damn stress. Crashing and running. Was Clayton nuts, fearing the silence more than the gun barrel?

Clayton's voice betrayed his nerves. "My given name is Clayton, though."

"Clayton, though?" Chestnut asked. Was this guy smarting off? Men with guns could afford to be. Clayton gave the man the benefit of the doubt.

"It's Rudd, sir. Just, Clayton Rudd."

Then without a moment's hesitation Chestnut said, "Clayton Rudd the Just." A feigned laugh followed. Clayton didn't like this man.

More silence. No vehicles passed. The birds and insects, even the breeze, all seemed in collusion for quietness.

"What is your name?" Clayton asked again. Chestnut casts the question aside.

"What do you," he paused, "in that purse there," the rifle pointed at Clayton's side where his bag hung among his ribs. With a subtle lift of his shoulder, Clayton drew all their attention to the satchel.

"This?" Clayton asked. The girl looked at him, then downward, and then away toward the road's black top. There was a depth within her shiny eyes—indecipherable depth like the distilled waters of some ancient cave.

Surprised, Clayton noticed more of this girl—young woman? He contemplated how it was possible for him to overlook these features.

Her expression was defined by anxiety and disappointment. Clayton didn't understand. Why would she be anxious? Was she in a hurry? And what of the disappointment? But then her expression could also be fear. She had to be at least a decade his junior, maybe sixteen.

The road no longer interested the girl, whose eyes now scanned the treetops across the road, perhaps watching for birds. A safe bet would be that she didn't want to be there.

The man, smiling but not happy, shifted weight from one foot to the other and grunted an affirmative, that yes, that "purse"—the only fucking purse—was the object of his interest.

Chestnut wanted to know what was inside the satchel. But, once he had his answer, Chestnut would be wanting more. He'd want Clayton's pistol.

#

The Colt 1911 sat useless near the bottom of the bug-out-bag. Storing the only weapon out of quick reach was a major mistake. There was no way for Clayton to know what this hillbilly might do if he managed to swindle him. There was a part of Clayton that he couldn't explain without thinking more about it, but he wanted this hillbilly to prove him wrong, make Clayton feel like the asshole, the cynic who saw the world through a pessimistic lens capable only of observing what was wrong with this planet. This part of Clayton was more like a spirit, just renting a chamber of his heart.

Chestnut coughed hard, and this gave Clayton an idea, reminded him of the bug-out's other contents. *The medicine*, Kate whispered. He almost responded without thinking, but caught himself in time. Whether Kate's a ghost or a neurosis, her unexpected whispers could put him in harm's way. Clayton was betting that Chestnut was smarter than he looked. He needed to

strategize, plan moves in sequence. A chilly breeze rolled over them. In the trees to the right, the leaves rustled in the oaks and needles fell from the pines.

Storm's on its way. Better tell him something soon, honey. Why don't you tell him about the shirt I folded for you? It's right on top.

“Clothes.”

“Clothes?” Chestnut asked.

“That’s what I’ve got in the bag,” Clayton said. “Mostly.”

The light of day had shifted since the encounter began. The sun was waiting less these days as summer waned and fall approached. Yet, the days—those safe for outdoor travel—had been cool for August. In the new light, the lines and wrinkles on Chestnut’s face were undeniable. He had aged ten years right in front of Clayton.

A stronger breeze raised goose bumps on Clayton’s neck, so cool, and a memory from two nights earlier came to mind, reminding him not to be caught without shelter after sundown.

The girl’s large, bottomless eyes were throwing glances like darts between Chestnut and him, and were the only sources of color in this drab setting. An illusion from the cloud, or exhaustion maybe, but only her eyes shined with blues and greens and some gold in an otherwise black and white picture.

“Look,” Clayton lied. “I wrecked my bike a couple miles back. I could use some help, but I don't need any hassle.”

Chestnut coughed again, this time longer and spat. Sweat dripped down Chestnut’s forehead, into his eyes, which he wiped with a surprisingly quick swipe of an arm. Clayton had

seen these symptoms before, something in that ash cloud that didn't agree with most immune systems.

"Are you sick?" Clayton asked.

Chestnut stole a glance at the girl, but returned his attention to Clayton and the bag. He began to shout something, but his coughing prevented him.

"I have something for your cough," Clayton said. "And the fever."

"What are you, a doctor?"

"There's a first-aid kit in the bag. I'll help you, then I'll be on my way alright? I don't have any time to burn."

Clayton slacked his shoulder and the bag slid the length of his arm to his hand. Both Chestnut and the girl flinched at the movement. Probably since they'd been like statues the whole time. Kudos to Chestnut for holding the rifle steady. Maybe he was stronger than he looked? Maybe he used to be.

"Put it down. Right there on the ground," Chestnut ordered. Again using the rifle to point.

"But I can just get the medicine out," Clayton assured him. *This is no good*, Clayton heard whispered. *You must dictate the moves*. He fought the urge to nod assurances to Kate.

"Right there, on the ground is fine. Now put it down and step," more coughing. "Step back." Chestnut's command was hard to hear, buried under layers of that hack. No ordinary cough, but deep enough to maybe shake loose anything inside not securely fastened. Maybe what Death sounds like when He calls your name? Wave after wave of painful clapping in the throat.

"But, let me just get the medicine."

“I’m not repeating myself again,” Chestnut warned. “Drop the bag and—” The cough was dreadful.

“You have got to be kidding me!” Chestnut’s stubbornness was almost impressive. There was nothing in the bag that could help him, but Clayton didn’t want him to know that.

Reluctantly, Clayton released his grip on the bag and it slouched in the grass with the crunch of broken blades. What would Chestnut do with his sweaty paws on the pistol?

“Good, now back on up there. That’s right.”

Clayton continued stepping away while Chestnut nodded. Then the man looked at the girl. “I’m sending Hillary here to fetch the bag. You just keep where you are and we’ll be dandy, you hear?”

“That rifle better have bullets,” Clayton said. An empty threat.

“Ummph,” Chestnut grunted. “It’s fully loaded. Don’t worry. Now stay put.”

Nothing was going to plan. “There’s nothing in there but clothes and medicine. It’s not right to treat a person like this. I’m trying to help you.”

“Right. Well you keep where you are and no trouble, see?”

Hillary was slow in her approach, but she looked more nervous being down range of Chestnut’s rifle than from nearing Clayton and the bag. She kept checking back at the man.

“We ain’t got all day, girl. Hurry it along,” Chestnut called.

She squatted over the bag, searching for a way to open it. She untied the straps and unzipped the zipper. Her hands were exploring. Watching her root through the bag had Clayton’s blood pressure rising. Here he was, at the end of the civilized world, everyone and thing he’d

known was dead or dying, and all he wanted was to reach Ray. Maybe find some solitude. Be depressed, alone.

Soon, they'll have all the food he owned. All of his supplies. And worst of all, his gun, his only inheritance from Clayton's old man's side of the family. Then, what will they need him for? What will they decide to do with him? Let him go? Kill him?

Clayton aimed to return to camp with Ray by sunset. There were warm meals and Jameson Irish Whiskey waiting for him there. He'd squirreled away some leftover from Heath at the ferry, stolen when Heath was busy looking for another pack of cigarettes.

"I thought it'd be nice to run into some other people," Clayton said. "I guess I imagined we'd all want to help each other out, considering."

The girl looked up at him, two large eyes absorbing the color of everything else. She wasn't afraid any more, just real sad.

Speaking to her, Clayton said, "Considering the world went and ended."

The way she looked reminded Clayton of a little kid lost in the grocery store. Desperate to find their parent, wondering aisle to aisle. Her gaze softened his resolve a little, and Kate whispered, *what's this?*

"The world is ended?" asked the girl. Her voice was thick like the morning fog. Surprising, that a young girl could have such depth in her voice.

"You don't know?" Clayton asked, genuinely caught off guard.

"I've been in the forest for—"

"That's enough now, Hillary. You focus on that bag. This ain't social hour."

“Wait. You mean to tell me you don’t know what’s happened . . . what is happening?” Clayton’s surprise was unconcealed. *Here is your chance*, Kate whispered. The girl had paused in her inspection of the bag.

“Is everybody dead?” she asked with that voice. It was a voice meant for something special, rich in tone like her whole throat vibrated and her tongue spun in harmony.

“I don’t know how to say this—”

“Hillary! Bring that bag on over here. If you won’t search it right then—”

“I can do it!” she shouted back.

“Then get on with it,” Chestnut said. Then his cough returned for another round.

She wanted to know more. Clayton would too if he were her. The thought never occurred to Clayton that there were people who still knew nothing about the eruption. But here he was, standing on the outskirts of Colorado’s border with Oklahoma, with two strangers who knew nothing at all. Why were they being so cautious? Something didn’t make sense.

The girl was now elbows deep in Clayton’s bag, shuffling items around to make more room to dig deeper. *All the time you put into organizing that bag*, Kate whispered. Clayton could almost hear Kate sigh. *And what will she do when she sees the pistol?*

“Listen to me,” Clayton urged. “It’s not safe for you to be going through my stuff if you haven’t been exposed to the virus.”

“Virus?” She yanked her arms free of the bag.

“There’s something in that cloud,” Clayton pointed at the sky. “Something that’s making folks sick. A lot of folks. And unless—”

“Hillary, goddammit! Bring that bag over here right—” Chestnut’s cough wouldn’t let him finish.

“I don't want to get sick,” she said. Her voice shook, but still contained an undeniable strength.

“Aw, you ain't buying this garbage are you, girl? He's messing with your head. The boy is screwing with you for fright, that's all. There isn't no virus in no cloud.”

“Maybe that's what happened to them,” she said.

“There ain't no virus, Hillary. Now grab the bag and bring it.”

When Chestnut coughed real hard, his rifle lowered so that the barrel almost dragged in the dirt. Kate added in a whisper, *and his eyes shut each time*. When he coughed again, Clayton saw that Kate was right, Chestnut couldn’t keep his eyes from closing mid-hack.

In rolled another breeze. This one was cooler and carried an odd smell. Smelled like trash, and kind of bitter. Sulfuric. *You need to speed this along, honey*, Kate whispered.

“I'm not lying to y'all. I'm not happy about it neither. I'm just trying to deal with it. Pick up where I can and just live my life. I don't mean any harm, but I need to keep on moving. If you won't help me, then could you please just let me go?”

“Where have you got to go if the whole world is ended? Huh? Why the hurry, Rudd?” Chestnut asked mockingly.

“I got a place,” Clayton said.

“A place? What, like an island?”

“Something like that.”

Chestnut laughed, high-pitched and giddy, like a hyena. Then he paid the price with more coughing.

“It's a house, my house,” Clayton lied. “And it's got supplies to last a while. Long enough to last what's happening anyway, should be. I'm not lying about the cloud. I've seen it, been up close to what it does. I don't know why it didn't kill me like everyone else. Thought I was lucky. Now I'm second guessing that. But unless you two think you might be immune, then being near me and my stuff is more dangerous than that rifle. And there's another cloud coming. You can smell it already, can't you? Like death with a sugar coating? This is only the beginning.”

The girl inched closer to the bag until she was close enough to reach for it again. To Clayton's amazement, she grabbed the bag and started to rummage through his gear again.

“Hey. Didn't you hear me? You could get sick.”

“No. I can't,” she said. “Now where's the medicine?” The girl reached deep into the bag and then snapped back. “Oh!”

“What is it?” Chestnut demanded. “What'd you find?”

Only be a moment before the gun was being used against him.

“The first-aid kit, buried under all the junk in there!” she said. She glanced at Clayton, turning toward Chestnut and bringing only the kit.

“There ain't nothing else in there worth taking a look at?” he asked.

“Just like he said, Dale. Just clothes, mostly.”

She's really selling it, Kate whispered. Now why would she do that? Clayton had no answer.

“Anything helpful in that kit?” Chestnut asked her.

“Yeah, take this. It's cough syrup.” She handed him a small bottle.

“How can you tell? There's not a label.”

“By the smell, Dale. Don't it smell like cough medicine?”

Clayton heard Kate's light laughter from behind him. She whispered, *that is some faultless reasoning if I've ever heard any for drinking unmarked cough syrup stolen from a stranger*. Clayton couldn't agree more. This girl was making a move. Or maybe she thought it really was just coughing syrup, and not Oxycodone.

Chestnut sniffed the syrup and downed a bit.

“Sure as hell tastes like cough medicine too, rotten junk. So now what? I'm getting tired of standing around here all day. Suppose we ought to take him back to the cabin with us, huh?”

“Maybe we should just let him keep walking like he wants,” she said. “He's helping with the medicine and all.”

“Nah, we can't do that. We risk him getting his buddies and coming back here. If the world is ended like he claims, then we're in need of all the help we can get. Starting with whatever he's got on him, like that bag you left over there.”

The girl didn't move. She stood facing him, arms straight as boards at her sides and hands clenched in small, angry fists.

“There isn't anything useful in his bag,” she said.

“I'll decide if that is true when I see for myself, now go.” Chestnut must've felt another fit coming on, because he tossed back his head and swallowed more syrup. So hard to see all that Oxycodone consumed by someone else. Clayton made a mental note to carry moonshine on all future scouting trips.

Visibly angry, the girl marched to the bag and picked it up. Then, she slowly carried the bag back to the man, whose rifle was swaying more as time passed.

“Good girl. Now hold onto it. It’s coming back to the cabin,” he said. Then, looking over at Clayton, “And he is, too.”

How good of a shot was this guy? Should he make a break for the woods? Was that rifle even loaded? Chestnut closed the distance between them, and there was nowhere for Clayton to run. Plus, he did want his bag.

Hillary headed toward the trees, just as another wind brought the forest to life. Clayton was to follow her, said the rifle aimed at his back.

“Dale, right? Your name's Dale?” he asked.

“Keep walking. I don’t want new friends,” he said. “Just follow Hillary up there and there won't be any trouble.”

Hillary took a dirt path that snaked between large trees and briars. Other than stepping over root systems, the path was simple. Dimmed sunlight broke through the towering foliage in spots that scattered like loose change on the ground.

Hillary picked up the pace. Clayton sped up to get closer to her.

“Slow it down, Hillary. We ain't running a race, dammit,” Dale said.

Clayton glanced back. He’d fallen back a good bit. He was losing control of the situation. Once Clayton got ahold of his things, he’d make an escape.

Hillary didn't seem to hear Dale. If anything, she walked faster. Winding around trees and stepping over roots.

“Slow it down,” Dale shouted.

She must've heard him but the girl had apparently gone deaf. She rounded the next bend so that Clayton lost sight of her for a moment. When she came back into view, her lead had grown by another twenty feet. Clayton sped up to make up the lost distance. From behind them, the crack of rifle fire. Clayton froze in place, then spun around.

Dale, out of breath, struggled to where Clayton stood. The girl was out of sight completely.

“Wait right there . . . or I swear . . . the next . . . one's . . . in your back.”

“I'm right here. No need to hurt me,” Clayton said. “I don't hear you coughing. The medicine must have done its job, right?”

“Just be quiet,” Dale said.

“No ‘thank you’?”

“Shut it,” he yelled. Dale was covered in sweat and looked sticky, pale. An all too familiar complexion.

Clayton heard Kate again. *Did I look that awful?* He cringed.

Dale was talking, “I just need to rest a minute. Just need a damn rest. After everything I done for her and she can't stop walking when I ask?” All of his weight was on the rifle with its stock in the ground.

“Something isn't right. Something's wrong with me,” he said. “The ground ain't supposed to move like this.” Dale dropped to one knee, then both. Clayton wasted no time and snatched the rifle from him, which caused him to land on his chest and face in the dirt. Clayton nudged him a few times with a foot. Unconscious. Not dead though, just sleeping. His breath scattered the dirt some. He wouldn't be waking up anytime soon.

Clayton found the medicine bottle in Dale's other hand and held it up to the sunlight. More than half of the Oxycodone was gone. Amazing the man had stayed awake as long as he had. No label on the bottle. What did he expect, Dayquil?

Clayton had the girl to thank. She'd given him the bottle and kept quiet about the gun.

"The gun," Clayton said. He took one more look at the poor bastard on the ground, then headed after the girl and his bag.

The trail's end blended with a large, grassy yard at the rear of a structure Clayton assumed was the cabin Dale had mentioned. There was no sign of the girl, but Clayton saw his bag leaning against the cabin door on the porch.

He'd check and make sure the gun was still inside, then make a mad dash for the road. If he was lucky, Ray might have something cooked for dinner by the time he got back to their camp. This ordeal had wasted enough of his time.

Three steps led up the porch. Clayton squatted near the bag, but as he grabbed the bag, the cabin door swung open and there stood Hillary, aiming his own pistol at his head.

"Take me with you," she said.

"You shouldn't point a gun at someone you aren't ready to kill."

"Take me with you."

While still squatting low, playing it cool, Clayton opened the bag and inspected inside without looking up at the girl holding his gun.

"Why should I help you? Thanks to you and your father, I'm way behind," Clayton said.

Clayton looked up when she was quiet. Her hands trembled. Her eyes filled with tears. She was doing all she could to keep herself together, emotions intact.

“What about your dad?” Clayton asked.

“He's dead. They're all dead,” she said faintly.

“What are you talking about? He's not dead, I left him lying on the path, asleep.”

“Dale's not my dad!” she snapped. “My dad is dead. My whole family is. Dale lives here, in this place. We were just visiting on vacation, only a couple weeks. My family is in the next cabin over.” She pointed down another dirt path.

“That virus you talked about,” she said. “I think that's what happened to us, my parents and sisters. First, Mom fell ill and then Haley, my youngest sister. She's only nine. Was only nine. Then Lily, my older sister, and then Dad. I was the only one left. I tried to take care of them, but it was so fast. I didn't know what to do, so I listened to Dad who said it was going to be fine, not to worry. But it wasn't fine, not at all, and then Haley died. I ran for help but it was like everyone had vanished. It took me all day just to run into Dale. By the time he came inside, well, my whole family was just there. I don't have a family now. I don't have anyone.”

She quieted, but the gun was still aimed at Clayton.

“You going to give that back to me?” he asked.

“Are you taking me with you?”

Her eyes were drying, and there were strands of red hair stuck to the sweat on her cheeks and forehead.

“How do I know I can trust you?” Clayton asked.

“You'll be all I have.” She offered him the pistol, holding it with the grip toward Clayton.

“I'd pity you if I weren't so busy feeling bad for myself.” Clayton said. He took hold of the gun. “We've got quite the journey ahead of us. You think you're ready?”

She looked at Clayton with those profound eyes. She smiled wide. “Call me Hills.”

#

Any warmth from that day’s sun had long faded, either settling deep in the ground or retreating heavenward, away from Raymond, leaving him with numb fingers with which to fumble the dried corn husks he used as tinder. From a small family of pine trees planted along the road, he’d saved a pocketful of needles to add to the corn husk, as well as smaller twigs for kindling. Clay was gone, scouting the way ahead for safety. Meanwhile, he was left to himself at camp, blowing off steam over how the river crossing finished, a venture that had cost him a new friend in Spit.

Raymond was responsible for their camp, a single tent nestled in a cornfield, and for his dinner. The small fire he prepared was positioned so that he could keep an eye on the tent while maintaining a distance he considered his throwing range. That way, if a person or predator found the tent, or tracked down his fire, he’d have a chance to run or defend. He was getting the hang of survival. His mother would be proud of her son if she knew.

He still debated whether to heat the lone can of beets he’d claimed for the night’s meal, or to eat them cold. The fire was fifteen minutes from getting started, at best. The cold air stiffened the knuckles of his hands. His stomach voted cold, its grumbling a legitimate threat to giving away his location. He rooted through his pack for the can opener. Clay might act like Rambo and use an oversized hunting knife to pierce the can, but that behavior was barbaric and unsafe. Civilization would still exist in the wasteland as long as one person, abiding in a hidden field, had the courage to free his beets properly, with a can opener.

The ground here, south of Highway 160, was sunken beneath the mountains to the west. The Rockies had given way to an everlasting stretch of low hills and then to nearly nothing, for if it weren't for the owners of the land who chose to farm it, the land might well remain as deserted as the ocean floor it once was. Far from being a marine biologist, Raymond was unsure of the precise aquatic history of the area. What was certain was that there had been sharks there once. Large ones, some of them, as judged by his growing collection of teeth. Raymond liked how closely the teeth resembled the arrowheads he'd also begun collecting as he and Clay neared the Oklahoma border.

He was being forced to accept that he and Clay really were on their own, responsible only for themselves. To accept that the country had divided, that the volcano had split more than just the earth as it had shaken loose the very mores of a nation. Someone, the U.S. military, or a foreign nation, had to be concerned, had to be sending help. Right? Nearly three weeks' time had passed since the earth rocked in Denver.

Nights were harder for Raymond. They seemed to have more surprises for him and Clay than the days offered. One night, while they slept beneath the canopy of a rare Plain Oak, a group of three boys huddled by the small fire that he and Clay had left alight. The excitement of the boys grew once they noticed him and Clay in their sleeping bags not far from the flame. Had Clay not been ready with his pistol, there was no telling what those kids would have chosen to do. In the daytime, the groups would've noticed one another long before any kind of interaction of that sort would happen. They'd have avoided each other. But, at night, these kinds of exchanges were inevitable.

Time behaved differently in the dark. Nights passed slower than days. As less things could be seen with eyesight, events took on new qualities characterized primarily by sound. The day's events were remembered in the mind's eye, but the nights were mostly remembered by the way they were heard.

The sun had set, but Clay still wasn't back from the day's scouting. This was odd. Raymond's stomach was uneasy, and he couldn't blame the beets just yet. He didn't want to consider the possibility that something could ever happen to Clay.

It was better, instead, to focus on the beets. Dark red, darker in the dark. A mass of wet, spongy mush with a delightfully unexpected rush of sweetness. He finished the can.

Clay would be displeased to find no dinner ready when he got back. He might get loud if there were no fire either. His belly satisfied by the canned beets, Raymond now noticed other feelings. Guilt, for giving his friend so much grief the past week.

He set a row of stones around the neatly stacked kindling, for stability and protection from the wind. The stones would heat once the fire got going and hold their heat long enough for him to fall asleep before they went cold.

There wasn't any productive reason for his attitude the last few days. Just trying to make Clay feel guilty for trading a dog they'd only known a short while. The drinking, though, that was why the act had hurt him so deeply. Had Clay been sober, would he have been so quick to trade Spit for the ride? The dog had been their only ticket across. He knew this. But, the ease with which the trade was settled, this was what had Raymond bothered most.

He found the old, plastic container that once held Elmer's glue, according to its label, now used only to hold their supply of lighter fluid. He twisted the orange cap on the top of the bottle and wet the wood.

Raymond had believed that once their supply of moonshine was gone, Clay would sober. Finding booze couldn't be easy, right? But every time he watched his friend swallow dry another bottle, a new supply would take its place. For Clay, the wasteland was paradise, a land for the wasted. Everyone had post-traumatic stress to deal with now. Booze and pills were traded as freely as ammunition. This was the state of the nation, and he had no say in it. Clay got his way because it *was* the way. America: the land of the wasted.

There was movement not far from him. Fucking nighttime surprises. He thought he heard Clay's voice saying, "Somewhere around here." Normally, he'd keep quiet, but he took the risk.

"Clay," he called. "That you?"

Then a second voice, a girl's. Raymond reached for his pack. He wanted the tomahawk he'd stowed in there. Clay's voice cut through the night's blindness, alleviating Raymond's panic.

"Yeah, Chief. It's me," he said. "I've got someone with me. It's okay. She's all right." Clay and the girl, were they giggling?

Then, Clay said, "Why's it so fucking dark?"

Raymond struck a match, dropped it lit into the doused piling, and used the fledgling light to see the newcomer.

#

If a shelter was to be built, work should have begun hours sooner. The days were ending earlier than the one passing before, and this day was nearly finished as well. Clayton had said as much when the three travelers finished refilling their canteens at the watering hole. But since no one had listened to him, Clayton was once again faced with the heavy task of finding somewhere to protect the group for the night to come.

This night was a lucky one for sure, they'd managed to spot a cave before sundown and would have the shelter they desperately needed.

Ray used to take quick to instruction, but ever since Hills had come around his attention was halved, at best. Clayton approached where Ray was building a small fire.

"I said to make the fire in the back of the cave, Chief."

"Hills said she saw a snake head back there."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"The back of the cave is dark, and if there is a snake back there I want nothing to do with it."

"You're scared of the dark?"

Hillary laughed, unable to detect Clayton's seriousness.

"It's not a big deal, Clay," Ray said. "So I made the fire up here, in the front, so what?"

Clayton took a step closer to the constructions of rocks and sticks and dried corn stalks. Already, the materials formed a half-circle, its design nearing perfection with all the practice Ray had received on the trip. Clayton kicked the piled stones and sticks and dried corn stalk, devastating the construction.

"What the heck?" Hillary yelled. Her voice surrounding them in the cave's tight quarters.

“Make the fire in the back, like I said.”

“Why did you have to do that?” Ray asked.

“I’m tired of trying when no one else seems to care. I’m done.”

“You’re done?” Ray asked. “Fuck it. You build the fire.” Ray was walking away toward the mouth of the cave.

Clayton called after him, “Chief, you afraid of the dark? That it? Afraid of snakes? Or are you too busy chatting up our new friend to hear your old friend when he speaks?” Ray was gone, leaving only Clayton and Hillary inside the cave. She was keeping a safe distance from Clayton, edging her way closer to where Ray had exited.

She tried her luck talking with the irate Clayton. To her surprise, his tone had downshifted. He was calm with her.

“What was wrong with Ray’s fire?”

“Wasn’t where I told him to make fire.”

“So, what? Was all that some control-freak freak out? Because the fire wasn’t put right where you said, it had to be toppled?”

“No,” Clayton said. “You can’t make the fire at the front of the cave. The wind is just going to blow smoke inside on us. You make the fire in the back of the cave, so the smoke can be taken out by wind instead.”

“If you had a reason, why not just explain that to us? Why throw a tantrum?”

“And interrupt you and your puppy-dog’s talks?”

Clayton began construction of a new fire, in the rear of the cave. He couldn’t be seen from the cave’s entrance and was hardly visible from where Hillary stood only ten feet away.

Clayton struck the flint and a spark took to the dried corn husk. Soon, a mellow glow began to strengthen and the darkness of the cave's innards subsided.

Clayton cheered in victory, followed by a startled squeak. Hillary looked up in his direction. A slender, black snake slithered out from the back of the cave, disappearing through the cave's entrance.

Ray returned to the cave later, carrying with him something and holding it behind his back. When he revealed the item, it was the same snake that had been residing in the cave's dark interior.

Ray brought the snake to the budding fire that Clayton built, and prepared a spit for the snake to be cooked on. Using his tomahawk, Ray chopped off the snake's head and proceeded to remove the snakeskin.

#

The windows appeared dark and mysterious. There were two windows, one on each side of the cabin's front door. The entranceway called attention to itself, constructed with an odd, small door, its top frame struggling to clear four feet.

Excluding Raymond and Hills, who were left to themselves outside the cabin, everyone else stooped through the low doorway.

They needed to crossover from Colorado into Oklahoma, and these men were apparently their best option to do that.

Raymond's non-invite to participate in these dealings may have stemmed from the lack of space within the cabin. But, measuring in at 5'9", his height was near average and couldn't be reason enough. No, instead, it had everything to do with the terms Clay had accepted during their

initial conversation with the men. This was the when Raymond's Cherokee background had come into play. Racists!

The encounter took place near the yellow farmhouse, prior to the three men leading the way to this cabin.

Just across a fallow field sat the much larger structure, in relation to the cabin, and Raymond had no doubt the house belonged to whomever owned the property and neighboring farm fields. The farmhouse stood two stories high, and around its whole foundation wrapped a porch painted white. All the exterior walls were painted a bright shade of yellow, a yellow that greedily collected the day's light and generously reflected it back onto its surrounding environment. The large, yellow farmhouse easily stood out in contrast to the darker, dormant soil surrounding it.

As was usual on this trip, Clayton noticed the others first. And only after a few minutes of silently studying their behaviors—while both he and Raymond hid behind the only two trees in the farmer's yard, and for that matter, the only pair of trees for acres in all directions—did Clayton confidently step from his cover and into their view.

Initially startled by the unexpected visitor, the trio composed themselves with an admirable swiftness and addressed Clayton as if they were old friends from another place and time.

First to speak was the white one. He shifted an unlit cigar between his lips. He smiled. "Sure is nice seeing a young man wearing that uniform. Reminds me of my own time in the service. Course, I always was of the mind that you Marine fellers led the way in uniform fashion." He was referring to the digital camouflage Clayton wore.

From his position behind what he believed to be an oak tree, Raymond found himself struggling to get a read on the man talking. Was he really former military, or had he made up the story to try to share a link somehow with this stranger? Raymond needed to get involved before he and his friend found real trouble.

The white man's smile lingered up until the point he spotted Raymond's approach, having chosen to join his friend's side, regardless of the risks and in opposition to his instincts.

Now they were two young men wearing military uniforms standing before the man. This changed his way of operating, and he suddenly called to the others with him: "Hey, Nevil. George. Come on over for introduction time." He gestured to Raymond and Clayton with the same hand that now held the cigar, and asked them to share their names as George and Nevil approached the small patch of lawn in front of the farmhouse where all five now stood just feet from one another.

One was a tall, lanky man, dark in complexion. The other man was darker than his counterpart, and shorter, too, with a muscular build. Not a word was uttered.

The white man pointed toward his tall partner. "That's George," he said. "Former Ranger, that one. As in the Army Rangers. Badass, right?"

Clayton was unable to figure if the man was cracking a joke or not. These guys had to be in their mid- to late-forties, at the absolute youngest.

"And this one here," he said, while pointing toward the remaining man. "He goes by Nevil. I've known him for years and that's always been his name, but I still can't believe he's got Nevil as his real name. Nevil is a name for a fairy, or some vagina of a man. You hear what I'm saying? But hell no, I ain't calling him by anything else but that silly ass name because I've seen

what he can do. Tear right through a man with bare hands. I'd say "Pit-bull" would be a more honest name for him. He's a nasty, nasty guard dog who likes to be called Nevil."

Incapable of bearing the man's slow pace any longer, only thinking more about the disaster headed their way, Raymond asked the white man about *his* name. "George, the Ranger, and Nevil, the pit-bull. Got it. And what do we call you?"

In his peripheral vision, Raymond knew that his friend was frowning upon the outburst. They'd made the agreement at the start of their trip to leave any talking—specifically this kind of conversation—solely to Clayton for the handling.

Clayton jumped in, "I'm John, and he's Alejandro."

It was unintentional on Clayton's behalf, but he'd forgotten how his friend's late father was also called Alejandro, and in death he still bore the name as it's inscribed with deep cuts into the granite stone marking his burial site. Chief's dad had only passed away a matter of months earlier, at the end of a painful battle with prostate cancer.

There was a stretch of time when Clayton had forgotten he ever lived with Raymond, because of all the days and nights his friend spent at the hospital. Raymond tried daily to persuade any nurse who'd listen to allow him to remain with his dad after official visiting hours were over, and sometimes wanting in before visiting hours began.

At first glance, he thought Raymond would be all right handling his new identity. But Clayton saw that Raymond was doing his very best hold in tears meant to grieve his father's passing.

Neither George nor Nevil gave any sign that they had noticed something change. However, they weren't Clayton's real concern. That'd be the gentleman with the cigar, who,

during introductions, had announced his name as if he were James Bond, ripping off the character's famous cadence.

“The name's Boss,” he said. “Mike Boss.” That was when Mike Boss re-placed the cigar in his mouth, where it still remained more than half an hour later—still unlit—after Clayton and the smugglers moved inside to discuss details concerning which method of crossing and the method of payment.

Clayton couldn't shake his concern—not having whatever form of currency these guys would take.

“Cash has lost its value, John,” Boss said. He then took his seat at the head of the short, folding table in the center of the small cabin. There were three empty seats remaining, as Clayton was the only one to join him. George peered through one of the windows, probably to keep an eye on Raymond, while Nevil posted as a barrier to what appeared to be the cabin's only exit.

#

Raymond played in his mind the walk from the yellow farmhouse to the cabin. They all had crossed fallowed ground where five sets of human tracks would remain imbedded in the dirt until the next hard rain rinsed the earth clean of that moment.

His worries were escalating. It's what they had said while still back at the farmhouse, their blunt racism which they weren't putting the least bit of effort into concealing. Even though they were all strangers and probably would never see each other again after today, Raymond felt each insult slam into his chest. They landed hard on him, and they would continue to land as long as he could remember their conversation, and as long as he continued to do nothing in retaliation.

He tried placating his nerves by returning to the guarantee. The guarantee he'd been given by Clay: that the three smugglers would make good on their promise, providing them with safe passage from Kansas into Oklahoma. He needed only to trust Clayton to handle things inside the cabin.

Clayton was busy in negotiations with the men who were claiming a similar military background. Raymond hung back at his friend's request. Raymond hadn't left Clayton's side since the two left from Colorado, but eventually, he reluctantly agreed.

Even after Raymond nonchalantly side-stepped toward the cabin's windows, repositioning for a closer look inside, his luck didn't improve. He couldn't see anything beyond what he determined was a coat of black paint applied to the windows.

The cabin's roof angled like an "A" and a small, smokeless chimney made of mudbrick protruded near the house's rear.

Except for the mudbrick chimney, the cabin was entirely built of wood. Raymond didn't know what type of wood. His mother would know, though, or his father.

Where was the use in this logic, though? "If you're not careful," Raymond muttered low and to himself, "you'll be reasoned into the ground when nothing makes sense at all. The worst part will be how you'd be most responsible."

Instead, Raymond turned his attention to survey his surroundings.

From this distance it was impossible to tell if there were any people inside the farmhouse—something he'd wondered ever since the chance to investigate was lost during the encounter with the men. The smugglers said it was "currently unoccupied." The owner, they

agreed, was a close friend of theirs and was only out of town following the Yellowstone eruption.

Bullshit! Raymond thought. As far as he was concerned, these men were definitely capable of betrayal. These were fearful men overcompensating with forced bravado: extremely dangerous to associate with in any situation. Much more dangerous than those kind of people who had learned how fear works for them, not solely in opposition to their well-being. That lesson then being able to provide comfort during pain's embrace.

He asked himself, "What the hell did he know about the way these things worked?"

Either way, Raymond was nearly certain that the smugglers were as strange to this site as he was. And Clayton, too. Raymond sensed the men were liars, not to be trusted, and for all intents and purposes, as foreign to this region of the country as he and his friend were. For the time being, he decided, silence was his plan of choice.

And besides the occasional rustling of wind through the vast wheat fields, along with various chirpings of insects, locusts he guessed, it was silence that Mother Nature likewise decided for this day in early October.

The day wasn't sunny by any means, but neither was it overcast like a typical day during the early autumn. Fall season in this part of the country was often cloudy, blue skies becoming something missed dearly and then sometimes so rare in occurrence that a person is forced to consider blue skies as a production of the imagination—like an illusion, not dissimilar to that of a desert mirage.

A limitation of the senses combined with a dangerous dose of optimism or hope.

Raymond wondered how many humans died in agony chasing something they perceived but was, in fact, always nothing.

Was he chasing a mirage? Were his optimism and hope impairing his ability to recognize when he was being tricked? Was he fooling himself each time he pictured his mother's warm embrace, and hoping for some good to come of this disaster? These questions all amounted to the very reason he fought against being left outside by himself—he'd developed a terrible neurosis of torturous introversion through self-berating whereby drowning beneath a sea of unanswerable questions, Raymond was choosing to go about things the hard way: resistance in place of acceptance.

Peering skyward again, breathing in deeply just once and then once more, Raymond wanted to settle the cacophony in his head. Choosing to find a positive focus, he noted how lucky he and Clayton had been over the course of the last two days.

For the two travelers, the weather had remained relatively mild and benign. Raymond dreaded the thought of a storm front sweeping across the country, considering how one might affect the distribution of Yellowstone's ash cloud. He contemplated how their already tight timeframe for crossing the country would then become even tighter once the first rains, starting in the West and finishing in the East, would drench the ground from sea to shining sea. He cringed.

Suddenly, Raymond found himself ever more impatient with the negotiations happening inside the cabin. It was bad enough that he and Clayton were trying to outrun the fallout of a monstrous volcano, but now to do so in this new-America—a single nation quickly changing shape to become united not by its freedoms but solely by the guarded fences that now defined

each state's territory—only meant additional difficulty, a slower pace, and the need to sometimes do business with lowlifes such as the three bargaining right then with Clayton.

Now his mirage, seeing his mother at least one more time if only to share their final hug, was rapidly fading, and he could do nothing about it. The strangest aspect of it all was his inability to decide whether losing sight of the mirage would be regretful or beneficial. A blessing in disguise.

The group of men, and the operation they ran, was all managed from this small cabin at the bottom of a small hill. The hill was a vivid green with short grasses where some farm animals—maybe cattle or sheep—must have recently visited for grazing.

On this day, however, there were no farm animals, and the cabin seemed to contrast with the bright hill muted like one of those black spots on the sun.

Once Clayton had joined the men, the last of them closing the door to the cabin upon Clayton stepping inside, the four of them could no longer be heard outside in the weak, breezy air of the mid-west countryside where Raymond found himself.

There, standing among their bags of supplies at his feet and staring back toward the direction from which they'd traveled, Raymond watched in disbelief as the clouds to the west darkened and grew higher and continued to reach outward, darkening not only the sky but also his mood.

All of this, everything that followed the volcanic eruption in Wyoming—this “Yellowstone Park *super*-volcano”—was still too new to know how to properly describe and label the whirlwind of emotions which were busying Raymond's mind: Fear? Shock? Anger? Regret? Somehow, each of these had a place in his heart, each were influencing his thoughts,

each were taking their turn with his attention and forcing him to reconcile with the grisly awareness that the world (his world) he'd known his whole life was never going to be the same again. The dark ash clouds to the west were a clear sign from Yellowstone's volcanic ancestry of just that.

Hoping to remedy his onsetting melancholy, Raymond reached into his bag, feeling for the first book he found. *The Counselor*, a screenplay of the disappointingly awful film—especially disappointing to Raymond, as he was a fan of Cormac McCarthy's lifework—which he hoped would serve better as a read than the movie had served as a confusing 117 minutes.

Given his current perspective, even to have back that 117 minutes would be worth more than he knew how to form into words. Briefly, Raymond considered how Mr. McCarthy must be feeling in that same moment, having spent much more than 117 minutes of his time in the pre-eruption era on what he must have considered a failure when considering the rest of his work. Raymond then, just a little bit, smiled—more of a smirk—thinking of time spent in past events and considering him and the author to be square.

He wondered while casually flipping through the book's pages why he had packed it in the first place, before remembering that the book had been gifted to him by his mother, Hialeah, during a phase where she related all her gifts for Raymond to the fact that he was studying Law at the University in Denver.

He tossed the book back into his bag, dissatisfied. The connection the book had to his mother had left him missing her a great deal after having seen it. Now he was more upset than when he had watched the cabin, and the dealing men within it, swallow up his friend in business, isolating *him* to nothing but his own wretched thoughts and feelings. These were the same two

aspects about his-self which lacked his comprehension. The chances of that! Yet it was his ignorance of the pair, he sensed, that could mean his own downfall one day. His undoing. Then he was accusing himself, asking, “Are not these the very kind of thoughts influencing your line of reasoning right now?”

Raymond paused to consider this for a moment.

Then a gust stronger than any before it that day carried his thoughtful deliberations along with it, a liberating wind that snagged from him his attention. This was a bittersweet change, however, because while grateful for the distraction, he could not ignore the implications stronger winds arrived with. Now he’d be tested by two threats if a storm were to hit and complicate matters with these border-smugglers.

“Snap out of it, Ray!” he ordered himself.

Wanting to avoid the voice in his head, Raymond uncharacteristically began to hunt through Clayton’s bag in search of reading material better than his own. Not one to typically disrespect the privacy of someone else, rooting without their permission, he couldn’t understand his urge to learn of the contents of his friend’s bag.

Yet it couldn’t be ignored, still stronger than even that recent gust carrying its guarantee of worse to come was a budding curiosity of Clayton’s well-being, both mentally and physically. He hadn’t returned to his usual self ever since he was discharged from the military. He tried remembering how long it’d been since Clayton had first knocked on the door of his home in Colorado, without luck.

Reasoning that since he’d only be searching for something to read—and that he was left to be alone like a child among adults—Raymond, his eyes shut entirely allowed his hand to

scavenge the contents of his friend's bag. He had to make several sweeping motions while worming into the items: a bottle of lotion? clothes. clothes. *clothes*? a case? First-aid kit, maybe? Then, finally, Raymond recognized the undeniable binding of pages shaped into the familiar rectangle: a book!

Upon his first inspection it was obvious to Raymond that what he'd found was not anything published, but more like the journals he often walked by in Barnes & Nobles, the ones costing way more than books published by people who are actually capable of expressing thoughts coherently in print.

And then he thought, "But . . . this is Clayton Rudd, and if anyone's secrets might be worth forty bucks to me, it's Clay's."

Clayton wasn't known for his tendency to write. In amazement, and entirely distracted away from the emotions of just moments before, Raymond opened the journal at random, a little shy of its middle. He began to read, and immediately he knew his friend's handwriting, the sharp angling of curved letters so the whole alphabet with which he wrote with contained sharp corners and edges.

Someday he's got to confront the facts:

Medication depressed development assaults the stress
that stresses over post-trauma, a stress disorder.

Neuroendocrinology: studies of his biochemical flashbacks

Back to that numbing time and place of no-place where health

Was no problem, no health problems.

Raymond looked up from the page, marking its location with his index finger, and took another look at the cabin—considering how the negotiations might be going. He hadn't had the slightest clue that Clayton had been putting any thought into a condition which he so often dismissed whenever someone encouraged him to seek treatment for possible PTSD. But now Raymond had proof in his hands that Clayton had in fact listened to some degree.

Raymond fought the slight guilt he had in his gut, the kind of guilt that needs no help at all in order to spread throughout a person's full-length, much like how house-webs suddenly appear from nowhere, having arrived from phantom spiders. Like cobwebs. The kind cleaned like dust: broom to pan to pail.

He read on,

How malleable can a brain grow before his psychological

Trauma deadens nerve-ends, ending whatever sensation

His guilty, anxious hippocampus manages through

flooding agents of meds and alcohol abuse?

Much more was written on that page alone, and Raymond felt no desire to cease his reading. It was very much the opposite desire he sensed, to read on in discovery of someone long missing: his best friend Clay—the prewar Clayton Rudd.

However, the door to the cabin—with an equally sudden and determined swing, and powered by the brute called Mike Boss.

Following only a few feet behind him was Clayton, busy tracing the precise prints left by the doorman, mimicking the doorman's righteous gloom by making faces so that only his friend would be able to see—the two other men followed after Clayton in a single file.

Clay's attempt at humor was lost on Raymond, who was least prepared for jokes when a life was legitimately at risk.

Raymond had interpreted the ridiculous expressions as an emerging sneeze. So there was no sneeze and no laughter. Hid behind his back was Clayton's journal, firmly, in a nervous grasp where his index finger still served as bookmark.

The single file followed the dirt path leading from the cabin to the spot where Raymond was waiting.

There were so many questions swirling in Raymond's brain that he could do nothing more than say what he said.

He addressed Clayton, ignoring Mike Boss.

"Well," Raymond began. "Is it good news, or the other kind?" He tried to maintain an angle capable of keeping unwanted attention away from his hidden hands.

For only the briefest split-second Raymond knew he'd seen Clayton glancing toward where *his* web of thoughts existed in ink. But his friend either thought nothing of Raymond's particular posture, maybe resembling a relaxed *at-ease* drill maneuver, or, Clayton was choosing to ignore it.

Clayton said, "A little of both. Like it always seems to be, Chief."

Then, before any more conversation could take place, Mike Boss, a man much larger in stature once he was standing near you, interrupted the couple.

He spoke with a broken cadence, pausing while swapping the unlit cigar from one end of his nearly lipless mouth, and back again. "Your friend here," he turned some toward Clayton without removing his eyes from Raymond, "has agreed to terms of compensation for our help

with that border crossing. We will help you into Oklahoma,” he said, “once we get our payment in full.”

#

Someday he’s going to face that psychological trauma
A survivor of bad conditions conditioning him for worse.
Pessimistic monsters, Fear and Avoidance,
His difficult dream of distressing memories
Make them real, not pretend, beneath the sheets
Bended and balled into knots knotted beneath his bed
Or in his closet needing counseling a diagnostic reaction
to abusive treatments and an awareness of loose intervention.

Take a snowflake, a fern leaf, a flower
Set it firmly under sunbeams for countless hours
Let it unfurl or melt or wither, let it darken, explode, or splinter.
A mind is a terrible thing to waste: but a brain is just an organ.

#

IV

Oklahoma? It didn’t feel right. Oklahoma: where you’d finally die. Your tongue, even, wrestled with the word, but, each time, the state name—Okla-homa—crawled from your mouth. A cadence, morbid, expressed your awareness of place, Okla-, even while you chased after a new place, -homa, any place away from the backwoods posse who were hunting you and Clay.

Oklahoma is landlocked at the center of America. Okla-, it's really in the middle of nowhere, -homa. Following a whole lot of walking contemplation, those four syllables of the state name would make peace with your mouth, your tongue, then loving them: the hard kuh of the *k* to start, followed by the seductive *la*, soft enough to forgive the harsh opening, then forced awake by the alarming *ho*, like a sailor in the night, who first fills his scope's eye with land and calls from his towering perch on the ship's mast, "Land Ho," and finally it's calmed by the familiar *ma*, the original pacifier, the one who births us, *ma*, unsurprisingly, the first word uttered by many babies—the last word uttered by many, too.

Up until the last time you spoke with your mother—a year ago?—You called her *Mama*. Had you always needed more soothing? The first *Ma*- you could justify, a grasping for that specific attention. But the second one, the *-ma* that tags along, redundantly, why? No patience? Double anxiety? Or maybe the encore felt too good to resist, pacified by the first, assured by the last?

Ma-ma, I'm dying in Ok-la-ho-ma. Would she feel right about this? Would she agree with you, as she almost always did? Would Ma-ma be sure to point out any details overlooked in your retelling of this story? You'd say, "Mama, I'm dying in Oklahoma."

"Raymond," she'd say. "Oh-kay. Oklahoma starts with an *Ok*."

Would Mama, like she had after Father died, school you in acceptance? "Dear, boy. You're so focused on the end, you're missing all the rest."

#

Four years had almost passed since Clayton felt the swift fear from getting shot at. He hadn't really been counting the time, but the idea of coming just shy of the anniversary did move

through his thoughts as quickly as Boss and his men's misaimed bullets swept the dirt and plants around him and Ray and Hills. This time was different.

Ripping through the sorghum fields, a fire raged. Cries of the trapped men had escaped the tall rows of grain, but, mostly, only the fire was heard. There was the whooshing of air sucked from the sky. Sharp cracklings of stems and seeds, a pop, a snap. The dull whip of stalks falling, exhausted, to the ground. The sound of these deadened thuds raced several acres wide.

He wasn't a soldier anymore.

This wasn't Afghanistan or Iraq. This was the heartland of America. These wheat fields were meant to serve as food, not as cover. The guys firing at them shared their nationality, even if a couple of them preferred being called "African-American." What the hell did he care? American was American. Ray was his only friend, and he called him "Chief" more than anything else. Ray's mom being Cherokee.

This was Oklahoma, early autumn. They had made it to somewhere in the state panhandle—an endless field of wheat nestled in the plain between two cities: Hooker and Beaver.

A day earlier, they'd entered Oklahoma by the narrow way of Colorado. Headed to Fort Gibson, their plan was to join with the Montero family and ride out whatever shit-storm would follow Yellowstone's eruption.

They were among the hundreds of thousands moving east and south in a chaotic exodus, a frenzied spree for safety. But, instead, they kept finding danger, like the men who chased them through the sorghum fields.

This wasn't a fight that should've happened: Americans attacking other Americans. Not on home soil. Not in a time of crisis. Clayton shouted something along those lines to Ray, who was throwing himself as best he could at the small gaps between the plants. His response, an "I know," came rattling back. He didn't know. How could he? He'd been kept in the dark on just about every aspect of the border crossing, and lied to when he'd asked why we'd been pursued.

Chief knew these men were from the same group who'd helped the three cross into Oklahoma. Clayton caught onto their pursuit, aided by the strong winds that carried their sounds and smells ahead of them. One of the men, Mike Boss, the man who'd accepted payment for the group's help, worked an unlit stogie side-to-side in his mouth while escorting them across a farm property that stretched into both state territories. Bold, with a little spice, the damp tobacco leaves allowed the three to get enough of a drop on their pursuers to change course, build a lead, dodge bullets, set fire to someone's farm, listen to the sounds three men on fire make—a terrible drone with surprising squeals that startle as they go with the flame.

The truth was as simple as it was difficult to understand. Clayton was an ex-Marine with a fucked up conscience. Guilty before enlisting, while he served, he'd only strengthened the case against ever seeing Heaven.

After a few years, he was sent home early with a medical discharge. Ray said he had PTSD and a substance abuse problem. Clayton called it a curse and self-medicating.

A stray memory flashed, as they're claimed to do in a sudden life or death scenario: less than a day after the eruption—so close to the disaster they almost seemed responsible for it—the military, FEMA, other national agencies, and media correspondents all acted in accordance to their scripts and protocols. Everyone had a procedure or a policy. *Supervolcano* was the term

heard all around. Most troubling for their plan to cross the country were the unexpected actions taken by state and local governments, hurrying to secure their borders. It was like travelling through Europe, each state becoming its own country.

Western America had become Ground Zero and the focus of the world. Yet, their attention remained with each other, friends determined not to see one another fail.

Clayton's accident, the short version, was that he'd been manning the Humvee's .50 Cal., when an IED was triggered, hidden in all the trash along a dirt road. Bucked some twenty feet from the armored vehicle, he'd survived—his x-rays resembling mangled, wire coat hangers. The private driving and the sergeant riding shotgun were killed. Right before the blast, one of them—it'd been impossible to tell which one it was—had called him a dick. His exact words were, "Corporal Rudd, you're a dick." Clayton's middle finger was busy waving a bird at them both when the air turned to hot metal.

First thing he did once he was back in the States, before calling around to find Ray—who he would discover living in Colorado—was to stumble into the nearest tattoo parlor and have those five words, which neatly decided his identity, sewn with ink into the flesh of his back, the same back once broken on a dirt road somewhere in Iraq.

Ray called it PTSD. But Clayton could ignore him, since he studied law, and not medicine. Not one for spending time inside hospitals, Clayton had opted to "self-medicate." Pot and liquor were daily staples, like taking vitamins in the morning. When days proved extra trying, there wasn't a memory that couldn't be pushed aside by the cloud of a burning OxyContin. Twenty milligrams of that stuff took his cursed memory and spun it into the butt of a long, silly joke.

So when he overheard one of the guys' chatter, something about painkillers, well.

They'd left Denver the day after the quake, driving the Atwoods' Honda, one vehicle among the herd, until the highways were no longer capable of supporting the traffic demands. They abandoned the car, reluctantly, and trekked with their gear. Clayton's terms were clear: he was only coming along because it was "obvious" to him that, without his help, Chief's odds of surviving the trip "sucked."

What actually convinced Clayton, the promised supply of Ray's homemade shine along the way, and much more of it once they arrived home. Clayton called it *Mama's Moon*, and, two swigs in, he was signed up and readying to ship out. In passing, Clayton let slip that *Mama's Moon's* motto could be: *A good reason to deal with another day.*

They had stood on the roof of the car to see farther ahead. Clayton wanted to know what they should do next—to know what to expect. He had suspected that they weren't going to drive all the way to Fort Gibson. That kind of luck doesn't exist. The scene stretched for miles in the direction they wanted to go. Bumper to bumper, all of the vehicles had inched tightly together so that they each had become the scales of a single metal python. Of course, this python had begun hibernation.

To Ray's credit, he didn't fuss much when Clayton told him they were ditching the car and humping it with only their packs.

Not a word was shared between them once they climbed off the car and gathered their remaining loose possessions. They were exact in following the SOP Clayton had drafted for the trip. Their behavior was business-like. The highway had gone on strike and told them to fuck off. They'd gotten the message.

Not until they were out of range of those stubborn engines did either man say a word. Clayton's mind was busy thinking about those last car engines still running without going to any place. Although he could no longer hear the engines at work, he was sure they'd run and run until their pistons pushed the last drops of gasoline on through to burn. Something like an hourglass counting down time until there was no time left to count. Rather than sifting sand, the engines torched fossil fuel. But it's all the same thing when related to time. First there's a limited supply of something to lose, and then it's lost. Sand in a glass, gas in a tank.

Ray spoke. His breathing was heavier.

"Do we know where we're going?" he said. He was behind Clayton. Not far, only a few feet. He glanced back, Ray's eyes were focused on the ground and not looking up.

"Your mom's," he answered. Chief was sure to mean a closer destination, but *Corporal Rudd, you're a dick*. "Mission's not aborted, is it?" Clayton asked.

"No," Ray said. He wanted to be convincing. He answered quickly and in a higher pitch.

"Damn," Clayton said.

He quit walking. A moment later and Ray was by the side of his friend, catching his breath. He'd read Ray like a book, except easier than a book, since most books had a way of fooling Clayton. That saying, *don't judge a book by its cover*, must've come from someone who thought like him, who knew better than to believe what was read inside a book, more than its shell. But it wasn't that way with Ray. Ever since Chief was a little chief, Clayton had known him cover to cover. What he saw was what he got, and that quality of his friend was what made his friendship the one fucking thing attaching him to the world.

In his utility pants pocket, Clayton carried a flask. Eight ounces, silver steel, nothing special. He reached for it and drew it to his lips. Before drinking a mouthful of Chief's *rat poison brew*, he had the urge to sniff the stuff. The liquor might have singed his nose hairs right then, it felt like it could have, but there was no mirror handy, so he couldn't know. He swallowed down that mouthful, raising the flask toward Chief as a mock toast but in honest gratitude. It'd been a tough series of years for Clayton, a real shitty run of years, and he'd only found relief in certain things, a temporary relief. Chief's *shaman shake* hit the spot.

He wanted Ray to know it. He said, "Chief, your *shaman shake* hits the spot."

Ray had caught his breath again. "Stopped your shake-n-bakin'?" His attempt to screw with Clayton, some honest fun. But they all knew it was a bad joke, based in a sad truth, and that without alcohol, or Percocet, or Vicodin, or even a long pull of some really strong kush, withdrawal was bound to suck ass for Clayton. Tremors were warning enough that all the sand in the sobering-up hourglass had sifted through to the bottom.

He didn't want to think about hitting bottom. He changed subjects. Using his free hand, he pointed to their left. "You see those people there?"

"Yes," Ray said. "There's a lot of them heading that way."

"Mm hmm," was what Clayton managed in the moment, his mouth full of Chief's *witchy widow-maker juice*. If he had any hairs in his throat, then the shine surely singed his throat hair on its way down. Then, recovered some, he explained, "That way is north, almost due north. To go that way is to die. To anyone wanting to remain above topsoil, it'd be foolish to ever go north again. Understand?"

"I'm following," Ray said.

Clayton raised the flask for round three, but the manner in which Chief's posture stiffened in response made him second guess it. The lid screwed on easily—a dependable flask, a rare and precious friend. It dropped into his pocket, and Chief seemed to relax, even though he continued to shift in discomfort under the weight of his pack.

“They're going that way because of how the sky looks and the flat land on the horizon. You see what I mean?”

Ray squinted, and the small whites of his eyes were hidden completely. Then he was focused back on Clayton.

“Yes, I see no elevation that way, and you can see pretty far, too, because there's better light.”

“Okay, Chief. Your turn.” He pointed to their right. “Use my example. What can you tell me about all those poor bastards?”

Ray's words shook uneasily. He sighed. Ray was on tilt. “That's south. New Mexico. Warmer. Also good light still, and mostly flat.”

“Good!” Clayton said. His enthusiasm felt out of place, but it was genuine. Raymond was smart, maybe the smartest guy he knew. Yet, seeing him pick up on this stuff was making Clayton surprisingly giddy. It might've had a little to do with Chief's *mystery potion 2000*.

“Everyone was driving East because that's where I-70 goes. Drones, all of them. But there are still some hills to climb ahead, and see that legit storm cloud out there? That's a normal storm system, nothing related to Mr. Volcano chasing us. We're going where the others won't, Chief. Remember this rule. Hell, make it rule number one. People are dangerous. Especially in large numbers. Avoid crowds. The less people around, the better off we are. Got it?”

“Got it,” he said. “People are bad. Keep away from them.”

“Good.”

#

Clay’s joy peaked, each time he taught Raymond another skill for survival. This troubled Raymond. Clay’s praise was sincere, and this was always pleasant. But, aside from the bit of warmth achieved with each minor success, a vast coldness also grew. It fed just as voraciously as the warmth, but unlike the warmth whose origin Raymond could pinpoint, he couldn’t be sure of what it was that he was trying to describe.

So, there was fear in the cold, but who did it belong to? Clay’s joy in victory was the source. Was it that each step closer to life he managed meant another step for Clay toward his death? Would he be able to save both of them?

Clay was smiling. Raymond studied the boots he was wearing, a size too big. He wore two pairs of socks to compensate. Then Clay, sensing something, cleared his throat.

Calmed and stoic, he asked, “What is it?”

#

The torched field was hot, too hot to be messing around in, but that was Clayton’s only chance to prevent Ray from finding out the truth about why those tough guys had trailed them. If Chief learned that Clayton never paid them what they agreed to, much less what he stole from them, and then this, the fire, his old pal might actually give up on him. But, wasn’t that what he wanted?

#

There was death in this scene, yes, but impossible to overlook was the inherent life. The eager blaze was alive, feeding on sorghum that, perhaps, was only two or three days shy of harvest. The fire was hungry, like them, but it fed without regard to supply or its own longevity. It burned for the moment without fear.

Mostly, it was the color red. The high scarlet and bronze of sorghum grain. Flickering firelight of crimson, magenta, maroon. A fiery consumption in opposition to a dimming world of gray.

“You smell that, Chief?” Clay said. He was filthy, covered in dirt from where Raymond dragged him free of the crops to the edge of the field. He sat where he’d been propped, on a fence post. Hillary sat beside him, sharing the same hard post.

Clay saw Raymond sniff the air, but remain quiet.

“Smells like syrup, don’t it?” he said. Clay’s legs lay stiff and jutted outward, flat against the ground like two 2X4s. They were all filthy. The military-grade camouflage gear—Clayton’s stuff—had turned from drab green to shit-brown where Raymond had crawled along the ground, desperately dodging gunfire.

“It’s the sugar,” Hillary said.

The muddied toes of Clay’s boots knocked together, keeping steady a beat in time. Without meaning to, Raymond counted along: *one-Mississippi-knock, two-Mississippi-knock, three-Mississippi-knock.*

“The sugar?” Clay asked. “Ain’t that a sorghum field I’m burning?” His tone had returned to the familiar, indifference of late.

“It was,” Raymond said.

Clay's boots quit measuring time. Dirt had darkened his forehead and cheeks. In striking contrast were his light blue eyes, which contained a lively quality of foreignness. The distance carried only the sounds of the rip-roar fire. The terrified wails of their pursuers had gone absent in the waning afternoon air.

"Then what sugar are we talking about?" Clay asked.

Raymond considered an explanation for him, how sorghum was grown because of unique properties, like its high yield in sugar and ethanol, how that syrupy smell in the air was dozens of acres of potential food burning, how, if the sorghum hadn't been for human consumption, then it was likely processed into feed for livestock. But what difference would any of this make to someone who already saw the world as dead, humanity doomed? What would any of this matter to someone like Clayton, who'd have you believe he'd stopped caring either way?

Nodding in the direction of the inferno, Raymond said, "That fire will burn into the night."

Clay faced the blazing field of grain. He squinted at the fire's strength, his thinned features illuminated by its wavy light.

"Quick thinking, wasn't it, Chief?" he said.

"Sure was," Hillary said.

"Yes," Raymond said. Then, with emphasis: "Very quick."

The fencepost was no longer comfortable. Both Clay and Hills began to stir.

"Brash, is what it was," Raymond added.

"Maybe," Clay said as he rose to his feet, "but that brash thinking saved *your* hide."

"And yours," Raymond said.

“And mine.”

“Nearly roasted us, too,” Raymond added.

“Nearly.”

But how could he be upset? Clay had witnessed, while Raymond squirmed in the dirt, the force of a bullet lift a black tuft of hair from his scalp. That’s what triggered Clay to set the fire.

Over the burning field stretched a rising plume of smoke. It was different from the higher, lighter smoke arriving from Yellowstone. Lifting from the fields was a dense pillar of black cloud that settled beneath anything else in the sky. The fire’s brightness reflected light gray in these low ceiling clouds, that then casted a violent hew over all below. Shadows swayed and bent in an unnatural rhythm.

“Did you hold onto it?” he said.

“Why, Clay?”

“Maybe I just want to know.”

“Not that.”

Clay paused.

“Why didn’t you help me back there?” Raymond said.

Heat from the fire made him sweat. His friend, too. He stayed quiet and watched the fields alter from red to gray.

Raymond pressed, while Hillary only observed: “You made me drag you. Why?”

“Does it matter?” he said.

“Yes,” Raymond said, “to me it does.”

“No,” he said, “any of it. Does any of this really matter?” He pointed toward the fields with an empty hand. “If I had burned in that field just now, nothing would change.”

“Did nothing just change for them?” Raymond said.

“I’m talking big picture,” Clay said, “not little like my life or yours. I mean bigger. I mean in the scope of our country. My death wouldn’t alter anything that has already happened. It might not have righted anything, but my dying wouldn’t make things worse, neither.”

“Clay,” he said. “Whether or not our death affects the world can’t decide that sort of thing. Sometimes we only have small things to live for. A friend. A relative. Life isn’t always so grand. One friend is all, sometimes. Maybe only a pet. A dog. Can’t a life be worth living because of something so small?”

“You haven’t got a dog,” he said.

“No.”

Clay pondered this. He stood beside Hills, almost touching shoulders. They all gazed out at the incredible image of incineration, acre after acre. Then, so soft Raymond might have even imagined it, Clay said, “No, Chief. Not this life.”

Hardly more than a whisper, but, it was as if by hearing his friend deny the sanctity of his life, Raymond was witnessing his own life being stripped of meaning.

Raymond’s whole abdomen felt both numbed and strained under an immense pressure, as if it were supporting a large block of ice.

“Well,” he managed, “I’m sorry to hear that, Clay.”

“Yeah, well,” he said. His voice faded into a silence where they listened to the fire gradually burning away from them.

Raymond weighed the options for what to say next. Each line of questioning more urgent than the last, as this, he feared, might be a final conversation between friends. Clay stooped, reached into a side pocket on his pack, and drew from it a carton of Winston cigarettes.

“Where’d those come from?” Hillary asked.

He pinched the seal and unraveled the cellophane wrapper. “Found them last night,” he said.

“While we were walking?” she said.

Clay nodded but made a point to only focus on what his hands were doing. He let loose of the cellophane. It fell and caught an invisible current until reaching the ground. He was working to unseal a single pack, while the discarded wrapper tumbled restlessly amid stone and fence and earth.

“Didn’t know you smoked,” Raymond said.

“Thinking I’ll pick it up,” he said.

As friend to Clay all his life, Raymond had known of every time he used a cigarette. Too rare to qualify as a real habit. Like in high school, when Katie dumped him the first time, and then the second time, too. And when Doug died. At Doug’s funeral, they’d smoked together and killed a flask of cheap scotch. Both the booze and cigarettes had belonged to the pastor administering the service. They sat in the man’s Lincoln Town Car, Raymond picking at a crack in the glove box, while, at a distance, Dougie was lowered into the grave meant for his father.

Clay had freed a cigarette from its red and white package, and was motioning for a lighter by flicking his thumb.

“What happened to yours?” Raymond said.

His chin lifted toward the sorghum field. “Dropped it out there.”

Raymond retrieved a plain, silver Zippo from a cargo pocket in his pants. Clay took it, lit his cigarette, and handed it back. He held out the cigarettes, but Raymond simply shook his head. No offer was made to Hills. Raymond returned the lighter to its pocket and replaced his pack on his shoulders. Clay had already secured his and was returning to the charred fields.

“You’re going back?” Raymond said.

Clay glanced back at him, surprised. “You left something out there yourself, Chief.”

#

The way in which Chief struggled to follow Clayton back into the field, failing, still stagnant at its edge where a cooler wind offered relief from the burnt sorghum, and from all the rest that burned within it, and, with him almost racing to the fire’s origin, and then past it, to where five bodies lay baking, this comparison told Clayton what he needed to know. Chief was experiencing feelings that Clayton no longer knew.

Neither Ray, nor Hills, could find out any of these things. They’d be hurt, badly. And, Christ knows that to cause Chief pain would be last of his things-to-do before checking out.

Two of the three men were on their bellies, in the act of crawling away from where the fire had approached. After executing a thorough search through them, it was time for a final farewell for Mr. Boss. Clayton checked, but Chief wasn’t going to be able to handle the field’s heat. Maybe it meant he was already nearing Hell, that, only for him, the heat was tolerable.

The stogie was gone. Probably fell from a gaping jaw. Boss wore a frown as his last expression. A frown! Clayton didn’t want to go out frowning on someone else’s terms.

He frowned at the dead man. And then, he took the small plastic bottle—orange with a white screw-on lid—from inside his inner breast pocket. There was no label to read, but Clayton recognized hydrocodone by sight. The bottle was back in his jacket, the pills swallowed. They made their way easily down his throat and into his blood.

Walking back to his buddy, ol' Chief, he couldn't shake the thought. He just didn't think his friend would see things the same way as he.

#

When the three arrived to Fort Gibson, the town was a ghost. The streets weren't swept and so the ash had been allowed to collect until it drifted like snow along the ground. There was no life to speak of except for the steam dispersing from the mouths of the three travelers.

Hialeah's home was lifeless, dull on the exterior and silent inside. They made their way into the house and through it. Raymond's frantic search ended with the reading of a note found in the kitchen of the place. The note was from his mother, addressed to him. She must have known he'd come looking for her. But she was gone. Returned to where they once lived, where Raymond was raised and had grown as a child with Clay, in Ellijay, Georgia.

"They probably left right away," Hills said. She stood at his side, rubbing his back with a hand. "She's probably safe in Georgia."

Raymond nodded. He said nothing. The trip to this home was not supposed to end this way. They'd experienced too much for this to be the ending. What would the trip from here to Georgia be like? What had Hialeah encountered on her way with Uncle Sal to Ellijay?

The three parted to collect items from different areas of the house. No one said it aloud, but there was a mutual awareness that they couldn't settle in the remains of Fort Gibson. They'd need to move on from the town.

Clayton found Ray in the room Hialeah had prepared for them to stay in, alone, and seated on the floor, Indian style. Eyes closed. Ray was praying. Clayton cleared his throat, gently, somewhat uneasy with interrupting his friend from this state.

Ray acknowledged him by turning, offering a half-smile, before returning to his former position, except now with eyes staying opened.

"Where's this grace?" Ray asked. He was facing a blind-less window, which allowed the small amount of available sunlight to land directly across his body where he sat.

"Grace who?" Clayton said, slipping noiselessly onto an armless wood chair. His legs draped around the chair's back, as he mounted it backward. Clayton tried to remember if he'd ever known anyone by that name.

"But, however much sin increased, grace was always greater, so that as sin's reign brought death, so grace was to rule through saving justice that leads to eternal life through Jesus Christ, our Lord."

Ray had hold of his mother's Bible. The book was hidden from the angle of the room's entrance. Clayton saw it clearly now, its delicate gold-edged pages bound within a dark brown leather. Tough to tell exactly what translation this particular bible was, definitely not the King James. Ray was about to continue reading from the page, but Clayton stopped him.

"You're asking about grace from God?" Clayton asked. He leaned his chair forward on its two hind legs, and then rocked back to all fours.

Ray gathered himself to his feet. He was barefoot, toenails in need of trimming, skin pale in contrast with the dark wood flooring. Boot feet. What wear and tear a month in combat boots could do to healthy feet. At least no frostbite.

From the window, Ray said, "I'm just thinking out loud. I wasn't really asking you. It's just that—" Ray paused, thinking of how best to say what he wanted. The silence meant he was having trouble doing so. Ray's head lowered, shaking. "I don't know."

Through the window panes, the storm clouds were passing in haste, on a mission. Inside the room, the events of the last month could almost be denied entirely, never having happened. Except these events had taken a heavy toll on Ray, how his back was slumped, all his body's weight leaning on the window sill for support. Ray was beaten down, and now he was questioning God's grace?

"I'm not sure, Chief."

Unsure if Ray had heard him, Clayton listened while his friend shared what was on his mind. Ray had broken from the window and switched to a position on the small bed in the room's corner. He rested on his back and spoke to the ceiling.

"It's just that I thought getting here, getting home, would bring me some peace. But it didn't, and now I know it won't. Just being here isn't enough, getting here wasn't enough. I don't know what to do to find some peace of mind. I made it home, Clay. My mother is gone. My uncle is. They might be all right. We don't know. It couldn't be easy to travel from here, could it? But, we're safer than we've been in so long. Yet, I feel so uneasy still. I just don't know what to do about it."

Clayton rocked forward again in the chair. “From what I know about grace, there isn’t much point trying to find it. Grace doesn’t work like that. You’d be better off trying to find that woman named Grace.”

Ray’s attention was peaked. He rolled onto his stomach, bracing himself up on his elbows and facing Clayton again.

“Go on,” Ray said.

Clayton continued, “I think that like ‘home,’ the idea of the thing is more real than the thing itself. You have a house, but that’s not what makes a home. Family makes the home, right? Well, grace isn’t something you can work for, save up, decide when to spend. Grace can’t be earned. If grace is something you’ve got, Chief, then it was given to you. Now, I’m not so sure I believe in grace, but maybe that’s because I haven’t been given any.”

Ray cracked a smile for just a moment. Had he said something funny?

“No, Clay. You’ve got more of the stuff than you know.” Ray sat up on the mattress. “You’re right, too. A house ain’t a home. Family makes a home. And here I was thinking that by reaching a house, I’d find peace. What I was really after was the peace that comes from home, from family.”

“You were?” Clayton asked.

Ray stood from the bed, returning to the window. Looking out the window, he said, “I don’t know for how long I will, but right now, this instant, I have my family in you and Hills. I can be at peace with that.”

“Sounds nice.” Clayton settled his chair on all four legs.

Ray said nothing, only stared back at the staring man reflected in the window.

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