

A CLUTCH, A PRIDE, A MURDER

by

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ABSTRACT

A Clutch, A Pride, A Murder is a linked collection of seven short fiction pieces and one novella that examine a world much like our own, but with the cover revealed—a world laid bare, exposed by its desires, its emotions, its beauties, and all its machinations. All of the stories involve, either directly or indirectly, the fictional Ohio city of Milton. Some of the stories take place within this seemingly typical American city, while others only involve characters coming from or in some cases returning to this unassuming location. Regardless, the events of these stories either in cause or effect all have their roots in Milton.

The world at large also plays a part within these pages. While the stories themselves are completely fictitious, many of the peripheral events that happen beyond the principle storylines are pulled from today's real-world headlines: a series of increasingly devastating tornadoes in the American heartland; a mysterious suicide of a wealthy industrialist; the amazing technological feats of a nation's space program; the heinous crimes of a serial kidnapper. These events, each a worthy story in their own right, filter into the events of this collection, much as they do in our world—through the media. Television, radio, newspapers, social media all are outlets of information and current events making the stories of others part of our lives as we all live out our own personal adventures. I utilize these true-life events to add scope and breadth to the world of my fictions so that these events might at times inform and offer new perspective on the principle narratives. And while these true-life stories unfold in the backgrounds of their fictitious hosts, the hope is that the reader will be able to have a better sense of the timeline as the events unfold over the days, months, and years that these stories inhabit.

Humanity in all its wonder and woe is on full display within this collection. From the journey of idyllic love to tragic romance, and the thin line that turns passion to obsession, we will see all the places these complex emotions lead: a young botanist travels half-way around the world for a chance to reconnect with a lost love; a young girl's love for her family pushes her to extremes to protect her brother; a man's love for his city challenges his morality; the bond between brothers is put to the test; and a young man's reverence for history, and his love of family leads him down a dark path. How far will someone go to protect themselves? Their loved ones? Or even their way of life? The lengths these characters will go, or in some cases will not go, are central to the stories in this collection. I intend to show those lengths and tell my characters' all too human stories.

To my family for their love and support.

And for no small amount of inspiration—whether I wanted it or not.

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CAMERA OBSCURA

Some nights, I just can't get to sleep easy. I'll toss around for hours. And to make things worse, I can never sleep on my back. Always on the side. I'll lie there—my eyes closed, clutching my fist tight like it's a child's stuffed toy. Sometimes I'll lie until my arm goes numb. I'll turn to the other side, trying not to wake my girlfriend, Bev, lying next to me. Trying to keep my eyes closed, afraid that if I open them I'll undo some quota and lose all the good sleep I've been working up to. But after a while I'll realize I always fall asleep on my right side. I know. How can I tell, since you can never recall the precise moment you fall asleep, but sometimes I think I can. It's something I try to assure myself of—one of many thoughts that race around in my mind. Around and around. My eyes closed, sleep just a distant pipe dream. A fantasy. Always my right side. Sometimes I'll try to sleep on my back, tell myself maybe tonight's the night I'll get the real sleep, like the people on TV commercials about sinus drugs or mattresses. The people, actors, I know, but still they're lying there with that self-assured look on their faces. Safe with the knowledge that sleep is a locomotive headed their way. They seem like good actors. I try to sleep on my back, but I know I'm just recharging my batteries, letting the feeling seep back into my arm, so I can clench my fist tight, roll over again. Always my right side. I try to think of what it means, as a metaphor and such, but all I can come up with are the obvious: habit; indecisiveness; nothing. I don't know. Maybe there isn't an answer. Maybe it's just me.

Lately, I've begun to give up. Just get out of bed, go to the sofa and turn on the TV. Get away from the bedroom. The formality of it, the ritual. The pressure. Bev hates it when I'm not there. She feels alone, abandoned, or something like that. She's never said those words, but that's what I read off her. Glean from what she does say. When she wakes up and asks *What time did*

you go to bed? Not What time did I come to bed? One of those little things, you know? And always with something extra in the tone of her voice. When she says things like that it makes me think of other things. For instance, one morning I woke up on the sofa, staring into the matrix of the cushion. I noticed a thread of red sewn into the fabric almost imperceptibly. It added notes of color to the overall brown of the whole. It's something you'd have never been able to notice until it was literally in your face. Until it was right in front of you.

#

Beverley came into our small apartment, her arms full of groceries in big brown bags. She always recycled the paper and always declined the bagboy's manipulative prompts of *Is plastic okay?* She would always decline because the specific grade of plastic used for most grocery bags wasn't easily recyclable for some reason. So she used paper, and she would come home with only one or two large bags—sometimes with a crusty baguette or the leafy greens of a bunch of carrots just peeking over the top. Very picturesque. I always thought so, at least. I joked with her sometimes—most of the time—that all she needed was a little red beret, and she would look right at home sauntering along the Avenue des Champs-Élysées. This would lead into a talk about a trip to Paris, a place we've both been to, just not together. We'd talk about going sometime, making plans for the future, but you talk about a lot of things when you live with someone. Me and Bev have lived together for almost two years. Her idea. But I haven't regretted it. We were together two years before it came up. Seemed like the thing to do. It's not perfect, but it works, and we're together. No regrets. We've achieved our own kind of domestic bliss. But it doesn't come without its difficulties.

“Hey,” she said, adding an extra syllable with her cheerful singsong voice.

“What’s up,” I said, high pitched and quasi-distracted.

“What are you doing?” she said.

“Working.”

“Good for you,” she said. “Who’s the client?”

“I am.”

“So, it’s not a job?” She was in the kitchen, dropping the bags. Some cans thunked on the counter.

“I’ve been writing.”

“Yeah, how’s that going?”

“I’ve got my ending and maybe my beginning, too,” I said.

“Well, you have the most important parts then.”

“That’s why I love you,” I said, smiling.

“*That’s* why you love me?” she said, her voice closer now, so I knew she’d popped her head outside the kitchen. Bev went quiet and, without seeing, I knew she was giving me a look like, *really?* I was facing the laptop on the desk, in what I called my office. It was really just a desk, an L- shaped Ikea knock-off. No fancy Swedish name just “Corner desk-left.” And it did fit perfectly in the corner, against the wall, perpendicular to the half wall that separated the kitchen from the living room. The cut out space in the wall kept the kitchen in view. The desk had my laptop. Bev’s printer. A nice setup. Comfortable. Everything in its place.

“You really are full of yourself when you’re writing,” she said. Her voice dopplered away and I knew she was back in the kitchen. “So, what about your *other* job,” she said.

“I got my feelers out.”

“Oh, dear. I assume you’re talking about Jerry.”

“He’s an entrepreneur,” I said. “In the meantime, I’m feeling inspired. I had another dream. About a girl named Page.”

“Was she prettier than me?” she said, half joking. Wisely, I didn’t turn away from the screen to see for sure.

“Actually, it *was* you,” I said. “Just you dressed like a librarian.”

“Mmhmm,” she said. I turned, saw her come out of the kitchen, brushing the long, black hair out of her eyes. “So. This story. How's it going to end?” she said.

I stopped typing, eyed the screen and said, “With a proposal.”

“Awww, that's nice,” she said. “What kind of story is it? Romance?” She put her hand on the arm of the desk—the part that made it an L—and leaned down next to me.

“Not that kind of proposal,” I said.

Bev came to the screen—a single page with a few paragraphs—barely half a page really.

“Is this your ending or your beginning?” she said.

“I don't know yet. Both maybe. I’m not sure. It’s not done.”

“That’s nice,” she said turning away.

“Mmhmm,” I said. My turn.

She went back into the kitchen, stopped at the sink and looked out the window behind it.

“Oh, look,” she said, “it’s starting to rain. You should put that in your story.”

“I think I will,” I said.

She opened the fridge for something. I heard the swishing smack of paper hitting the linoleum floor of the kitchen. Bev made an exasperated *O* sound.

“Alan,” she said, in *that* tone. You know the one.

“Beverley,” I said. I could hear the distinct sounds of the different papers’ stocks as Bev shuffled them around the front of the refrigerator.

“You’re running out of real-estate here, Mister,” she said. “How attached are you to this Pizza Hut magnet?”

I got out of the chair and moved into the kitchen. Bev was waving the magnet around like it was contraband. “Do you really need all of these?” she said.

“They’re important,” I said.

“Not all of them,” she said. “Look at this.” She peeled off a largish square magnet with a mini calendar on it. “2005. Really? I think it’s time. Past time, actually.”

“The calendar is off, but the magnet still works.” I took it from her, slapped it on the blank spot on the fridge. She was right about there not being much real-estate left, but that was kind of the point, right? It had been accumulating for the six—no, seven years I’d been living here. Eight? Eight. The magnet faltered a bit. It was losing its grip, but it settled into place. They always did.

“See,” I said. “Everything in its place.”

“Mmhmm,” she said.

“It’s a work of art,” I said. “You don’t change a man’s art.”

“Mmhmm,” she said.

#

I woke up that night, the covers twisted off some time before. My head was swimming, awash in its recent sleep. I thought I’d dreamt about the desert. I thought I remembered heat. I

got up, saw Bev there on the bed, her fist tucked under her chin, perfectly peaceful and dreaming.

I walked on the faux wood floor. It was welcomingly cool on my feet. The rain had stopped, but there must have been wind because the walls moved in low groans and settling creaks like the bow of a ship. In the kitchen, I opened the fridge. The light was neon bright. I grabbed the milk—red cap, whole milk—took a glug, cool all the way down. I turned away, let the door fall closed, listened for that satisfied sealing sound. I started to move away when I heard the whooshing crash on the floor. I opened the door again, let its light back out. On the linoleum was one of the magnets and a photo. Me and another girl. An ex named Zoe. It had been buried under the layers for years—hidden under the magnets and doodles on post-its, the stickers, all taped, stuck, magnetized and willed to the front of the fridge. The photo was taped together, cut along the horizontal in a misguided (and overly dramatic) demonstration by my colleague/friend Jerry. He always had what he perceived as my best interest at heart, but that time I wasn't feeling it.

When he slit the picture in two I could have killed him. I knew he meant well, but it was the surprise of it. It wasn't that I wasn't over Zoe or anything (even though we were together for almost three years). And I loved her, I did, but it just . . . ended. We were too young to stay together. We drifted away in love and proximity. She moved to Tennessee. I stayed in Ohio. She said I'd never change. That nothing would change, that I would never grow up, never settle down. Never get a real job. She said my life would be just more of the same, except she'd be gone. So, she left. I stayed. And things did change. But that's why you want to remember.

I used the failing magnet to pin the corner of the picture back to the fridge. It hung under the little drawing of a robot donated to the fridge by a friend, Cody. He passed away in '05. He put that little drawing there himself the last time he came over. The next time I saw him was at his funeral. He died of “mixed-drug toxicity”. In short, he overdosed. At a rock concert no less. It was one of those two day music festivals. He and some friends were sleeping in tents. It had been brutally hot and he was dehydrated and

He was airlifted off the concert grounds while Sting and the Police reunited on stage for the first time in years. Cody made the papers. Was even on MTV, if anyone still watched that. He's buried here in Ohio. Not in the ground or anything, but in one of those wall tombs. He has a plaque on the wall. It's nice enough. It has his name and his dates. But it is just a plaque. The same as all his new, permanent neighbors.

I guess this picture is kind of like that. Except, this is *his*, made by his own hand. And not the same as all of its neighbors.

How could I take something like that down?

Next to it there's a NASA sticker, stuck right onto the surface. I never really thought about how I'd get it off if and when I moved. I knew I'd try though.

All those little sketches, and the flaws. Those kinds of things that mean the world until they don't mean anything at all. One day, I knew I'd have to move and take them down, put them into a box, where they'd either stay there, or I would try and put them back on some other fridge, but it just wouldn't be the same, which was worse.

There's another photo on there—me, about ten, at a cemetery in Colorado, I think. I'm posing next to the headstone of Doc Holiday. That was the trip I thought I saw a ghost for the first time. These memories, stuck there, on this humming, cooling, crowded thing.

“They're all ghosts,” I said. Deliriously tired, I thought a string of words—*I am the amalgam*—and I knew I was definitely gone. It was still dark outside, but already I could hear a bird chirping in pattern—*chirpchirpchirp—chirpchirpchirp*—a meager, grating, but incessant sound. Nature's broken car alarm.

I went back to bed. Bev was lying there, her head resting in a dark puddle of hair. I laid myself back down next to her. She squirmed, adjusted.

“What time is it?” she said, never opening her eyes.

I heard the bird—*chirpchirpchirp*.

“Too early,” I said.

chirpchirpchirp

“That can't be a real bird,” I said.

“What is it,” she said, drifting off, eyes closed.

“A sign of the apocalypse,” I said.

Bev made a sound that was something like a laugh, but wrapped in a layer of sleepy otherness.

“Go back to sleep,” I said. Although it was unnecessary. She already had.

I lay there, and lay there. I watched the end of the night turn from black to blue to white outside the window. Eventually—mercifully—I fell back to sleep.

Later that day, I met Jerry at Cup O' Joe on South 3rd Street in the German Village. It was an old part of town, all red brick buildings with white molded cornices around the windows, cobblestone sidewalks—the works. The neighborhood was quaint, but hip in its retro-cool kind of way. My favorite spot was The Book Loft, which happened to be next to Cup O' Joe. The loft was a local icon famous for the large banner outside with the German greeting—Wilkommen—out front. But really the best part was that it was open till midnight seven days a week. Great for a night owl like me. Bev and I only lived a few blocks away. Every chance we could we'd slip out for a coffee, check out the new arrivals. Something we'd do together that we both liked. Our classic cheap date.

I passed the loft. Jerry was already outside at one of the small tables on the sidewalk.

“Hey, man,” Jerry said.

“What's up?”

“Coffee?” Jerry said.

“No, I'm good,” I said.

“You sure? You're looking a little rough there.”

“I'm fine,” I said. “Sleep's a little off.”

“Who's got time to sleep in this economy?” He took a sip of his coffee. “You and Bev doing okay?”

“Yeah, we're good, actually.”

“No work lately, huh?”

“Been slow. But I'm keeping busy. Started writing again. Since I've had the time.”

“If you can pull yourself away from the Great American Novel I think I can help with that.”

“A job?”

Jerry nodded. “We’re putting in a bid for a pharmaceutical company. They want a whole Internet spread. They’re going green. I need some design work. Art, some animation, the usual. You in?”

“Green pharmaceuticals?” I said. “Like herbs green?”

“Like Green Chemistry. Atom conservation, Eco-packaging, that kind of stuff.” Jerry shrugged. “I don’t care if it’s Soylent Green, a job is a job.”

He was right. I hadn’t had a check in six weeks. Bev and I were doing okay for now with her job as a legal secretary, but my savings were dwindling fast. “I’m in,” I said.

“Just give me the basics, green logos, happy trees. I’ll e-mail you.”

“No problem.” I stood up. The chairs outside the Joe were convenient but uncomfortable. My lackluster sleep did nothing to help the ache in my back. Jerry followed suit, shooting up without the slightest hesitation. Jerry was always sure of himself, whether he had the right to or not. The kind of guy that always slept like a rock.

“Mozel Tov,” he said. “If we get this contract it could mean real money.”

“That’s my favorite kind,” I said. I shouldered my bag.

“That’s *my* favorite kind,” Jerry said, his voice lowered a register.

He wasn’t looking at me anymore. His eye followed something over my shoulder. A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. I looked and it was, of course, a woman. She was older, but her features were flawless and symmetrical. She carried herself with a professional, but easy

air. Her purple blouse fluttered slightly along her arms in the crisp wind. She had a jacket hanging from her arm that she carried indifferently. The wind blew an amber strand of her shoulder length hair in front of her face and she brushed it away, running her slender finger along her cheek bones as she did. For all Jerry's personal flaws, he did have a good eye.

Unashamed, Jerry let his eyes follow her inside the adjoining store—Provident Antiques. The sign was old, but like the woman, well-maintained. Before I realized it, Jerry was walking towards the shop doors and to make things worse, I followed.

There was a display window filled with jewelry and a few choice antiques like a gold pocket watch, vintage leather gloves, a bronze compass ornately engraved. It was a charming mix, really.

“Let's go in,” Jerry said. “Check out the wares.” That smile tugged harder at Jerry's mouth. I thought about leaving, but I was intrigued. And again, Jerry led the way with me behind.

There was a small room just inside the doors with another set of inner doors just a few feet further in. These were barred. The kind you see in any pawn shop-type store. There was a small buzzer next to the inner doors, but there was no need. Jerry tried the doors and they opened up. The inside of the shop belied its outer presence. The word *façade* jumped into my head. I got the impression this shop was not really intended for your typical window shopper. The floors were a glossy, polished wood, the walls a sedate but deep wine red. There were a few items prominently displayed on pedestals around the space—well-lit with recessed lighting that moved in crafty round gimbals. In actuality, the shop had the appearance of a small art gallery.

There were only a few customers inside. Very few. Mainly two older couples—truly older couples—all gray, well-dressed. The men in suits, the women in dresses and coats. They were either wealthy or at least had the look of it. One couple wandered the open space with the slow patience of the elderly, the retired, or the affluent. Likely all three. The other couple was admiring a single object—a bronze nude statue of woman. A gentleman—because that’s exactly what he appeared to be—was next to them gliding his hand slowly around the statue’s curves. The couple listened intently and nodded slowly. From where we were, I could see a smile on the woman’s lips. She looked back forth from the Gentleman to the bronze, admiring them both.

“Not quite what I was expecting,” Jerry said.

“No,” I said.

There was a long glass case along the left half of the showroom, behind it the well-manicured woman appeared from a back room. She walked around the glass case, her coat and belongings gone (no doubt tucked away in some space for the employees, which she clearly was). She eyed the unattended couple across the room, but the path to them brought her in front of us which no doubt pleased Jerry. I can say that because as she approached I saw him put on his biggest smile yet.

“Afternoon, gentlemen,” she said.

She had her hands together in a peaceful pose that exuded calm and patience.

“Ma’am,” Jerry said and nodded slightly.

I wanted to laugh at his down-home affectation, but he sold it with a strange sincerity.

“Is there anything I can help you with?” she asked.

“No. Thank you,” I said. “We were just curious, thought we’d take a look around.”

“Well,” she said. “Curiosities are one of our specialties.”

She had a warm, genuine smile that showed off her teeth, and her only visible flaw, if you could call it that. She had the slightest chip at the bottom corner of one of her front teeth that was more endearing than disruptive. Like the brush strokes that distinguish a portrait from a photograph this “flaw” made her more real.

“If there’s anything I can help you with my name is Rebecca, please just let me know.”

Jerry said nothing, only smiled his big, canary-eating smile.

“We will,” I said. “Thanks.” I immediately felt a pang of disappointment for not saying *Thank you* instead of *Thanks*.

The woman—Rebecca—closed her lips, but kept smiling earnestly and moved away to greet the other couple.

I waited for Jerry to say something once she was away, but he didn’t.

He was full of surprises today.

“Happy?” I asked.

“I’m not unhappy,” he said, then added “Rebecca.” Trying the name out. “Classy dame,” he said.

“Yeah, too classy for you.”

“Nah,” he said. “I could handle it.” Jerry moved to one of the pedestaled objects, this one an Asian looking vase. Jerry put his hand on his chin and pondered the vase, making a *Hmmm* sound, trying no doubt to class himself up.

The vase was beautiful. It had the look of age—a true antique. At first I assumed the pedestal it was on had to be fake marble. But I—gently—touched it. It was cool, and firm and

completely real. I imagine the pedestal itself cost more than a month's rent for me and Bev. I started to worry if I could afford to even breathe the air.

Aside from the surely expensive pieces on the pedestals, much of the store was bare. Some beautifully framed paintings hung at even intervals on the walls, their frames ornate, gilded. The store was dominated by this kind of tiny art gallery and I wondered about the curios I spotted in the window. I turned and saw the glass case that stretched opposite the showroom floor. In it were the real curiosities. It was a mix of small antiques and little novelties that seemed out of place: a tin toy soldier next to a fountain pen; a plain-looking set of rusted cuff links next to an equally rusted set of old-fashioned looking handcuffs. My mind swam trying to find links and connections, imaging stories that might go behind these objects. But it was the jewelry that caught my eye. There were rings, necklaces, broaches—all polished and shining from the sun that came in through the windows. The light played in the prism of the glass case and did its work on the objects themselves. They almost glowed.

I moved down the case. There were no prices on anything—not in the entire store, I realized. But the wealth in this case alone must have been . . .—well, I had no real idea. I could only imagine.

“How much do you think these cuffs cost?” Jerry’s voice said.

“The cufflinks?” I said.

“Um, no,” Jerry said.

He moved down the case and leaned in close to me. “Maybe I should ask *Rebecca*,” he said, one eyebrow crooked up. I knew he was waiting for me to acknowledge him, but before I could—

“Gentlemen,” a voice said. It was *the* Gentleman. The man who had been showing the statue to one of the couples when we came in. Up close, he was just as impressive as he was from afar. His gray hair was perfectly cut and styled, a few lingering dark strands kept their original color, still happily clinging to the past. His smile, like Rebecca’s, was both generous and genuine.

“Anything catch your eyes?” he said.

“I think we’re just looking,” Jerry said.

Jerry was right, but something had caught my eye. A small band of gold with a fleck of stone in it. Small but promising. Hopeful.

“This is a great place,” I said.

“Thank you. My uncle opened the shop in 1955. We’ve been here ever since.”

“When we get that gig you could make an honest woman out of Bev,” Jerry said to me.

“Thanks, Jerry,” I said.

“Oh, are you looking for an engagement piece?” the Gentleman said.

“Uh, no. Just . . . looking.”

“So, what, are these diamonds, like, cruelty free?” Jerry asked.

“Everything you see here is vintage and therefore comes with their respective histories. Personally, I think it’s best to keep the past alive rather than to forget about it. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“You can’t change it, can you?” I said.

The Gentleman perked up. “No. You really can’t.”

The Gentleman had lost his smile, but it slowly crawled back up the sides of his mouth. “Well,” he said. “If something changes please think of us. We have something for every occasion. And price range.”

The Gentleman excused himself and Jerry and I left. I had wanted to do a little more walking anyway.

Outside, a pleased look crossed Jerry’s face and he spoke up, reverting to his old self. Sometimes he just couldn’t resist.

“Should I have said bye to Rebecca?” he said. “I should have, shouldn’t I?”

“I’m leaving, Jerry. I’ll let you know when I have something.”

“Hey, you realize if you and Bev married her name would be Beverley Everly? I’m just saying.”

“Bye, Jerry,” I said, moving off.

“I’ll call you,” Jerry said. “Big things are coming, Al! Big things!”

#

I came into the apartment. It was quiet. Still. “Bev,” I said. “Guess who came through?” I headed to the kitchen, threw my keys on the counter, and I saw it. The photo of me and Zoe, my face pressed against hers, our eyes closed. I moved to put it back, file it where it had been, when I heard her.

“You’re not putting that back,” Bev’s voice said.

I turned, saw her outside the bedroom, her face solid. I knew it was coming.

“What is that?” she said.

There it was.

“It fell off the fridge,” she said.

“It’s nothing,” I said—I tried.

“You’ve had a picture of your ex on *our* refrigerator. The whole time we’ve been together?”

“Come on, you know I’ve got everything on there. It doesn’t mean anything. Not about us.”

“Fine. Then take it off.”

“Bev,” I started, but she was ready for me.

“Wait. What am I saying? Of course you have it on there. Because it’s not *our* refrigerator, is it. It’s yours. All that crap is yours.” She went off, her arms crossed. She slammed the bedroom door. I stood in the kitchen, frozen. An old magnet slid off the fridge, hit the floor.

#

I left the apartment. It was early but the sun was coming down. It was hotter than it should be for a Columbus spring. I just walked. Walked until I started to sweat, and then I kept going. Zigging and zagging through the village, down this block, up that one. I could see motes and dapples in my field of vision. They’re not actually on your eyes. They’re more a reflection, shadows, or rather an idea of shadows. But they seem more when they’re all you can see. There was one that looked like a figure eight, or maybe an infinity sign. They moved and pulsed in the fluid of my eyes with every beat of my heart. I moved my eyes to clear them, and ended up glimpsing the sun. It left a greenish negative in my mind when I closed my eyes. It looked almost like a spiral.

I kept walking until my feet hurt. By nightfall, I'd made my way home. Bev's paperwork was stacked neatly on the coffee table in front of the sofa. The bedroom door was closed. I didn't bother trying to go in. I didn't think I'd be sleeping that night anyway. I went to the desk, opened the computer. I worked all night.

#

"These are great," Jerry said. He was shuffling through the print-outs in his hands.

"They're going to love this," he said. He held out one of the glossy prints. On it was the mock-up of the logo that read: *Baker Pharmaceuticals* in a crisp, bright neon green. To the left of the font was a single arm of a fiddlehead fern, its length still rolled tight together in a perfect green spiral.

"I can work the font, tweak the colors as they like. We can animate the fern so that it unravels, recoils, whatever."

"That sounds expensive," Jerry said. "I love it." He smiled and pulled out his checkbook. He scribbled some and peeled off the rectangular scrap. "But they can afford it."

He handed me the check. It was for eight hundred dollars. "That's for the proofs. I'll get these out, see if they want to move forward, but I think they'll dig it."

"Let me know."

"How'd you do this so fast?" Jerry said.

"It was right in front of me," I said.

"Well, keep it up. We might be busy soon."

Jerry took the proofs and slapped them against his other hand, grinning his canary grin.

As he walked off, I half expected him to skip down the street. I had been sitting a minute when I saw the Gentleman coming out of shop next door. He had a briefcase in one hand and held some black gloves in the other. He wore a coat over his suit and a hat that made him look like a man out of time.

He had agreed with me that you can't change the past. But like the objects behind the glass nothing had to be lost.

Everything came together in an instant after that, and I realized how right Jerry had been the other day.

Big things were coming.

#

When I got home Bev was there on the sofa, flanked by stacks of legal briefs and paperwork. She didn't look up at me, just stared down at the papers, which was fine, for now.

I could feel my pocket bulging. I tossed my keys on the counter and went to the bedroom. I emptied my pockets in the nightstand on my side of the bed.

I went back out, Bev was still ignoring me. In the kitchen I opened up the fridge, grabbed a beer, and closed the door. I saw the photo still there, the diagonal cut separating me and Zoe forever. I pulled the picture off, went back to the living room. I stood in front of Bev. She still wouldn't look up at me. I dropped the picture on the floor in front of her. She laughed—a wounded kind of sound.

“What are you doing?”

“I'm sorry,” I said.

She looked at the photo, then at her eye level, my midsection, still not focusing up at me. I had a thought that she might be thinking about punching me in the gut.

“I’m kind of slow, all right. Kind of a late bloomer, I know that,” I said. “When I find something that works, I just . . . don’t do change easy.”

“I’m well aware,” she said.

“But you and I work. Well, you work, mostly. But I want to work. I want us to work together. I meant what I said, this is just a picture. I’m not saying it doesn’t mean anything, but you mean a lot more. And it wasn’t right for me to put this back. On *our* fridge. So, I’m sorry.”

Finally, she looked up at me. Sizing me up.

“I am. Sorry.” I went to pick up the picture, Bev grabbed my hand, pulled me on the sofa, and we wrapped our arms around one another, held each other, my face against hers, hers to mine, nothing, especially not an old picture, between us.

#

Bev and I got in late that night. We went out for dinner and drinks since I was freshly employed. We came home a little drunk, groping and laughing our way up the stairs to the second story door. And there was more inside, until we were near the bedroom. Inside, she kicked off her heels and turned her back to me. She lifted her hair and I started her zipper down her back. She laughed a bit and dropped her hair and turned to me.

“Give me a minute,” she said.

I fell on the bed and kicked my shoes off. I heard the toilet flush, and she came back out, her dress still unzipped, her hair up in a lazy bun, a few strands lounging about. She went to her dresser, moved her hands to the long costume pearls she’d worn that night.

“Don’t. Leave them,” I said.

She smiled, looked at my reflection in the dresser mirror. She dropped her dress, touched the pearls with her hand, making sure they lay flat against her skin. They contoured along the hard lines of her collarbone. A perfect fit.

#

I woke up to a flash. Beverley was over me, smartphone in hand, taking photos.

“Morning, sleepyhead,” she said.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m taking photos, grump,” she said. “Look.” She turned the phone around so I could see the screen. I was there, dead asleep. It was actually kind of upsetting, my lifeless, absent body recorded. She looked at me with her big chestnut eyes, lashes still full from last night’s makeup, her hair tossed lazily from last night’s sex, and she was smiling so sweetly that I knew under no sky could I be angry.

“I want to put it on the fridge,” she said. “We’ll add to it. What do you think?” She looked at me with those big eyes, waiting for a response. I could hear the birds outside.

I could feel the soft of the bed, the warmth of her body next to mine, the cool of the air spinning from the fan overhead.

I thought about the past, imagined the future of the thing in the box in my bedside drawer. And I heard the birds outside—*chirpchirpchirp—chirpchirpchirp*—asking me to take the next step. And then her eyes . . . I couldn’t help but smile back at them.

“Sure,” I said. “I think we can find some space.”

“Is it weird if I tell you you're kind of completing me right now?” she said. She smiled wider and kissed me. Against me, I could feel the open space of her mouth, like chambers of a heart. And my blood pumped, pumped, pumped. We kissed so hard she kissed my teeth, because I was smiling. I was smiling wide.

#

MOVING COMPANY

I pulled into the parking lot. Today it was Neighborhood Storage in Venice Beach and it was packed. They were all there: Big Jim, Marty, the Henderson brothers. Their out of service U-haul with that cut-rate logo on the side—Henderson Bros. Moving Co. — was taking up two spots again. Neither of them knew how to park, and worse they never even bought enough to fill the damn thing. The rest of us knew they just liked to show it off. Probably proud of the way their peeling decal rhymed. They played at being big-time but were glorified amateurs. We all knew it. But you run into a lot that in this business. Weekend warrior types—rich tourists who stumble onto the auctions, father and son pairs out for a laugh, some clever college boys thinking they're going to make a quick buck. All of them trying to take money out of the rest of our pockets.

I managed to find a spot next to a three wheeled motorcycle and a purple coup de ville and all of a sudden I hated California. I got out and headed through the gates. Never been here before but it was a clean place. Nice neighborhood. Might find something worth the trip.

I walked in and saw Jack Waters and his wife Diana Kline—she kept her own last name. They were *very* California. They ran Nationwide Auctions Inc. and were a constant on the auction circuit: estate sales, police auctions, and, like those here, abandoned storage units. Jack and Diane sold it all. They were always together. Always smiling, working the crowd, making hokey jokes about their name to the delight of the tourists and weekenders. Jack and Diane were there, center stage, outside the first locker. This was an outside unit, halfway down a row of about a dozen others. I'd rather have been inside today, especially after the morning I had. After the last couple mornings.

I made my way to the crowd. I usually pushed through, past the looky-loos, but today I stayed back, trying to avoid the familiar faces. I was in no mood.

I made it right on time. Some guy was grinding away at the Master Lock with a power tool. He didn't look like one of Jack's guys so he must've worked here. Sparks flew for a second, and it was all over. I thought about something snarky I could've said to my brother Darryl—if he were here—probably had said, probably very recently. Something like *see, it's not so hard to be on time. To do your job.*

The guy with the power tool pulled the broken lock and threw the corrugated metal door up and it began. The crowd can't help but move closer. Hoping to see . . . *something*. I couldn't help but do the same. When a unit opens up, for a split-second you let your mind race as your brain processes what it sees, deciding what chemicals to keep pumping. We all feel it, even the pros. The rush. For some that's what it's all about, but eventually you learn to push it down. You have to or else you end up with a van full of someone else's trash and your very own Darryl trying to convince you there really is an H in Gucci, and that he can sell that old weight bench (without weights, of course) over at Muscle Beach. Worst of all, you know that he can. But it still won't cover the money you spent on buying the locker, filling the truck with gas, and the inevitable beers on the way home. But, you think, your Darryl always has a joke, or three. And you can't help but smile because they're almost never funny. That makes them special, because they're his, and funny or not no one can tell them better.

"Noel," a voice said.

I ignored it.

The crowd is lined up in front of the unit trying to peek at the stack of Picassos that weren't there under that moving blanket and behind the plywood nightstand with the chipped corners, right next to the garbage bag of old, dirty clothes.

I know if Darryl were here he would tell me he could fix that nightstand. Patch it up with some wood glue and what he calls "know-how". Maybe make a couple bucks if we can get the locker for the right price. Maybe even pay for the gas and the beers. Then we can cover the unit selling those Picassos that'll end up being crush-velvet Elvises.

"Hey, Noel," I heard again. Closer now. Louder.

I turned and saw Mickey looking at me though his cheap sunglasses that he probably salvaged from inside one of his buys. I already knew what he was going to say. He didn't disappoint.

"Where's that brother of yours?" he said.

He grinned and waited. I could see his brother Billy already queued up in front of the locker.

"He's at home," I said. "Just me, today."

Mickey nodded. "He's missing all the fun," he said, adding, "What do you think?"

"Nah," I say, "this one's not for me."

From the locker Billy looked back with eager eyes, nodding slowly, seriously to his brother.

"This one looks like a two man job anyway," Mickey said.

"You're right about that. Too much for my van," I said. "That truck of yours is going to come in handy."

“Damn right it is. Today is gonna be our day,” Mickey said.

I look back at the open locker—like a gaping hole. “I think you’re right.”

#

NIGHTWALKER

Everything is broken. I blame the media. Not just the dysfunctional reality stars, the celebrities: the beautiful people. Not just the politicians and pundits and the talking heads on television. It's all of them. I've seen their work right here in Chicago, my home. Two of our state's last three governors served time in federal prisons, both for corruption.

I wonder if they're pen pals?

One of them, I can't remember which, sold commercial licenses to unqualified drivers. The result was a trucking accident that killed six children. Shameful. Though it shouldn't be a surprise. It's almost a cliché in this city. It's a wonder people can't see the corruption. It's everywhere. I can see it—do—every night, walking the city.

Tonight like most nights, I walk the shore on Lakefront Trail. I like to follow the path down to the Field Museum of Natural History. The trail is my favorite part of the city, the walk my favorite part of the day. It's night now. The path leads me away from the highway nearby, away from the traffic and the rest of the city. The trail is a place on the edge—I know how it feels.

I'm moving further away, now following the path as it moves down. I can see the portico of the museum over the grassy hill. I can see the columns and the top few steps of the entrance. The trail starts to bend right. It heads underneath an overpass belonging to its sister road, Lakeshore Drive, above. It's there that I see them: a gang of shadows. Four of them, underneath the overpass. One of the shadows is facing the wall, his arm raised to it. I can hear a can of spray paint hissing in the dark, and I stop. One of the shadows touches the artist on the shoulder and he stops, too. He turns. Now they're all looking at me underneath their hoods. I see them. They see

me. No one moves. It's a bracing February cold, but the wind is unusually still for this city. As if it's waiting with us. As if it knows something we don't—that it's a special night. Right now, I want so much to be wrong about this world. In the distance, I can hear the L, its brakes whining. Everything's stopped now.

I turn around. Maybe tomorrow night I'll make it to the end.

#

“Hi, this is Greg with K-Tram financial. Thanks for taking my call. I understand you're busy at the moment, so I won't take up much of your time. I just wanted to tell you about a brand new opportunity that we're offering to a select group of valued customers. Later this year, one of our sister companies, Baker Pharmaceuticals, will be unveiling a brand new drug with a variety of applications all approved by the FDA and—yes. Yes, we're expecting big things. And, as a valued partner of the K-Tram family, we wanted to invite you to get in on the ground floor. With a modest investment of—yes. Well . . . are you sure? We'd hate for you to miss out on an opportunity like this. Yes, well the profit potential here is projected to soar by the third quarter of—yes . . . yes. All right. Well, can we send you further information in the future? Great. All right then. Great. Thanks for your— . . . time.”

The line goes dead and I take off my headset. I look up and see Randy, my co-worker, grinning at me, his arms resting on the dividing wall of my cubicle.

“What up, man?” Randy says.

“Not my numbers,” I say.

“I know, right? What are you gonna do,” Randy says. Not a question.

Randy keeps talking. I just want to get back to work. For some reason he pulls out his phone and shows me a photo he says a woman sent him of her breasts. I try to smile and nod. Try to act like I think I'm supposed to act as a man in situations like this. Do what I'm expected to do. I must do a pretty good job because he keeps right on going, telling me intimate details of his sex life.

The woman, the parts I can see, is attractive, tan. I try to imagine why she would be with a man like him. Why she would let him take these photos, let alone climb on top of her and do the things he tells me he does to her.

It's kind of repulsive the way he talks about women. The things he says. He must know it too, because he takes little looks over his shoulder like a nervous animal.

I wonder why the hell he feels the need to tell me these things.

He finally stops, hearing something. He puts away his phone and takes another of these quick, suspicious looks. He must see Alex approaching, pushing the mail cart. Alex is old, and his shoulders are rounded from age or infirmity, maybe both. He walks in labored, uneven steps. With his shoulders and bald head he has the silhouette of a vulture, but he wouldn't hurt a fly. Randy on the other hand . . .

"Dude, that guy is a freak. I bet even the music in his head is weird. Whoooooooooooooooooooo . . ." Randy turns his voice into a Theremin, puts his hands up, curls his fingers into claws like a monster. It is a good impression.

"You hear Brenda left early? Lucky bitch," he says, tiring of his impersonation. "I hate this place. I can't wait to find a new job."

I think I try to smile. I can't wait for him to find a new job either. Randy's lazy, arrogant and worst of all, a bully. I hate all of the Randys of this world.

"Why'd she leave?" I ask.

"I don't know. Her kid's sick or something. You know what that means."

I do. It means our boss, Terry, is going to need someone to cover her calls, probably stay late.

"Oh, shit," Randy says, his eyes wide. "Terry, twelve o'clock. Gotta go. See you, man."

I half stand at my desk and turn—sure enough there's Terry heading my way.

Oh well. At least it'll be night when I leave.

#

At my apartment, I lie in bed. The TV across the room is on, but silent. I watch with the captions on. Black bars holding white letters blip on and off the screen. I have no interest in hearing the newscasters feign sympathy or cheer. There's a story about an author who's died, when the TV goes dark. At the same time there's a *whomp*-ing sound as the power cuts off in the building. The fan above me begins to slow. I wait for some generator or transformer to kick back on, but it doesn't. I look out the window and see the rest of the city. Outside, the sky is black, but made electric from the glow of the city lights. It seems my block is the only one affected.

I get dressed in the dark. I'm only a few floors up so I can take the stairs down easily enough.

I walk the streets. As I pass the L at Madison and Wabash I see the paint on the framework peeling. It's meant to protect the metal underneath. But it cracks and falls to the concrete. I can see it underneath—a hundred years of rust.

Everything is broken. Crumbling.

There's a nice hotel here on the corner—the Silversmith, it's called. A man with blond hair rushes out of the door. He's dressed in the upscale black and white of a waiter or an old-fashioned bartender. He pulls at a dangling black cloth around his neck that might have been a bowtie. He whips it off and tosses it into a garbage can off the street. He's moving fast. I watch him go by but he doesn't give me a second look. He's got a birthmark or maybe a scar next to his eye. It makes him look like he's wearing make-up. But I doubt he'd appreciate me saying so. We pass like two trains on the L.

I keep going, not ready for home. It's probably still dark anyway. I know it is. On my right there's a glowing neon Open sign in the window. It's a comic book store, all cardboard cut-out displays and four color posters in the windows. I see one poster in the corner. A black and white drawing of a masked figure. The name underneath reads *Nightstalker*. I imagine that I'm him and he's me. The sign goes dark. It's later than I thought.

I follow Madison to the lake. On the trail, I pass two cops on bicycles riding their beat. I notice their belts as they pass—all black straps and dull metal snaps. They look like the utility belts that a Batman-type would wear. As I pass them on the sidewalk, I wonder whether they've come from the park or further up the trail. I'll find out.

I move down the trail. It's a cold night, made colder still from the breeze coming off the lake. There's a man dressed in a hood and sweats, his head down, his arms up, his fists clenched tight like a boxer in training. But he seems old, frail. His steps more shuffling than spry, his build not quite filling out his clothes. I wonder who he is underneath that hood. A prizefighter? A champion? Maybe he was good. Maybe he was the best. But what is he now? He stops and looks

at the lake, at the breakwaters beyond the city. His stomach inflates further than his chest with every breath. I'm sure he's remembering something grand. I hope he is. I keep moving. I'm almost to the museum. The trail doglegs right, and I see them again. The shadows waiting under the overpass. Etched into the stone above their heads is Grant Park, as if to announce the sight of their vandalism, but that wouldn't be apt. These shadows don't speak for this part of the city. Let them have their boroughs and their streets. They can't have here.

I don't stop. I can't. I won't give them the satisfaction. Not them. Not Terry. Not Randy. No one. I tell myself I'll never stop walking again. I move by the shadows through the darkest part of the city. There's a graffitied shape on the wall—the number six. The loop on its lower half spiraling in on itself with a flourish. I keep moving. One of the shadows turns to me, and I see a face—he's just a kid, still a shadow, just one of the man he'll one day be. We both turn away. I walk through the darkness. Come out the other side.

#

THE DENTIST

The lights came up and shined above the floating ceiling of glittered balloons and ticker-tape novelties. The single, sullen echo still trembled the walls of the resplendent gala hall.

The voice of a woman cried out: *Somebody! A doctor! Is there a doctor? Please!* Her words fought for purchase under the gathering murmurs of the crowded room that was awash with black and white.

Nobody moved. No body moved.

#

THE ANTIQUARIAN

We have all heard the stories.

I grew up with them, have held their relics—their remains on flesh. I was not the first.

The first was Bruno Brodniewicz, a small time criminal, serial No. 1. He was brought into Auschwitz May 20, 1940 with twenty-nine other so-called “professional criminals”—the first thirty inmates of the camp. They were the kapos—the camp functionaries, and they exerted control over their fellow prisoners, over their own countrymen, and their own blood. This allowed the camps to operate with fewer soldiers.

Much more efficient.

The last to be numbered was a builder, Engelbrecht Marketsch, an architect and surveyor. He was marked January 18, 1945. Seven days before the camp’s liberation by Soviet soldiers. He was No. 202499. There were more, of course, symbols and letters added to the numbers: the triangle for Jews; a Z for *Zigeuner*; the German word for Gypsy; an R for the Russians; and on and on. My uncle, Ulma Drechsler, was No. 112358, part of that first line from Bruno to Marketsch. And now to me.

#

“All gold comes from the stars,” I said. “It’s true. I think I see something of the stars in your eyes, no?”

The woman laughed companionably. Her actual companion smiled, not quite as amused. I returned her hand. Now she smiled. Both she and her companion continued to admire the ring.

“It’s a beautiful piece,” I said. “Its luster is, well, unparalleled. Would you ever consider selling it?”

“No, I couldn’t,” the woman said.

“Are you sure?” I said. “I could give you an amazing price for it.”

I saw the corners of his mouth turn towards the woman, far too young for him. Her face beamed at the prospect of this singular piece on her skin. Both their faces swam in a sea of greed. His of her flesh, hers of the stone.

“No, thank you, we couldn’t. It is a family heirloom, from the old country,” the man said.

“Ah, Deutsche?” I said.

“Indeed.”

“Wunderbar! I thought I heard it in your voice. Are you certain about the ring?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Very well. Though, if you change your mind do let me know.”

“You have some lovely items here,” the woman said, changing the subject.

“Well, we do try,” I said. “Some of these items have taken years to collect.”

The woman’s lip drooped some, an affected sign of polite surprise.

“My uncle started the shop thirty years ago, rest his soul. He was very proud of his collection.”

I waved my hand at the showroom. Modest as it was, it was true. My uncle was a very proud man. The collection was his life. Now mine.

“That’s lovely,” the young woman said, pointing across the floor.

My employee, Rebecca, was showing another piece, a golden candelabrum, not for sale, but as a thing of beauty, it drew the eye. It begged attention.

#

My uncle's shop was Provident Antiques est. 1955—3800 square feet of heartache and relics. And I loved every inch of it. So did Uncle Ulma. It was his life. And, as he told me when I was young, it would be mine. Though, in reality, it was all of ours. My family's. He said we were stewards of the past he and I. Curators of these objects. Their protectors. He made it sound important, and I never doubted him.

My uncle's sister, Aunt Sara, had begged him to open the shop in New York. She never understood why he chose Ohio. He said it was the weather, but I don't believe it. Uncle had a reason for everything.

When my parents died Uncle Ulma took me in. He was my Godfather by law, but always he treated me like a son. In the summer of '67, I was working with him at the shop.

One day, the outer door opened with a *ding* (the silver bell above the door was old when Uncle was young, a story on its own that Uncle never got around to telling me, and I never asked while he was alive). The inner door that led to the showroom was closed, the iron bars making panels of light on the floor from the morning sun shining outside. A few of the panels became dark, and that was when I saw him.

A billow of smoke escaped the man's mouth—he must have been smoking out front. He rapped on the glass with his left hand. A large silver ring clacked loudly as he looked at me.

I was at the far end of the counter, cleaning the glass over the jewelry display. Uncle walked from the back office and saw the man through the bars. He pulled his pocket watch by the chain and checked the time.

“First of the day,” he said and moved behind the counter.

He went for the button under the case—*buzzzzz*—the door opened. The eager man pushed his way inside, a large, brown coach bag dangling from his hand. He had a slick, shiny ponytail on his shoulder— pure contrast against the long pale-gray coat he wore like a robe.

“How can I help you?”

“I have an item I’d like you to look at,” the slick man said with an accent.

Uncle raised his chin. “Ah, Deutsche?” he said.

“Yes, but, uh, no spreche,” the man said with a smugness.

Uncle shrugged, made a dismissive sound. The slick man laid the bag on the display case, and it landed with a heavy clang. I thought the glass top might’ve broken. I know uncle thought the same, but his face never showed. The man removed a large object, unwrapped the dingy white cloth that covered it—a gold candleholder, three-pronged, unpolished, but clearly a treasure, even to my young eyes.

“I’d like to sell this today,” the slick man said.

“May I?” Uncle asked.

The man gestured, put out his open palms to the object, an unspoken *please*.

Uncle picked up the object, felt its weight. “Gold,” Uncle said.

“Gold,” the man repeated, pleased.

Uncle eyed the object top to bottom. “It’s lovely. Where did you get it?” he asked over his spectacles.

“It belonged to my father. It’s been in my family for years.”

Uncle turned the object over, looked under the base. “Ah,” he said.

“What?”

“You have some marks here.”

“Oh no, my father was a very gentle man.”

“I’m sure,” Uncle said. “These are maker’s marks.”

“Is that good?”

“It can be, yes. Give me a moment and I can find out where exactly this piece is from, and how old it is.”

“Will that affect the price?”

“If it’s from a well-known maker, it could, yes. Very much. Will you give me a moment?”

“Sure, go ahead.” Impatient.

Uncle took a small pad from behind the counter and his pen from his jacket pocket. He wrote a few lines. The slick man tapped his finger once—the silver ring rang against the glass.

“Feel free to take a look around. I’ll just be a moment,” Uncle said.

I had been wiping the jewelry case, the whole time nosing my way closer. Uncle passed me at the door. “No dawdling, Michael,” he said. I snapped back to it, busted.

I could see inside the office from the threshold. Inched my way inside. Uncle pulled a reference book down from the shelf above his desk. The front said *Collins* in large letters across the top.

I peeked out the doorway to the slick man: he wandered the store idly, hands in his pants pockets.

“Don’t stare at the customers, Michael,” Uncle said, turning the pages of the *Collins*.

“What are you looking up?” I asked.

“Maker’s marks from the candle.”

“Is it old? It looks old.” I spied out the door again. The man was staring at a bronze statue, a 19th century nude of Aphrodite, on her knees, arms behind, face awaiting the sky. His head cocked right, matching the angle of the kneeling goddess. I heard Uncle make his noise of success and then

“Here it is,” he said.

“Is it old?” I asked. “Uncle?” I turned back to Uncle. His brow furrowed in thought, mouth slightly open.

“Uncle?”

“Michael, get the broom, sweep up the back room, please.”

“Yes, Uncle,” I said.

“Good boy,” Uncle said. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his keys, he opened the top drawer of his desk. It was always locked. I knew he kept a money box inside, a few gold coins he never took out, and a black gun. I saw it before when he needed money from the box, but he’d never taken it out, at least not that I’d ever seen. He reached into the drawer and removed something, not the gun—a card. He picked up the phone, turned back to me. I was almost out of the room.

“Michael,” he said. “Check on our customer, please.”

“But you said—”

“Now. Please.”

I passed Uncle, his hand over the receiver, even though he hadn't dialed yet. There was a look on his face, solid as the bronze in the showroom. I crossed rooms again. In the showroom, the man was pacing, checking his wrist watch—silver, to match his ring.

I turned to Uncle. He was holding the card, the phone between his shoulder and cheek, and dialing a number with his free hand. Someone must have answered, because he turned his back to me and spoke in Polish.

I stepped back over the threshold and saw the slick man. He was closer now, looking at me. I could hear Uncle talking in foreign tones. The man stepped closer, turning his ear towards the door, trying to listen around the walls.

“Is there a problem?” he asked.

“My uncle is just on the phone. He'll be off soon,” I said.

The man stepped closer. The phone clicked behind me. The man took a step back as Uncle returned.

“I'm sorry for the delay,” Uncle said, his voice tight and direct. Different.

“Well, what did you find? Do we have something here?”

“We don't, I'm sorry. I can't help you.”

The man's head tilted a few degrees. “What do you mean?”

“I'm sorry. I simply can't buy this from you.”

“It's gold. It must be worth something to you.”

“Not at this moment, no.”

The man scoffed, expelling a breath. They stood a moment, both silent. The man went to the counter, stuffed the candleholder back into the bag.

“Waste of fucking time,” he said to us both.

The man stomped to the door, and I saw Uncle reach under the counter to the buzzer but he didn't push it. Not yet. The man grabbed the door, pulled, but it held. Tight. He tried again. Nothing.

“You mind?” the man said.

“Oh,” Uncle said. “So sorry.” He pushed the button and the buzzer sounded.

The slick man flung the door open.

“Auf Wiedersehen,” Uncle said, his voice back to his pleasant register.

The outer door closed. Uncle stepped to the window, watching the slick man leave in a huff. I could hear a door slam outside, an engine start. Uncle pulled the small pad and his pen, jotted something down. He stopped, turned to me. “Don't you have sweeping to do?”

#

It started because of the numbers. There were too many. When a worker died in the camp, the clothes were removed from the corpse, the serial number stripped from the clothing leaving the bodies unidentifiable. Thus, the SS, the Nazi's secret police, began the practice of marking the deceased with indelible ink.

The living tattoos began with the Russians. In '41 thousands of Russian POWs were brought into the camp. At first, a metal stamp was used. The instrument held a series of interchangeable tiles. The numbers on the tiles were made up of needles approximately one centimeter long. This allowed the entire serial number to be punched at one blow onto the prisoner's left upper chest, one after another, like a devious printing press. Ink was then rubbed into the bleeding wound.

Eventually, a single-needled device was introduced which pierced the outlines of the serial-number's digits onto the skin, and the site of the tattoo was moved from the chest to the outer side of the left forearm. Tattooing was generally performed during registration when each prisoner was assigned a camp serial number.

All told, over 400,000 serial numbers were issued in the Auschwitz complex. However, only prisoners selected to work were issued numbers. The rest received what was known as *sonderbehandlung*, or “special-treatment,” which was really a bureaucratic euphemism for murder. Of the mentally ill, the disabled, the useless.

The chosen go right, the rest, left. The un-chosen sent directly to the gas chambers. The countless uncounted.

Right: to work. Left: to death.

The definition of sinister.

#

A week after the slick man came, another man came by. He wore a suit and a smile. He was older, full gray, his suit the same bright color as his hair. He carried himself with a distinguished air—sure, proud. Uncle greeted him with an even bigger smile. The man carried a bag, switched hands to shake with Uncle.

“Ulma,” the man in in the suit said.

“Henry, so glad to see you.”

“More than glad to be here. The shop is beautiful.”

“Oh, it's nothing, nothing,” Uncle said with a dismissive wave and a coy smile.

The man named Henry spotted me. “Who's this?”

“Ah, this is my nephew, Michael,” Uncle said. “Michael, say hello to Mr. Bertolini.”

“Hello,” I said, holding out my hand.

“Look at him, so proper,” Henry said to Uncle. “Michael, it is a pleasure to meet you, young man.” He took my hand, shook it, not hard, but not softly. His hands were tight, but not quite rough. He and Uncle smiled.

“Mr. Bertolini is a friend of mine. He’s here to help with an appraisal,” Uncle said. “Back to work, Michael. Mind the floor.”

“Yes, Uncle,” I said.

Uncle led the man to the back. It was still early, and the store was empty. I grabbed the feather duster from under the counter and worked my way around the room. I started from the paintings, around their gilded frames, down the wall to the ceramics, vases, and pottery from Europe, China, the busts from Greece, Italy, each on a private pedestal. They took the longest. I had to work slowly around them. I worked my way to the bronze Aphrodite, the same one the man had ogled before. She was always beautiful to me, though I learned not to stare at her. I wondered what the slick man saw in her curves and on the stone-faced look of whatever emotion that roiled up and out through the die maker’s cast.

“She’s beautiful,” Henry said, behind me.

I turned, startled and embarrassed. I meant to respond, but . . .

“It was nice to meet you, Michael,” Henry said, already moving towards the door, his bag in his hand, flat, empty.

“Auf Wiedersehen,” I said.

He stopped, holding open the inner door and turned to me, smiling. “Auf Wiedersehen, Michael,” he said, stepping out the first door.

I went into Uncle’s office. He was sitting. He was very quiet. On the desk I saw the slick man’s golden candlestick (later, Uncle would tell me this was actually called a candelabrum. I was surprised to see it. I had meant to ask Uncle about it, but I saw he wasn’t looking at it. There was something else. Next to the candleholder—a small cloth purse, a drawstring around the top. It was black, plain, but the look on Uncle’s face stuck out at me. The quiet distance of his thoughts. The twinkling welling in his eyes. The shine of them that seemed to mean more than it was. I saw a flutter of a change cross over his face, but he wasn’t back yet.

“The bottle of polish,” he said, “and a clean rag. Will you, please, Michael.”

I left and returned with the items he requested. Uncle had taken off his suit jacket, it was hung on the back of his chair, and he was rolling up his sleeves. I laid the polish and a fresh, white cloth on the desk. He said thank you, but made no mention of the objects on his desk, but I knew Henry had brought them. Uncle said nothing else. For a long while he simply set to polish the gold, his eyes playing the light like stars.

That night, after close, Uncle called me to the office. Still on his desk was the candleholder—the candelabrum—glistening like new, the soft gold glowing, reflecting the room.

“Come. Sit,” Uncle said. He had a fold-up chair next to his. He sat me down, handed me the object. My hands felt dirty over its sheen.

“Turn it over,” he said. “Look.”

Underneath, on the inside of the base, I saw three marks: tiny symbols.

“You see?”

I nodded.

“Look closer.”

I could see the marks clearer now. They were like tiny stamps in the field of gold.

“Little pictures,” I said.

“Those are the maker’s marks,” he said. “Unique as a fingerprint,” he said, holding up his index finger. I looked closer at the marks, saw the symbols more clearly. There was a number, it read 358, next to it was a small shape—a tiny candleholder—a twin to the one in my hand, the last shape was an *S* wearing a five pronged crown, the points looked the size of needles, but they were there.

“Do you know what this is?”

“A candleholder.”

“Oh, yes, it is, but it is much more. It is part of our family’s history. It is. What do you think of it?”

“It’s pretty.”

“Bah, you can do better than that. Its curves are like the sun, its color like a desert fire,” he said, pronouncing with joy. I always liked to hear him speak like that. An old poet.

“It’s beautiful,” I said.

“That’s better. I would agree.”

“What do you think, Uncle?”

“I think . . . it is home,” he said, taking a long look. “This was made over one hundred and fifty years ago, in Strasbourg. That is in France. Your great, great, grandfather lived there.

This is part of your family's past. It is part of the history of our people. Our family—there is nothing more important to me than our family, Michael. Do you understand?"

"I think so."

"Nothing is more important, Michael. Promise me you'll try and remember."

"Yes, Uncle."

"There's a good boy. Now, shall we get supper? Are you hungry?"

"Mmhhh," I said, famished.

"Where shall we go?"

"Schmidt's," I said eagerly, thoughts of warm potato soup and Schmidt's plump, sauerbraten already in my mind.

"Ah, a fine choice, Michael. A fine choice."

#

I worked with Uncle at the store until the very day he died. True to his word, he left me the shop in his will. I was twenty six, had been working there on and off sixteen years. Even during college he was always a part of my life. He encouraged me to go. At his urging, I received a degree in business from Ohio State. It made him very happy, I was proud that he was proud of me.

His death happened quickly, for that I was thankful. It was a pulmonary edema—his left ventricle no longer worked. It would be romantic to say he died of a broken heart, but it was his blood that killed him, filling his lungs until the end. After, it fell on me to continue and I was glad to do it.

In his will, I found the combination to the safe— five numbers. The day after the funeral I opened the safe (the candelabrum had long been on display in the shop—a perpetual shine from constant polishing—though I never saw or heard from the slick man again). Inside, I found the purse, tucked away in the back. It's not right to say it was hidden, more forgotten, but knowing what I know now, that's not likely true. I pulled the purse from the safe, little more than a small sack, heavier than it looked. It smelled of rust. I poured its contents on the desk: a metal bar and about two dozen small metallic squares, each covered in lines of sharp bristles, and then I saw them for what they were—more numbers.

I saw the numbers. Felt the points at the end of them. Felt the end of my Uncle's line. Both were equally sharp. Both cut equally deep.

I looked down at the object, the sharpened tines reaching out. I used the ink from Uncle's pen. I could have chosen to be a stock broker, trading numbers, instead, I created them. I could have thought of the world in quarters instead of seasons, updates instead of growth, growth instead of age, numbers instead of people. But it was people I thought of. My family. My line. So I joined them. They were always in my heart, so I made my number there.

202500

My own maker's marks. To breath my every new breath behind their voices. So I can speak for them, and can be counted among their number.

#

"That's lovely," the young woman said, pointing across the floor to the candelabrum.

I escorted the couple over. The woman had love in her eyes.

"How does the gold stay so shiny?" the woman said.

“*Sonderbehandlung*,” I said.

The man’s face tightened.

“Excuse me?” the woman asked.

“We treat the gold with a varnish. It’s a special trick.” I looked at the man. “From the old country. I believe.”

“Oh,” the woman said.

The man fixed on me.

“This, too, is a family heirloom,” I said.

“My dear,” the man said. “Let’s go.”

“I want to look around, you promised.”

“Feel free to come back anytime,” I said.

“See,” the man said. “We’ll come back.” The man ushered the woman back.

“What’s the rush,” she said.

“Are you sure I can’t change your mind about the ring?” I asked.

The man didn’t answer, only pushed the woman to the door.

“If you change your mind, I don’t mind making house calls.”

“Oh,” the woman said. “That’s lovely, thank you.”

“Come on,” the man said as he pulled the woman out the door.

“Thanks for coming in,” I said. “Auf Wiedersehen.”

#

THE BUS

Eric's head knocked against the dirty glass window and exhumed him from an uneasy sleep. He was jarred out of a half-dream/half-memory of grade school. Clear as day he saw her face—small and rounded with cherub-like cheeks framed by dirty-blond curls. A caramel-skinned Shirley Temple waiting by the bus stop on the first day of school. He watched her watching him except he wasn't a child. He was himself, as he is now—a twenty-eight year old researcher for the Berkeley Botanical Garden. A scientist, proud of his accomplishments, but still, when he looked at her, as she was, all of ten years old, he felt inadequate. Small. As he was back then.

He looked around the inside of the bus and was met with the blank face of his seat mate. She was a dark-skinned woman with jet-black hair pulled in a ponytail. He couldn't help but note and catalogue her tell-tale features: her skin tone, her rounded face, and her attached ear lobes. These kinds of thoughts were uncontrollable to him. His uneasy mind always searching, reaching, quantifying, and classifying people, places, and things around him. He offered her a thin smile and after a moment of apparent consideration she reciprocated and then turned her eyes forward toward the back of the head of the man in front of her. Eric in turn looked back to the window, his swimming head still coming to. He wondered if he had snored or talked in his sleep—internally working through a checklist of his insecurities. He tried to push those thoughts away. But what he truly wondered was what he was doing here looking out at this new world. A world so vastly different from the one he'd left behind. How did he come to trade the cold, sterile, and easy safety of his lab for the wild, dangerous jungle heat? He realized now how far

removed from the world he'd been before. Looking out, confronted with this place, it was almost too much. And again he wondered what he was doing here.

Then he remembered.

It was the letter. *Her* letter. The envelope was in his hand now, all wrinkled and sweat stained. He also had something in his lap—a book. The title across the top was embossed in gold and read *A Hero of Our Time*. Below the title was a single name in the same golden lettering: Lermontov. The book had been a gift from a visiting colleague. At the time, Eric thought the gift wasn't meant to be entirely serious. In return, Eric sent the colleague a copy of Melville's *The Confidence Man*.

Eric wiped his hands on his pants and tried to smooth out the envelope as best he could. He tried to stretch it along the edge of the book's hard cover, but by now the letter was well-worn, on its way to ruined. He looked at its face. Tucked into the top right corner was an address. The word "Nicaragua" was easily read, but the rest was in Spanish, buried under a Venn Diagram of foreign stamp codes. Much earlier, back in the states actually, Eric had written two words in marker in the white space: Red Valley.

He removed the letter from its withered envelope to read it again. It was short. There were words and reminiscences, a few lines with directions for when he got wherever he was going, but only one line seemed important. The last line:

Eric, I need you.

Eric, I need you

His skin rippled as he heard her voice in his head saying his name. He folded the top third of the letter, and then the bottom third. They met and overlapped. He placed the letter back inside its envelope.

Eric, I need you

He opened the book and placed the enveloped letter between its pages—somewhere near the middle. Outside the window, he heard a sound. It was far in the distance. Not out, but up. Like a jet somewhere overhead. He saw no jet. Only a streaking contrail strangely dotted at even intervals with roundish puffs, like a white vine growing tufts of fiddleheads.

Eric closed the book and stowed it in the satchel at his feet. He shook off the last of his sleep and returned to the view outside the hazy glass of his window. The ancient gray buildings and European fountains in Managua had given way to the pure, virgin, green jungle that now surrounded him. Those civilized French styled boulevards seemed out of place and untrue when he saw the native shape of this land. Here, everything was dense to the point of overgrown. Wild. And teeming with life. At any moment, he thought he could spot half a dozen bird species. Looking out now, he could see a blue-backed parrot and the scarlet macaw. Even the most stoic looking of his bus mates' attention was pulled out the window. He couldn't blame them. He felt it too. But it was the diversity of the flora that truly called to him, begging him for a closer look. Plants, after all, were his specialty.

Back home at Berkeley, plants were almost his entire life. His waking hours were spent researching with one of the oldest and largest collections in the country: 12,000 taxa consisting of over 300 families of plants. For a botanist it was like being a kid in a candy store. A 33 acre candy store. His days spent researching and studying, testing and retesting, his nights doing it

over again. He was told, and told himself, his research was on the front-line, laying the groundwork that could lead to new applications in just about every consumer level imaginable, and maybe—if he were lucky enough—those still unimagined. But the last three years had proved fruitless. Just more of the same. Still, he and his colleagues knew change never came easy. It had to be earned, cultivated if you like, through years of sacrifice, of research and development and then years more before any kind of practical applications could be instituted. The thought of all those years weighed on him and in truth had been for months now.

And then, her letter came.

It seemed like just the thing he needed. He called this little excursion a sabbatical, but it was more like a respite, a reprieve from the monotony of his life, his routine. Really, it was a call to adventure, excitement. That was the idea at least. Romantic and naive as it was. And then, of course, it was a chance to see her.

As the bus rounded yet another bend of the switchback he looked out from his seat and saw the drop below. Easily a thousand foot dive into the depths of the valley. As he looked down his heart sank, and then the bus stopped. He heard the antique hydraulics squeal and breathe a raspy, bilious breath as everything in the cabin lurched forward and then back as the bus rocked to a standstill. He looked out over the sheer drop. He could feel his testicles shrinking up against his thighs. His heart began to race.

He'd felt this sensation before whenever he was on a plane that began to lift off the ground—that pre-flight sensation of helplessness and panic when he thought he could feel the struggle of flight's fight against gravity. As always, the feeling passed. Now, he looked out over the side and saw it was beautiful again. The gentle slope of the tree tops traveled endlessly into a

massive rippling ocean of green jungle. They moved liked waves heading out into some great sea. His eyes went all the way down, stopping on a coursing river that weaved through the valley's nadir below. He could see its waters churning like rapids, gorged from some recent rain that nourished the trees, and had made them a vibrant, electric green. The sight of the rushing water sent a tingle throughout his body and he had an inconvenient urge to empty his bladder. As if testing his resolve, a sudden bleating chorus of horns began and he almost pissed himself right there in his seat.

Living in California he knew a thing or two (or three) about traffic jams. But in America the horns were usually a last defense, their usefulness minimal except to make one feel better. Here, the horn was an apparent first recourse when confronted with traffic—which had been everywhere—and then, without fail, and all at once they would be freed. A blaring, obnoxious cacophony of horns, but he thought there was more to it. There was a language to the horns, almost a kind of shorthand Morse code. Their sound had been a fixture in every city he'd been through on his way here. The traffic patterns were unlike anything stateside, it was as if the entire country were always going to the same place at the exact same time. In the cities, it was a perpetual bottleneck at every block. And then the horns would come out, like claws on a cornered animal. Here, on the pass, it was no different except there was only one small unmarked and unpaved road, carved perilously into the massive hillside—just a dirt road on the side of a mountain, a quarter-mile in the air—and the few cars and busses on it were enough to choke the way. Eric could hear the horns now through the thin glass and metal of the bus, everyone furiously tapping out their own patterns. Communicating in yet another language he didn't know.

He shifted to see how bad the traffic was, but his seat was too far back to tell. The few glimpses he caught did little to dissuade his fears that they were in the mountain-side's version of rush hour. Yet, he found himself smiling. Here he was, out of the laboratory, in the field, playing a hunch, based solely on a mysterious letter from a woman from his past. He felt like one of the old detectives in the pulp books he read in college. Things were so simple in those books. The hero always got the girl, the caveat being that it was usually for only one night before she was either killed in a cross-fire or in hiding from the mob or something equally ridiculous. But, he thought (as he had many many nights since that last night with *her*), one night could be enough, would have to be enough. He knew there was never a Happily Ever After for the hero. Not really. Just one night. The bittersweet quality of the stories always rang true to him. It seemed enough—one night to sustain a life. One night of connection. Just one night. Just . . .

Something brought Eric back. It was the air, he thought. Something's happened to the air. It felt charged. Full. As if the bus became pressurized somehow. It reminded him of the airport again (what didn't after the last few days of endless travel?). Airport air always seemed different. And then the sound. Or rather a lack thereof—Eric heard the weak, rubbery cries of the horns lower to a whimper and the foreign curses of a few impatient drivers leaning out their windows—all of it seemed to fade out. No, not fade. It was *drawn* out, sucked. Like a vacuum had pulled the sound away. And then . . .

Nothing.

Not a sound.

Until after the red cloud floated away. A wave of concussion came first, shaking the bus, followed by a wave of heat. He felt it through the bus's cheap windows and thin metal walls.

Only after the heat washed past his face did all sound come roaring back. He could hear a collective noise from his fellow passengers (and had a brief nonsense thought about how he could hear their accent in the non-word of their gasps). A fire was burning just a few car lengths ahead. Some of his fellow passengers stood up and called out, in Spanish of course. The bus driver picked up his radio and fumbled with a dial which brought only static. As he worked the knobs the static of the radio turned to a tinny whine, and something else—a muffled sequence of signal, pulsing rhythmically, buried under the snow of the old radio. Some of the passengers called out to the driver. He replied calmly, at first, but in their panic the passengers pressed and the driver fired back, angry. He slammed the radio off and let the mic dangle from the console. Two men stood defiantly. One wore a Stetson cowboy hat. He seemed out of place, even to Eric, who was the only Caucasian on the bus. Mr. Stetson and the driver exchanged a few more words, but the driver wouldn't back down. From behind, a shrieking noise rose finally silencing Mr. Stetson. Everyone seemed to listen as the noise expanded before quickly settling into the frantic screech of a siren. As soon as Eric realized what it was, it had flown by, going the wrong way in the now empty oncoming lane. It was a white van with a blue light flashing on its roof, honking (of course) its own horn. The driver pointed to the van and again called out something in Spanish. Mr. Stetson sat back down. Eric squirmed in his seat trying to look out and saw only a column of dark, black smoke rising beyond the bus's windshield.

From the confusion ahead, several men appeared, all wearing surgeon's masks. They were mostly white men, one was black, they all looked American to Eric, he wasn't sure why exactly. Instantly, they began trying to control the scene. The men roved in packs, going down the line, talking to other drivers in cars and on other buses. Some of the men had first aid kits and

administered help on the spot. The others moved to direct traffic of all things. They spotted for those by the edge, using every inch of space trying to clear a way, to open the road.

On the bus directly ahead of Eric's the passengers had started to step off, and instantly one of the Americans spoke to them through his surgeon's mask in what sounded like Spanish. He put up his hands and approached the departed passengers and waved them back onto their bus with some authority. The man was tall and blond with short cropped hair. Eric watched as the man came around to the right side of the bus—the side closest to the drop—and knocked on the door. The driver pulled a lever and the door opened. The man came on board. He spoke in clear Spanish to the driver who shook his head “no” in reply to something.

“No?” the blond man said. He moved down the line, asking the passengers the same question. Repeating their answer as fast as it came.

He saw Eric, had been watching him the whole time. He approached and asked the same. Eric looked on, clueless as to the Spanish. The man lowered his mask. Eric saw a healing cut beside the man's left eye. It looked like the eye make-up he'd seen in renderings of Egyptian pharaohs in the History Department at work.

“Are you hurt?” the man asked in English and with no accent.

“No,” Eric said.

“American,” the man said, not really a question.

Eric nodded. His head feeling thick. The man nodded back, looked Eric over a moment and Eric had to resist the urge to stare back at the man's Egyptian eye as he did.

“Stay put. We'll have you moving soon,” the man said.

He looked back to the last few rows of passengers and asked his question again in Spanish. Eric turned and saw them all (including Mr. Stetson) shaking their heads no in silence, like good little students. The man turned back to leave the bus when—

“What happened?” Eric asked.

The man stopped and turned back to Eric and said, “There was an accident. Looks like a gas tank explosion. The man regarded Eric another second. “Hang tight. We’ll have you on your way.”

Eric nodded.

The man nodded back, and walked off the bus. The second he was off the driver flipped the lever, closed the doors and a collective weight seemed lifted from the passengers.

Somehow, the men had traffic moving within minutes. One of the men had turned conductor, letting by small groups of cars and busses from one lane, directing them apparently around the wreck, and then switching back and so on.

Soon Eric’s bus began to lurch forward. One revolution at a time, he felt the wheels move. Eric saw the van that had flown by, its siren off, but its blue light still spinning silently. On the side of the van, he saw now what had looked only like a streak of black when the van sped by. It was a name, small and unassuming: K-Tram. Nothing else. It looked like one of those UN trucks—completely white to show no allegiance to any one country. Something about the name rang in his memory, but he found it impossible to place it right now.

As the bus moved forward, they caught up to the wreckage. Another bus, or what used to be a bus, was in the opposite lane, smoldering against the rock wall of the mountain. The charred vehicle, Eric could tell, had been brightly painted and festooned with bits of found objects

artfully arranged in every free spot. Chicken buses they were called, for some reason Eric never found out. He had seen many others like it—all festive, flamboyant. Each painted vibrantly with its name and permanent route scrawled along the side. Each one crammed with passengers while the bus was driven hard, usually at top speed. Accidents on these buses weren't unheard of, and suddenly Eric's need to relieve his bladder returned.

Around the wreck, Eric saw a bit of burned tassel that had probably been decorating the windows. It was still smoldering, giving off a sad line of smoke like a miniature road flare. He saw more bits of fringe in the dirt, and a brightly painted hubcap that was surely blown off after whatever happened happened. Near the wreck, a few blue tarps covered the ground like patchwork, under them massy protrusions poked out in all directions. It was impossible not to recognize them for what they were: bodies of the very recently dead. At the foot of one of the tarps, Eric saw an old woman in tears. To him (and likely to her) the whole scene was surreal, unreal. The look of grief on the woman's face as she crouched surrounded by this spectacle of violence was to Eric like looking at one of those photos from a *National Geographic*. As they passed, Eric saw the blond American watching over the scene. He seemed to notice Eric and his bus as it went by, his face back behind the surgeon's mask.

The bus picked up speed and left the wreckage in the dust. Confused and exhausted Eric laid his head against the dirty window next to his seat. The further away they got, the faster the flow of traffic continued to pick up. Eric looked out. The bus was approaching an old, sun-faded sign. *Bienvenido al Valle Rojo*, it said. Translated: Welcome to the Red Valley.

#

When they reached their final destination Eric stayed in his seat. He was still. He felt small again, like he had in his dream about the day he met Amber all those years ago at another stop, on another bus. And here he was, years later, still speechless, with her still on his mind.

Eric came back to Earth and looked around. The bus was empty. Outside, he could see his fellow passengers embracing friends and loved ones and hurriedly piling into various ancient cars and tiny Toyota trucks. His seatmate with the ponytail was hand-in-hand with a large man with an impressive mustache. Even Mr. Stetson was greeted with a loving kiss by a young woman in a faded (though still beautiful) pink floral dress. But it was the driver whom Eric noticed most. The dark skinned man had been overrun by two small children: a girl and a boy. The driver whisked the girl up in his arms and kissed her on her round cheek. Her eyes looked red and puffy, but the grime on the window pane made it hard for Eric to tell for sure. Around the driver's legs the boy clung fiercely. Wearing the children like clothes, the driver put his free arm out over the shoulder of a woman. She had the same eyes as the little girl and Eric thought they must have heard about the crash—accident—whatever it was, because the family had a look of love and relief on all their faces. Eric envied them for that love. But he knew that look came with a price. He'd seen it on the mountain pass—the death. And it had been close. Close enough he could smell it, literally.

Eric knew the olfactory system was one of the strongest triggers of memory and the phantom smell that hid in his nostrils didn't disappoint. He could still smell the gas and oil burning in the jungle air, the blood of the machine spilt and pooled on the dirt. The char. With the engine off, the air inside the bus was growing thicker, hotter by the second. It triggered that feeling—the wave of heat. Eric could feel it again on his face and neck. He couldn't help but

imagine more. The flames folding around him like a blanket, encasing him in its light. A shudder flowed throughout his body, and then there was cold—a film of sweat had covered Eric for what seemed like days. Now it had helped turn his skin to gooseflesh from a breeze that had wandered through the open door. Eric took up his satchel and left the bus.

His feet back on the ground, Eric pinched the front of his shirt and peeled the damp, clingy fabric from his chest. He felt a small suction as the cloth broke free of the layer of sweat. He tried to stoke the flow of air with his shirt like a bellows.

He looked around the bus stop—his luggage (which, besides his satchel, was just a vintage military green duffel bag) was waiting for him. The stop was a small open air shack, little more than a roof with a bench. A long, stucco sided building acted as the bus station. The stucco siding was badly cracked and crumbling revealing the cinder block underneath. He saw purple graffiti on the wall, but Eric couldn't make out the words. He finished his sweep of the small square—all the passengers had departed with their friends and families. There were a few other buildings, some cinderblock, some wooden. They all looked empty to him. They felt empty to him.

He walked across the square and saw some buildings long reduced to rubble. One lot was nothing but a cinderblock wall. On the ground around it he saw large flakes of stucco and cracked chunks of plaster. He thought he might have made a mistake coming here. A big mistake. Up till now that thought hadn't occurred to him. Not really. In fact, the decision to come came uncharacteristically easy for him. As if the answers were already there, inside him, waiting

for her

for the right questions, for something to come along and move him. And nothing moved him like she did. Eric cast his doubt aside. He'd already come too far.

#

Eric stepped out from behind the crumbling cinderblock wall and zipped up his fly. The few directions in the letter had said to follow the road west. That was easy enough—there was only one road, and the sun was high but coming down. Eric sucked in a deep breath, picked up his duffel and moved farther down the road.

For a few hundred yards he passed under a covered section of jungle, but he was approaching a clearing at the end of the path. Once there, he emerged back into the glaring sun. Once his eyes adjusted he saw a building. Outside it was an old Chevy Suburban and an even older military Jeep. A sun-faded sign was hanging off an eave out front. All Eric could make out was an image, barely there, of a cartoon bear with a top hat. The place was four walls, a roof, and little else. It seemed that way until Eric heard a crash and the shatter of glass from inside. Then he heard the grunting moan of a man, and something else. Another voice.

Her voice.

Eric ran. The voices grew louder and more severe the closer he got—it sounded like arguing in Spanish. He dropped his duffel and charged the door, but it didn't budge. He pushed again, putting the full weight of his shoulder into it, but nothing. He stepped back, this time he pulled, and the door opened easily. He threw the door open and rushed inside. A hulking man in a sweat stained wife-beater was flipping over a wooden table (everything inside was made of the same faded gray wood). The man turned to Eric with anger in his eyes and started towards him.

Eric backed up instinctively and stumbled over the pieces of a broken chair. The man moved in on Eric.

“Cooch, no!” *Her* voice.

The man stopped. His hands were clenched into fists.

“It’s him,” her voice said.

The man looked Eric over. Eric could only look up at the huge man whose eyes were growing glassy. The man breathed out and Eric could smell the man’s last meal in the air that hit his face. Something fried. Eric’s stomach tightened. The man stood up and looked over his shoulder giving Eric a look at his savior standing behind the man.

“It’s okay,” she said.

The man looked back at Eric—the glass in the man’s eyes had melted into tears. Saying nothing, he walked past Eric and flung the old door open and left the building.

From the ground, Eric looked back to the woman. It was her. Amber. She stood there, one hand on her hip—the old pose. The band of skin showing around her waist looked warm and soft from the heat. She was smiling. Eric tried to stand. His knees were weak, but he succeeded. It wasn’t until he was upright that he realized he had his book in his hand, the Lermontov. He didn’t remember pulling it from his bag, but there it was. He saw the paper sticking out from between the book’s pages. He pulled it out and held it up.

“I got your letter,” he said.

Amber kept her left hand on her hip and moved the other to her forehead. Her smile widened showing some teeth. She made a noise that was part sigh and part laugh. They moved

closer and embraced. He had to force himself to be gentle, but she squeezed him hard. He wanted to do the same, but didn't. He wanted to though.

When they released one another she looked around the small room and put her hand on her forehead again—her gesture of exasperation that Eric knew well. She picked up one of the fallen chairs.

“What was all that about?” Eric asked.

Amber moved to the table, Eric helped her right it.

“He lost someone today. We all did.” She sighed and said, “He just heard.”

Eric stopped. “In the bus accident?” he said.

“You saw it?” Amber’s eyes widened some.

“Yeah. I was . . . right there.” Eric had a flash of the burning fringe in his mind.

“Unfortunately,” he added.

“You don’t know how lucky you are then.” Amber picked up another chair.

“Your friend looked like he wanted to kill me.”

“Oh, he did. He thought you were one of them.” Amber looked up at Eric, as if remembering herself and added, “The other Americans.”

“I saw them. They looked like they were trying to help.”

“They are. Themselves.”

“Who are they?”

“Private security. Government contractors. Something else.”

“Amber,” he said, for the first time in a long time, “what’s going on?”

Amber righted another chair. “Come on, I’ll show you.” She walked out the door, into the light.

Eric followed her out. She moved to the driver’s side of the old Jeep, but didn’t open the door. The large man stood, arms crossed, by the passenger side of the Suburban, waiting. Eric saw the handle of a large blade in a brown leather sheath on the man’s hip. Eric swallowed. Amber said something to the man in Spanish. He spit on the ground and moved to the driver’s side of the Suburban, opened the door, got in.

“Amber,” Eric said. “I’ve been traveling for . . . a long time. Just tell me I didn’t come all this way to almost get my ass kicked by a guy named Cooch.”

She smiled and walked around the Jeep to Eric. She put her hand on his face. He could feel a few grains of dirt on her palm rubbing into his cheek. He could feel her heat.

“I’ve missed you,” she said. She lowered her hand and went to Eric’s duffel, still on the ground where he left it. “And that’s not why you’re here.” She picked up the bag and thrust it into his arms. “Get in.”

Eric looked at the old Jeep.

“Just get in,” she said.

He did. She turned the engine. Cooch followed suit in the Suburban. They drove down the trail.

#

Eric and Amber rode, cutting through the open-air that coursed over the Jeep. The wind felt amazing on Eric’s skin. Cool and refreshing in its way. Eric looked over at Amber. Her hair was blowing free in the wind. She reminded him of California with her effortless beauty. And in

this moment, next to her and her wild, whipping hair, even after all their time apart, here, riding in an ancient, decommissioned Jeep he counted himself lucky—despite seeing death for the first time in his life today. Or rather maybe because of it.

Eric looked in the rear-view mirror. He saw the man, Cooch, behind the wheel of the Suburban behind them.

“So, ‘Cooch’, what kind of name is that?”

“Spanish,” she said.

Eric smiled. “What’s it mean?”

“It’s a nickname. Cuchillo,” she said. “For his knife. It can be your best friend out here.”

Eric looked back into the mirror. Cooch had his namesake out and was brushing it against his cheek as if he were shaving. One of Eric’s eyebrows twitched.

“That’s upsetting. So, are you two . . . ,” he started.

“He’s a good man. A friend.”

“Good to know. Glad I didn’t hurt him, then.”

Amber looked at him.

“Didn’t you see me back there? I was ready for anything.”

“I saw. What were you planning on doing? Hitting him with your book?”

“I was considering it.”

Amber’s foot went down on the pedal. The engine whined like the motor of a cheap carousel and pushed the Jeep on. Eric watched the landscape go by—the rich, green density of it. He heard animals he never saw, that he imagined some might have never seen, or at least documented. There was a waterfall across the valley. He saw a cloud of mist sparkle a million

rainbows, one for every drop as the falling waters cascaded down, likely feeding that unnamed river he'd seen from the pass.

And then they were there.

A small village was set against a large rocky hill that was itself backed by a wall of jungle. That's what Amber called it, a village. But to Eric it looked more like a campsite. Most of the dwellings were large canvas tents shaded under the jungle canopy, a few semi-permanent structures rose above these. They looked tired and worn, built for some older purpose. Regardless, they numbered only a half-dozen at most. This was a tent city. But something stood out to Eric—the roofs of the old buildings were covered in jungle foliage like a crude camouflage.

When the Jeep stopped, Amber jumped out without opening the door. Immediately, she was greeted by people. More faces with that look of love, grief, and relief. Amber met them all. She hugged them and shook their hands like a beloved politician, or a savior. A few old ladies even signed crosses over their chests in a single motion, finishing the movement by bringing their fingers to their lips. Eric sat in the Jeep, taking it in when Cooch walked by. They met eyes again. Cooch reached into the Jeep, grabbed Eric's duffel from the backseat and dropped it in Eric's lap. Eric puffed his cheeks and exhaled a huge breath and opened his door. It squealed and squawked every inch of the way.

Eric got out and dropped his bag on the ground. He wiped his brow as Amber talked with the villagers. Amber gestured to Eric and several of the people looked at him. Eric turned away, uneasy. He eyes retreated to a small boy who was staring up at the sky. Eric followed the boy's line-of-sight and saw the scattered remains of the cloudy contrail drifting off, its shapes

fast disappearing—a waning omen. Whatever had made them was long gone. Eric thought of the fiery cloud he'd seen on the pass and the way the air moved before it. *Fire and air*, Eric thought. Eric squinted through the glare of the sun, which was still high in the sky. He put his hand to his chin—a thin, prickly layer of stubble had sprouted unevenly on his skin. He rubbed his face, enjoying the sensation a moment as he pondered the dissipating streaks.

#

Eric turned away from the sky. Something about those streaks of cloud disturbed him—their presence. He looked down to his side and the boy was still there, his attention also turned away from the sky.

Eric's book, the Lermontov, peeked out of the opening at the top of his duffel bag. Eric knelt down to the bag as it rested on the jungle floor, his knees and back cracked in small pops. He reached inside and removed the book. For a moment he thought the cover stock had the sickly texture of some kind of tanned hide. Or maybe reptile skin. He could feel every ridge and valley of his fingerprint, every canyon made of dead and dying cells as they smoothed over the surface of the book. He held it up, looked at the boy.

“You a fan?” he asked the boy.

The boy said nothing.

“Yeah, me neither,” Eric said.

Amber called to Eric from across the field. Both he and the boy turned to her. Eric stuffed the book back in his bag and turned back to the boy. He saw the boy was wearing a dirty white shirt that said *Pittsburgh Steelers: Super Bowl XLV Champions*.

“Tell you what,” he said. “I’ll let you borrow it when I’m finished. Maybe you can use it as a flyswatter or something.”

The boy frowned up at Eric as he cinched the duffel closed with the cord, stood up.

“Adios, kid,” Eric said and walked off.

Eric walked over to Amber as she moved away from the last of her welcoming party. She led him to a rusted out Quonset hut. Camouflaged netting covered the building, a flap of which hung over the front creating an improvised awning above the entrance way. Amber opened the blue/gray/rust-colored door of the hut. Eric followed her and couldn’t believe his eyes.

The space was converted into a laboratory, make-shift of course, like everything else in the camp, but definitely what Eric would call “field ready.”

“What is all this?” he said.

“It’s for you,” Amber said.

It was all there, a complete workstation. There was a top of the line laptop—its screen up but off, next to it a tablet computer, thin to the point of nonexistence, a DG-3 portable microscope and its full-size brother. There was even an Optical Emission Spectrometer tucked into the corner with all the bells and whistles: the dedicated computer, the table top grinder for sample prep, all of it brand new. Eric could smell the packing plastic in the air, the newness of the components. In another corner there were stacks of gray cases, each a thick, sturdy hardcover shell latched with butterfly clips, all a different size and each stamped with a sleek, stylized “K.” Eric turned back to the workstation and saw a small box of glass slides next to the microscope and pulled one out—it too was etched with the same “K.” It was then the name occurred to him.

“I use these same slides back home,” he said.

He went to the laptop, ran his fingers along the touch pad and the screen came to life, glowing gently. There it was—the same symbol lit up on the computer’s screen. This time complete with the rest of the name: K-Tram.

“No way,” Eric said.

“We use gennies for the power. Not bad, right?”

“I don’t have equipment half as new as some of this. Where’d you get it all?” Eric asked.

Amber walked a few steps around the room, towards the stack of gray boxes, choosing her words before answering.

“Those men on the pass—the other Americans you saw?”

“Yeah?” Eric said.

“No matter how they looked, they’re not foreign aid. They’re not Red Cross or UNICEF, and they’re definitely not with the UN,” Amber said.

“Okay. Then what are they?” Eric could feel it as his temples throbbed.

“They’re more like . . . military contractors. We think they work for the government—with the government—we don’t know, but that bus accident you saw wasn’t the first accident we’ve had since they came.”

Eric moved away from the desk, away from the logo on the laptop, as if it were hazardous material.

“What does that even mean? I saw them, they were helping people.”

“Were they?” she said.

Eric thought back. Was there something about them? The way they moved together, orderly, like a team.

“We took this—all of this, from them,” she said.

“You stole it?” Eric said, ascribing a hint of awe to the word *stole*.

Amber moved closer to the stacked boxes. She crouched low to one. It was long, unusually so. She pulled back on the butterfly clips. They opened with a *snap*. She raised the lid and turned back to Eric.

“Those men, they don’t want to help anyone,” she said.

Eric moved closer to the box, fixing his eyes on its contents—four guns lay inside, neatly cradled in shaped wood and plastic. Eric had no idea what they were called, but they looked like automatic weapons, the kind that the guards had had in the airport in Mexico, and that he saw again, later, when he touched down in Nicaragua. He’d never seen a gun so close. They looked alien to him. Dangerous.

“Amber, I don’t—I really don’t understand what’s going on, why’d you ask me here?”

“Why’d you come?” she said.

“I came

for her

to see you,” he said.

“Why?”

“Why? Because. You wrote me.”

“But why did you come? We haven’t spoken in three years—four. ”

Eric knew full well when it was. Four years ago last summer. Before he got hired at Berkeley. She said she was going to travel. Maybe New York, she had said. Maybe Paris. She

never said Nicaragua. Paris seemed very far away and right now four years seemed a very long time.

“I . . . don’t know,” he said.

They stood a moment, facing off, her not giving an inch, her hand on her hip.

“I need some air,” he said.

Outside the hut, they stood under the overhanging canopy. Amber said nothing while Eric breathed. He looked out and saw Cooch with some other men, all of them dark skinned and dressed in mismatched fatigues, with knives on their hips. After seeing the guns inside, the presence of the men took on edgier notes. Across the field, Eric saw the young boy again, sitting alone, his legs crossed, fingering bits of grass on the ground. From overhead came the sound of thunder. The boy looked—there wasn’t a cloud in the sky.

#

A bright, yellow school bus rolled to a stop, brakes squealing. The doors opened into an inky black. Idly, Eric and Amber stood staring into the Stygian pool. It seemed to go on forever into an endless abyss—a vertical plane of black, textured air standing in defiance of gravity and all the natural laws of man. Eric realized he and Amber were in a queue, surrounded by children, towering over them. Eric scanned the world and realized he was back in Wright-Patterson. He saw row after row of the identical yards and the identical ranch-style homes that made up the residential grounds of the base—or, at least did back when he and Amber both called the base home. Amber smiled and surveyed the children with their lunch boxes, their brown bags, their backpacks, and their youth. The kids behind Amber gave her the stinkeye as if to say *What’s the hold up? We’re going to be late.* The children stepped around them and walked into the black, as

if disappearing into a pool. A ripple fluttered in the void. There was a hint of a thing, unnamable in the distance—a speck of pure contrast against the veil, like a single star in the night sky. Except that it was growing. Eric took Amber’s hand, she his. Together, they stared out as the false star expanded, until finally it reached out—a ball of fire thrusting out of the open door, out of the black, enveloping them both.

Eric awoke on the small cot that was set up in the laboratory. He’d seen it there yesterday, but only now, as he looked around at the room, the equipment, field prepped for his arrival, had an unhappy thought occurred to him.

“She knew I’d come,” he said to himself.

Something about that upset him—that Amber knew—*knew*—he would come. As if all she had to do was whistle and he would come running, half a world away.

Eric looked around, saw the computers, the beakers, the gear, when another thought occurred to him. He’d traded one lab for another. He shook off another pitiful night’s sleep (that seemed the only kind he’d have on this trip) and tried to forget his dream.

Eric stepped outside his new lab. Beams of morning light were lancing through the rugged, camo tarp tented over the hut. The light was coming through the jungle canopy above it all. Whether from his dream or the heat his shirt was drenched in sweat. It was far too hot for being this early in the day and the camouflaged tarp did nothing to obscure the heat, but Eric had a thought that it was meant for another purpose.

Whatever the case, it was beyond Eric’s expertise, and not why he came. He was in over his head and he knew it. Now, he wondered if part of him had known it before he left for this place. What was he thinking, coming here?

for her

Did he think he was just going to see her and they'd fall into each other's arms, pick up where they never left off?

Something like that, he thought, something like that.

#

Eric moved away from the hut and wandered deeper into this little village that Amber called home. How long had she been here? Is that what had become of her after college? Being an expat, a rebel, a revolutionary? There was nothing but questions. *It's time*, Eric thought, *I have answers*. Wandering the grounds, he watched the people, they watched back. They were friendly on the surface, mostly. The old women smiled and there was blank innocence from the children (except from the one nameless young boy. He watched Eric intently, keenly, and almost always from a distance.) The men however were a different matter. They eyed Eric with the unknowingness that you'd give a stranger. Eric felt like a tourist who took a wrong turn into the bad part of town. Like an uninvited guest. An intruder. Their furrowed, dark brows and deep stares did nothing to make him feel at ease and he thought they likely weren't meant to. Whether by instinct or design or by learned behavior, these men gave off an air of dangerous uncertainty, made even more unnerving in the jungle heat.

The rest of the villagers seemed more than fine to be in his presence. Some almost seemed pleased. And Eric wondered what sort of promises Amber might have had made on his behalf. Clearly, there was an expectation of something. After all, they hadn't gone through the trouble of setting up a perfectly usable lab for nothing. Although, to what purpose it was meant was still a mystery and God knows by what means it was acquired. The notion of violence on his

behalf made Eric feel uneasy and turned his empty stomach. More and more he felt pulled further away from the everyday life he'd known these last years, now he was being constantly confronted with events that challenged his behavior and instincts. Had he seen an explosion on the I- 80 in California he'd have been as likely to abandon his car and run the other way. But here there was no other way. Here he stayed. He had *her* to grasp on to with his mind—she his only center, his constant frame of reference, the only context by which to judge the events around him. But enough was enough and it seemed that that context was in serious need of some reevaluation.

As he went, Eric saw the mundane comings and goings of seemingly simple people living seemingly simple lives in the wake of something seemingly much more complicated. He saw Cooch and some men surrounding a fire pit. Cooch himself was kneeling before it scraping his giant knife against a small rod of steel. A small ignition of sparks came off the steel and went into the pit. Cooch tucked the steel rod in his pocket and leaned in close to the fire. He looked to be blowing air into the pit. In seconds a little tower of smoke billowed up. Cooch sheathed his knife and turned to Eric with a stone-faced expression.

There was not a hint of smile.

Eric moved on. He saw children carrying clothes from a wash, likely from a nearby stream. He saw women stirring pots over other fires. These were peaceful, real things that he knew belied their circumstance. They were by all accounts a people in hiding. There was however something else he saw that seemed more like the truth. A young, dark-skinned boy stood by a man of similar features, perhaps the boy's father. The man knelt beside the boy with a stone and a knife in his hand. The boy watched as the man honed the blade—pushing the

smoothness of the rock down its length. The boy's hands were empty, eagerly open, waiting for their turn as father showed son the correct movements with all the precision and care of generations behind him. This seemed to Eric to be more truth than he'd seen yet—the balancing act of the world—care and love at the edge of a knife.

“Eric,” Amber called out.

He saw her at a table under an open-air tent, Cooch and some more men around her, all eating—a mess tent.

She waved him over.

Eric entered the shade of the tent. Amber said something in Spanish. Across from her a few men shifted, clearing a space between them on the communal bench seat.

“What time is it?” Eric asked sitting.

“Late,” Amber said. “How did you sleep?”

Eric remembered the bus, the black, the fire. “Fine.”

“Good. Hungry?”

“Yes actually.”

Amber gestured. A woman set a spoon and a wooden bowl down in front of Eric. The bowl was filled with a yellowish porridge. The smell of earthy, sweet corn rose up on the jungle breeze. It smelled delicious. Eric couldn't remember the last time he'd eaten.

“Gracias,” Eric managed in pitiful, clichéd Spanish. The woman smiled, Amber too. Eric dipped the spoon in the bowl and brought it to his mouth. The porridge was smooth and creamy and sweet and warm in his mouth. Its warmth was good, despite the heat outside. Eric lowered his spoon back in the bowl, stirred a moment, considering.

“So, when are we going to talk?”

“After you eat,” Amber said. “There’s someone I want you to meet.”

“Who?”

“A friend. You’ll like her.”

Cooch dropped his spoon onto the table and let it flounder on the wood. Eric saw the other men looking up as Cooch stormed off—their own spoons stopped in mid-air.

“Should I ask?” Eric said.

“He’ll be fine,” Amber said, lowering her spoon back into her bowl.

After breakfast, Amber walked Eric toward another tent. It was large and fully enclosed—made out of a thick, green canvas. Eric recognized it as a Lodge Tent, the kind used in field research. Some of his colleagues preferred them due to their spaciousness (and most importantly their ability to keep out insects). Like the equipment in his hut the tent was both expensive and brand new.

As they approached, he heard the hum of a generator. He stepped some to the side to peek around the corner. There he saw a few large gas cans and a brand new commercial generator, a few thick yellow cables running out and into the tent.

“Eric,” Amber said, politely encouraging him as she held the tent flap open.

Eric moved in, Amber followed. The space was as equally well-appointed as Eric’s hut with one big difference. If Eric’s room was the lab then this was the office. There were three plain wooden tables being used as desks by two men who were going through what looked like paperwork. Next to the two men were banker’s boxes and large legal folders, the kind that accordion out (each was stuffed to their limit), all of it brandishing identical *K* logos. The third

table however held something more interesting. On it was a large radio transmitter/receiver, docked and racked in a mobile case, the other end of the genny's yellow cords flowed out of its back. A man in sun-bleached fatigues and glasses was monitoring the system, one hand holding a pair of large headphones to one ear.

"Kervin," Amber said.

"Mi amor," Kervin said, swiveling his chair away from the radio. He spotted Eric and stalled. "So," he said. "This him?"

"He is."

"I am," Eric said.

Kervin put out his hand. Eric shook it. "Nice to meet you," Kervin said.

"Likewise," Eric said. "This is quite a setup you have here."

"It's homey. But not as nice as yours. Did you find everything in order?"

"Um, yeah, so far. Thanks."

"Kervin's the one who set up your lab," Amber said.

"Really?" Eric said.

"Most of the hardware was easy enough. Tab A, slot B. But I updated your software. Had to reseal the battery to clear the CMOS. That was a pain in the ass."

"You couldn't short the jumper?" Eric asked, switching on.

"I could've, but the motherboard didn't even have one. This rig is top of the *next* line. Very cool. She should purr nicely for you." Kervin made a tight face Amber's way. She smiled an unamused smile, not at all surprised.

"Um, great," Eric said.

Kervin cocked his head, leaned closer to Eric as if to tell a secret. “If you want to sync your tablet I can get you iTunes, I have a secure torrent. Shhh . . . ,” Kervin said slyly with a click of his tongue and a wink of his eye. He sat back, tale told, and added, “I disabled the GPS, so don’t bother with Google Maps. Other than that, you’ll be fine.”

Eric nodded as if understanding then stopped. “Why?” he asked.

“What?” Kervin said.

“Why disable the GPS?”

Kervin and Amber shared a look. Kervin started, but Amber jumped in. “All right, boys,” she said, “Compare your playlists later. Kay, what’s the word? Any chatter?”

“No, Mi Amor.” Kervin scurried back to his desk, dragging his swivel office chair with his feet. He turned a knob on the console. “Since the explosion everything’s been kind of dead.”

Eric looked away at that last, taken out by Kervin’s choice of words. Kervin stopped, catching himself “Sorry,” Kervin offered. “So, does this mean you’re making a run?”

“It’s time to make introductions,” Amber said.

“Oooh . . . ,” Kervin started. “Exciting.” Kervin turned to Eric. “You ready, stud?”

“I have no idea,” Eric said turning to Amber. “Where are we going?”

“On a nature hike,” she said. “It’ll be fun. Trust me.” Amber walked out of the tent.

Eric stood there a moment, painfully aware that trusting her was all he’d done for the last week. For the last six thousand miles. For the last four years of his life. He heard a creak and remembered Kervin in the room. Eric looked at Kervin, who shrugged, helpless. Eric sighed, left the tent.

Outside, Eric hustled to keep step with Amber.

“Get your kit, meet me at the Jeep,” Amber said.

“Why?”

“Just get your bag, there’s someone I want you to meet. I think you’ll like her.”

Eric stopped, shored himself. “Amber. Where are we going?”

“Just come on. Trust me.”

“You’ve been asking me to do a lot of that lately.”

Amber stopped, turned to him. She moved in closer, meeting him halfway. “I know. And I know this has been difficult for you, taking this all in.”

“Taking what in? You haven’t told me anything. You’ve shown me a room of stolen equipment and a box of guns. What do you want from me? I need—I deserve to know.”

“You’re right, Eric. And you will—you do. I know how—”

“You really don’t. I haven’t seen you since . . . I haven’t seen you in four years. I woke up and you were just gone.”

Eric felt the weight of the words as he pushed them out. Felt the space they’d occupied now empty. Amber stood a moment, considering the forest floor.

“That was wrong of me then. But it’s not wrong now.”

“What is that supposed to even mean?”

“I swear to you this will all make sense. I will tell you everything. Everything. And you won’t regret it.” She moved in closer, put her hands on his shoulders. “For right now, have a little more faith . . .” She put her hand on his cheek. “And get your bag.” She gave his cheek a little slap, turned on her heels and moved towards her old, reliable Jeep.

#

Eric had his smaller khaki field bag on his lap. He and Amber rode away from the village. Eric felt the heft of his book, the Lermontov, inside. Now it felt like something of a security blanket, something from home. Something that could ground him the more Amber took him off his feet. He'd also grabbed some specimen containers (really just plastic bags) and a multi-tool he found on the desk and tossed them in the bag.

They drove down the dirt road seemingly hitting every bump and contour that the road offered. The old Jeep moved and shook. The open air whipped Amber's hair and cooled Eric's brow. As they moved further away from the village Eric saw they were moving closer to the falls and he realized they were directly opposite the site of the mountain road that Eric came in on. He tried to pinpoint the spot on the road across the valley where *it* happened but it was pointless, any trace of *it* was obscured by the lushness of the land, or, he thought, disappeared by those men from the road. The men Amber and the others had stolen all the equipment from, who they were hiding from, and now, he supposed who he was hiding from, also. Amber must have been able to read the thoughts on his face, because she spoke up, her voice fighting against the wind.

"Don't bother," she said. "It's long gone by now."

Eric said nothing.

There was nothing to say.

The roads turned from dirt to grass to nothing, slowly wiping out any trace of man's encroachment as they climbed higher and higher. Eric could feel the incline of the mountain as they went. He had a feeling of ascent, like the car of a roller coaster climbing and clinking upward—that moment of angularity just above the drop when you know you're stuck and there is simply no going back.

Sometime later, fifteen minutes at most, Amber stopped the Jeep.

The forest was dense, the air was thin, and the clouds hung in a low ceiling above them, teasing at the possibility of a storm. The way was impassable by anything other than on foot. Ancient roots spread out across the uneven forest floor, covered in a layer of neon green plant life: ferns, moss, all of it everywhere. Eric could feel the life in this place. It felt to him like the jungle could come alive and smother him at any moment. It was beautiful and unnerving.

“Come on. We’ve a ways yet,” she said, urging him on.

Higher they hiked. With every inch forward (though it felt like they were heading up, rather than forward) Eric’s chest heaved and fell. Before long it became harder and harder to breathe the thin, alien air. New sounds confronted him. Primates howled and cooed, but were never seen. New smells were carried in with every breeze and rose up from the moist, rich earth with every step. This was a scientist’s paradise, as sure as anything. A researcher could get lost wandering the jungle, chasing sounds and smells.

The keenness of Amber’s perceptions again gave voice to his thoughts: “Almost there,” she said.

Eric looked around, wondered how she could find anything in here. There was nothing but jungle and an old gnarled tree, a huge, dark hollow in its center.

“Almost where? I don’t see anything,” he said, or rather expelled in tired, gaseous breaths. “Oh, wait,” Eric said, his voice rising with a curious excitement between giant breaths.

Amber spun her head around. “What?” she said, a tint of concern coloring her voice.

Eric took a step closer to a tall, thin tree. Its trunk was gray, darkened, Eric knew, by a recent rain. Still, it stood out against the brightness of the leaves. He reached out to a cluster of small berries hanging down, surrounded by green, leathery leaves.

“Pimenta dioica,” he said.

Amber jutted her chin out impatiently, furrowed her brow.

“Allspice.”

Amber relaxed, “Just come on,” she said and started moving off.

“I don’t remember you being this bossy,” he said.

“Really?”

“No. Not really.”

“Eric,” Amber said—a youthful obnoxiousness in her voice, with it a hint of the girl Eric knew. The girl he never forgot.

They moved through the jungle, Eric following as they climbed up and up along a near invisible (to him, at least) path. The sweat on his body made his shirt cling tight to his chest. The air was thick and moist. The humidity was all there was and coupled with the altitude Eric didn’t know which was worse. Despite the strain of the climb, Amber was in good spirits. Indeed, she showed almost no sign of fatigue. Only a slender line of sweat that formed an “I” down her back proved that any toll was being taken on her, if only symbolically.

“How long have you been here?”

“Almost two years,” Amber said. She looked back to Eric.

Eric’s mouth hung open, sucking in the humid air.

“You okay?”

“Oh, fine. I had a professor who always said that to be a good researcher you had to get out of the lab every once in a while.” Eric stopped, took a massive breath: in through the nose out through the mouth. He affected the pose of a man on a leisurely hike, but the sweat dripping from his brow betrayed him. “Breathe that mountain air,” he said.

“Don’t worry. We’re close,” Amber said, staring off into the thick of the jungle.

“Oh. And I was just . . . getting my second wind,” Eric tried.

“Save it. You’ll need it for the trip back down,” she said with a petulant smile.

Amber went back to the trail. Eric followed, frowning so hard it hurt his brow.

Finally, they stepped out of the jungle. They came out on a small, level clearing on the side of a cliff. Eric tried to catch his breath—Amber looked fine staring out, silent. She looked like a portrait in some painting: both beautiful and imperfect and all the more timeless for it.

Eric was struck by her—a common occurrence because she was always, somehow always, a surprise to him.

Eric stood, meaning to be close to her. To be a part of the painting, but her damnable, incessant clairvoyance, once more, beat him out, smothering the moment.

“Eric,” she said. “Come here.”

“What is it?”

“Before we go any further, I want you to just look.”

Eric watched her looking out. His heart was racing from the climb, his breathing heavy from his heart, his face flush from the blood racing through his body. Still, he had the look of a man about to make a decision.

A kairos man.

He moved in closer, but as he stepped forward and saw he was stilled—the view was awesome, in the truest sense of the word.

The small ledge they were on looked out through an opening in the clearing showing the valley below. The lush, frothing tops of the jungle canopy swayed serenely in the wind. The breeze was cool and cutting and it felt meaningful in its simplicity and presence. The setting light from the sun pooled between the mountainous peaks and laid a sheet of red over the jungle.

“It’s beautiful isn’t it?” Amber said.

Eric turned to her. The breeze was playing with a few strands of her hair. For a moment Eric envied the wind.

“It is,” he said. He never told a more honest truth in all his life. He turned from her and then back out to the sight, knowing he’d likely never see this sight this way again.

“The Red Valley. I see where it gets its name,” Eric said.

“Not yet,” Amber said. “Just a little farther.”

She walked Eric to the rock wall at their back. The face was covered in vines. Amber pulled back the curtain of vines showing an entrance in the rock—more camouflage. She stopped and then turned back to him.

“No outsider has seen this place, Eric. Ever,” she said, in all seriousness.

“Why are you letting me in?”

“Because, Eric. I need you to.”

Eric, I need you

The side of the volcanic mountain range where they now stood curved around toward the horizon. Concepción, peaked flatly in the distance, its partner volcano, Maderas, joined behind it. The two burning together. Not on the surface, but deep in their cores.

Eric and Amber stood, arms hanging at their sides, when she wrapped her hand in his.

He remembered the dream: he and she at the bus stop, she taking his hand. It had only been in a dream, but it seemed almost real. It felt strange to have her hand in his, and for what seemed like the second time in one day. An embarrassment of riches.

Before yesterday they hadn't touched since the night before she left, leaving a different kind of letter for him. The kind that starts *Dear John*.

Their relationship had never been based on the physical, neither was it something so cliché as purely emotional. It was less tangible. More abstract. It was the effortless connection that came from finishing another person's sentence. The possibility that two people can share the same errant thought at the same time—the kind of thoughts that have no rational answer, but somehow both people, so different, find themselves in the same place. The kind of odds that seem more like fate than math.

To Eric, fate was what it often felt like with her. Like things just fell into place. Like tumblers in a lock. Things happened that were simply supposed to happen. Things felt like they couldn't have happened any other way. There was some hint of this, a twinge of it, since he opened her letter and read those words on the inside.

Eric, I need you

It felt to him like that letter couldn't have come at any other time. That there could be no world with any other outcome than the one in which he did everything that he did: that he

wouldn't have gone on his computer and booked a plane ticket; that he wouldn't have gone home and packed his bag. Even that book. That stupid, bulky, pretentious book felt to him like it couldn't have been any other.

Because that was her magic.

She could make him feel like everything was as it should be. Even though she was as maddening as she was calming. Even though she gave him as much insecurity as she did courage. That she was as brave as he was not. She was as strong as he was not. She was as open as he was closed off. She was a counter, a balance to his life. And he knew he would, and would have to, do whatever was necessary to help her. Because there was no other way.

To help her, he knew, was to help himself. Not in some selfish, narcissistic way, but in an obvious, instinctual way. The only way. And Eric knew it. He felt it. And knew he would go with her. Wherever she went. As he knew he would get into that old Jeep and ride next to her, through the wind, up the mountain, against the pull of gravity. And now, whatever was in this cave—whatever troubles or wonders or trivialities it held. He would go. Wherever the road went. And wherever it ended up.

“Are you ready?” Amber asked, almost somber.

“Yes,” Eric said. “I’m ready.”

Amber led him by the hand towards the opening in the mountain—into this hollow of earth.

The camouflage was alive. The wall of vines that hid this place were gorgeous pale-yellow and green vines. Eric recognized them at once—Genus: *Tetrastigma*. But he didn't say.

Eric couldn't tell if the passageway was hewn or natural, but it was clearly ancient and long revered. The remains of countless melted candles flowed along and along the lengths of rocky walls where they met the earthen floor. Their rippling, uneven bodies frozen in time like a glacial ice flow. Fresh candles dotted the way, their flames burning lazily in the still air of the tunnel. In the distance, Eric saw more lights—a collection of more burning candles lit along what he guessed was the back of the cave.

As they walked Eric could feel Amber looking him over, gauging his reaction as they moved down the stone aisle in the slow lingering steps of a marriage procession. Eric scanned the half-lit walls—they were as equally adorned as the floor.

Petroglyphs were scattered along the walls. Ancient serpents, turtles, and monkeys ranged. Carved spiral patterns punctuated the rock face. They lingered over engraved costumed figures with inhuman bowling ball heads. More spirals floated over the figures like stars.

Snatches of graffiti decorated the rock, painted alongside the carvings. A phrase was painted there that said: *Que viva el sexto propheta*. Eric had no idea what it meant. He tried to remind himself to ask. Later.

Next to the phrase was a curious 6. The aperture of the numbers loop spiraled in on itself decidedly, so as to mimic the carved spirals on the wall. Eric knew he recognized this symbol from somewhere earlier, but he couldn't place it.

He said nothing, merely took it all in with the quiet reverence of a museum patron, or a parishioner at Sunday service.

As they approached the end the light grew brighter. A kind of altar covered the rear face of the cave, but there was no idol, only a wall of red flowers hanging from a veil of more

tetrastigma vines. The petals of the flowers hung open like a lazy rose. The aroma was breathtaking, but that's not quite right. The gorgeous smell alone seemed to return Eric's breath to him, and he drank it in eagerly. In an instant his altitude sickness seemed to disappear, his head felt light and clear. It was only then he noticed the old woman. She was there, kneeling off to the side, working a mortar and pestle, casting dim, candle-lit shadows. There was a bandage on her hand and wrist, and Eric knew her face as belonging to the sad woman he saw on the pass. He remembered her wailing outside the wreck of the bus. He remembered her sad eyes.

A start came into those sad eyes. Amber looked back to the old woman, nodding gently as if to say *It's okay. He can be trusted.*

"What is this place?" he asked.

"Her home."

for her

"Whose? Her?" Eric asked, meaning the old woman.

"No. Not her. She's a kind of botanist, like you."

Eric smiled thinly, non-threateningly at the old woman and approached the wall of flowers. They were simply beautiful. The smell was intoxicating in a very real way. He reached out and a breeze followed his hand, moving the red flowers, making them seem to tremble in anticipation of his touch.

"This is what they want," Amber said, a plaintive melody in her voice.

"Why?"

"Because she has power."

The breeze and Eric's hand had both stopped. One of the flowers—the one closest to his fingers—still seemed to move, to shiver. Eric gave Amber a look.

“I know you can feel her,” Amber said, almost whispering, leaning in, her hand moving up his shoulder, lost in her words. “She's filling your lungs, pushing your blood.”

“I feel . . . a tingle on my skin,” he said.

Amber giggled innocently. “That's her.”

“I-I . . . can feel the vasodilatation. My blood vessels opening, enhancing blood flow, oxygenating my cells.

“Eric,” Amber's voice.

“For her,” Eric said (mostly to himself).

“Eric?”

“It feels like first-degree sunburn. I can feel my cheeks reddening. I . . .” Eric looked at his hands—they were shaking.

Amber grabbed his hands. She moved in close—right in front of him.

“It's okay,” she said smiling. “Eric, you're fine. Just . . . breath. In . . . out.”

She breathed with him—the rise and fall of her chest leading his. Their heads were against one another now, hers just underneath his, supporting him. And she bore him sweetly. With patience. They breathed together until they peaked and then calmed. Their breaths were smaller now and more even. Eric was embarrassed, excited, and frightened. He felt confronted. But he began to feel something else.

“Better?” Amber asked.

“Y-Yes, Eric said, “I'm better.” Eric took another deep breath, now back in control.

“Yeah?”

“Um, yeah. Actually.”

And it was true. He did feel better. Not quite refreshed, but something like it. It was a kind of high, a lifting of the spirit and mind. He took another deep breath of the fragrant air.

Amber smiled again. “It happens to some their first time. She can be . . . overwhelming at first.”

Eric knew exactly what she meant.

“Eric,” Amber said. “This is why you’re here.”

Amber went to the old woman. Beside her was a basket full of dried scarlet flowers. The old woman pulled one from the basket and with reverence presented the specimen to Amber.

Amber accepted the flower with equal respect and carried it to Eric.

“Here,” Amber said—her hands cupped and extended, holding the dried bud.

Eric saw the flower that Amber called Scarlet. The living specimen was aptly named, but the dried version was a deep, dark merlot.

A profound kind of red.

“This is beautiful. I’ve never—I’m not sure . . . What is it?”

“Her name is Scarlet,” Amber said. “She needs your help.”

#

Eric perused the dried bud in his hand. Its petals were crisp and tight, but not fragile. They had a thickness to them, like heavy card stock. The flower was sturdy, resilient, and unaffected by the open air of the moving Jeep. The hue of red for which the flower was named was now intensely dark and almost meaningfully rich (which Eric knew suggested a high

concentration of carotenoids in the specimen's chemistry), but he'd have to perform some tests to see what it truly meant. And, for the first time, he was thankful for the lab Amber had thoughtfully procured for him. He thought he would be putting Kervin's engineering to the test. But he wasn't troubled by this, no, he was, well, without words and still giddy from the prospect of this potential new discovery. He was eager, excited, all at once.

He was that kid in the candy store again.

The walk back to the Jeep had been quiet—Amber seemed to allow Eric that time to come to whatever terms he required—the ride back to the village was less so. Eric continued to inspect the specimen.

“What do you think?” Amber said.

Eric looked at her, the bud in his hand trembling from the wind.

“I'll have to consult a field guide. Try to identify its taxonomy. Once I put it under the microscope I'll have a better sense. Then I'll take a peel and test for starch and photosynthetic responses. Given that it grows in a cave that should tell me something.”

“Oh. Good,” Amber said facing out, minding the road a moment before turning back to him. “But what do you *think*?”

“I . . . don't know. It's beautiful. Distinct.”

“That's a good word.”

“To answer your question, I'm not sure what to think. If it's an unclassified species then it could be an exciting discovery.”

Amber turned back to the road, pursed her lips—a thinking gesture. “ ‘An exciting discovery.’ The botanical Christopher Columbus, discovering something already known. The

people in this valley have known about her for generations. They used her for medicine: poultices, remedies; in spiritual ceremonies, celebrations, rites of passage.” Amber sounded like she could go on, but she stopped, focused back on the road.

Eric took a moment, decided, “Well, discovered for science. Nothing is known until it’s . . . known. Until it’s been classified and recorded. Documented.”

“Americans,” Amber said, then turned back to Eric. “What about the tree?”

“The tree?”

“The tree, that’s fallen in the forest that no one sees?”

Eric thought a moment and then: “Well, we know that trees fall.”

Amber turned to the road, made a sound like a breathy exasperation. “I’ve missed you, Eric,” she said.

Eric turned back to the thing in his hand. “Oh. That’s nice. I haven’t missed you at all.”

“No?” she said, playing along.

“You’ve barely crossed my mind.”

Amber pursed her lips again and nodded, keeping her eyes on the road ahead.

#

It was almost dusk when they arrived back at the village.

As soon as they returned, Eric left the Jeep and launched into his hut, to the surety of his lab. Putting away all thoughts of where he had just been except those immediately relevant to his experiments: ideas about light, water sources, soil content (he had been somewhat irritated that he neglected to take any soil samples, but since the flower had grown from the vines, he forgave himself the error.) Beyond that, Eric pushed away any other impertinent thoughts about the place

he'd been, the place he began to think of as The Temple, that Amber had solemnly allowed him entrance into.

Now Eric was standing hunched over the desk. He was inspecting the computer screen attached to the spectrometer. On the screen was a graph with a single line that stretched across the table and that rose and fell gently across some meaningful axis until it spiked up to a monumental peak that looked as if it would pierce the monitor and stab through the top.

Eric stood there, eyeing the monument, his eyes tracing the peak from base to summit, climbing it with his eyes. He stepped back and knuckled those eyes with the back of his hands to clear his vision, as if he wasn't sure if what he'd seen was the truth. In reality, he was growing tired. He'd been in the lab for hours staring into lenses and the glowing, eye melting screens of the computers. That and the excitement and the jungle heat had a way of sapping his strength.

But still, among the familiar comfort of the lab and the equipment with clear directions, his experiments with specific parameters—everything measured, metered, and controlled—he felt in his element. He felt like he had control. Outside, beyond this place, he knew he was the stranger, that he was the free-radical that damaged the whole of the cell. Inside the lab he was literally a physical constant. The known element—universal in nature and constant in time.

Now, looking at this screen, he felt that constancy waver. He was looking at an anomaly.

He hadn't seen her come in, but Amber was there, watching him, a plate covered by a brightly colored kerchief in her hand. The bright, gaudy colors were reminiscent of the bus he'd come in on. The eccentric, wavy layers of color mimicked the lines on Eric's graph.

“How is it going?” Amber asked.

“You were right.”

“What about?”

“It’s amazing.”

“She,” Amber said.

Eric stopped. Amber crooked her brow, slightly. Eric caught on.

for her

“*She* is amazing.” He gestured to the computer. Amber moved closer to see.

“It’s almost literally off the charts. It—she—produces an array of compounds I’ve never seen in any plants on the Western Hemisphere.

“I told you, you’d like her.”

Eric fell into the empty chair by the desk. “Amber, I’m just a researcher. You need an ethnobotanist, a pharmacognosist— or better yet, a whole team of them.”

“But you know what makes her special?”

“Well, seemingly everything. I have no idea what a plant like this is doing here. It’s parasitic—it draws its sustenance from other plants, likely the vines it hangs on, and it still produces chlorophyll, which is amazing since it grows in darkness. Yet it falls under no known genus. It’s distinct, unique, it’s . . . *she*’s an anomaly.”

“Do you know why the men want her?”

“I mean, I can understand why there would be interest in her.” Eric stood up. “I tested a simple extract against a stable DPPH—one diphenyl, two picrylhydrazyl.” Eric picked up a vial of solution—it was an off-color brown.

Amber’s brow furrowed, mouth twisted, waiting.

Eric shook the vial a little, as if that might make Amber understand.

“Why do you do that?”

“Sorry—it doesn’t matter,” Eric put the vial down. “What does matter is the antioxidant activity values alone are breathtaking. They dwarf anything known. I mean, I’ve read studies that some Indian extracts have been tested with high AA, but these are above and beyond.”

“Which means . . . ?” Amber said, still waiting.

“Which means nothing, but this has all the indicators of a neurogenic rejuvenator. Parkinson's, Alzheimer's, loss of memory, nerve degeneration—the medicinal potential could be vast. With refinement and study they could be . . . I mean there’s no telling.”

Amber smiled her biggest smile yet. “Can you replicate it?” she said. “Concentrate it?”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Eric said, his hands up defensively. “I don’t even know what *it* is. It—she—has hybrid characteristics from half a dozen other species. One of which is thought to be extinct. Why do you need to replicate it? You have a natural source right here.”

“To conserve it,” Amber said with a direness in her voice Eric had not yet heard.

“With time and study I—”

“But can you do it?”

“With time. And study, I . . . ,” Eric saw an eager light in Amber’s eyes, one he couldn’t bear to let extinguish. “Yes. But I have no way of knowing how long it could take. It could take weeks to isolate the right compounds, months to synthesize them.”

“Will you try?” Amber asked.

“I don’t— . . . it just may be beyond me.”

“No. This is yours. Will you try?”

“Amber, I . . .” Eric took a step forward. “I don’t know what you want.”

“Figure what makes Scarlet special. Whatever they want her for. Then we can help her.”

“What does that mean?”

“If those men take her, they’ll exploit her. This land—it means nothing to them. But it does to us. If they want her, we have to keep her from them.

for her

That’s all that matters. Will you help us?”

Eric thought of Berkeley. He thought of his job in the lab. He thought of a life inside. He thought of his coworkers, his students, his acquaintances and of a life of simple safety, and sanity, and of monotony and complete and utter tedium.

And he wanted none of it.

“No.”

Amber blinked. Her lips pushed away from her teeth—true surprise.

“I will help *you*, though,” Eric said. He walked back around the desk, placed a stained slide under the microscope.

At Eric’s side, Amber put her free hand to her forehead, her old gesture. She put the plate she’d been holding this whole time down on the desk next to Eric. He pulled away from the microscope, slightly, knowing some line had been called into question. He waited and wondered whether said line had been approached and crossed, or would be ignored. Amber pulled off the colorful cloth revealing a plate of rice dotted with peas and some fried plantains.

“Hungry?”

“No, thanks.” Eric said, and leaned back in his chair.

Ignorance it was.

Amber looked around the room, thought a moment, and then asked: “Thirsty?”

#

The old, monotone bar had the smell of sweat, beer, and rum. Kervin was behind the bar tending, looking right at home, rag on his shoulder. He poured generous shots, pulled draughts of beer from a solitary tap.

It was all very quaint, but Eric wondered if he went and looked at the keg somewhere in the back if he wouldn't find that damned K stamped on its side. He looked around, remembered the last time he was here, the way Cooch looked at him with fiery, glinting eyes as if his gut was full of burning coals. This time Cooch nursed his beer, sitting sentinel in a far corner, back to the wall, and away from Eric. He was surrounded by his loyal men, their camouflaged clothes not doing their work against the graying, tired wood that made up this place.

Eric sat at the bar, Amber next to him, swirling two fingers of whiskey in a rocks glass. The shimmer in his eye said it wasn't the night's first drink, or last.

“I've never seen anything like it—literally. That's not hyperbole. It exceeded the test parameters by a hundred percent. I mean, it's—”

“She,” Amber corrected.

Eric looked at her. Saw a change in her eyes, the new eyes she looked at him with, like he was finally in on some big secret. New eyes for a new understanding. Eric nodded.

“*She* is . . . unique.”

“You're right about that.” Amber took a sip of her glass, making it last.

“You said before, this was *mine*. What did you mean?”

“Exactly that.”

“But why?”

“Because it has to be you,” Amber said. “Finish your drink.” Amber raised her glass.

“Salud!”

Amber turned on her bar stool, her glass still raised. She yelled something in Spanish that Eric didn’t make out, and ended with another “Salud!” (the only word Eric was sure he knew) and everyone in the bar cheered all at once.

Eric raised his glass. “Cheers,” he said.

Amber turned back to Eric and downed her drink. Her cheeks puffed for a moment before she swallowed with a show of her throat.

“Ahhh,” she said deliberately. “Well?” She gestured Eric’s way.

Eric raised his glass, threw back his drink—down it went.

Amber jutted her lower lip up, impressed.

“What?” Eric said. “I do teach at a college.”

Amber smiled, “Come on. Let’s get out of here.”

Eric never saw anyone staring at him and Amber as they left—the whiskey had begun to lessen his usual self-conscious hyper-awareness—but outside the bar he heard the sound of shattering glass from inside. He knew Cooch wasn’t smiling.

#

Amber led Eric down from the clearing outside the bar (which he found out was called El Oso Atildado or The Dapper Bear Est. 1933) and together they moved down the same trail Eric had taken after first stepping foot off of the bus. Despite the lack of light, Eric could manage to

sense the foliage covering the way. It loomed. Looking up, Eric could see the thickness of the jungle blotting out the night, an inky black, absorbing the blue-night of the sky.

“My directions weren’t so bad, right?” Amber said, aware of the significance of the location.

“Good enough for government work,” Eric said. It was meant to be humorous, but the words fell flat and limp. An unspoken implication occurred to him that he didn’t enjoy. He tried to change the subject. “So, what do the people know about . . . everything?”

“Everything I do. There are no secrets here.”

“They seem, well, really well adjusted.”

“They’re a strong people, and used to a little revolution.”

“So is Berkeley.” Eric punctuated this with a smile.

“This isn’t Berkeley,” Amber said to the ground.

“What? I gotta fire my travel agent,” Eric said, his smile looser now, more genuine.

Amber smiled, too, but she kept her eyes on the ground.

“Since the 90’s the US has been working with the government, first supporting and financing—leading the UNO.”

Eric furrowed his brow—his turn to make a face of incomprehension at an unfamiliar acronym.

“Oh. Sorry,” Amber said, unconvincingly.

Eric stopped. “You did that on purpose.”

Amber stopped—her face was a sly twist. “Not fun is it?”

Eric tightened his mouth—a pouting gesture—“No.”

Amber stepped back, grabbed Eric's arm, pulled him close. "Apology accepted. Anyway, the UNO—the Unión Nacional Opositora. Our governments have been in bed together ever since. Us trading intel for American government surplus—boats, planes, buses." Amber gave Eric's arm a little squeeze.

They walked a moment in silence, unspoken words hanging in the air.

"What?" Amber said, that pesky, keen sense of hers reappearing.

"Nothing, I just—why are you doing this? How'd you get here?"

"I came here by accident, really. I finally started travelling—like I'd always wanted. So, I thought I'd come see where my grandmother was from. When I got here, I saw how these people were living. How afraid they were.

"That company had come in and started throwing money around. They'd been buying up all the land surrounding the valley. First from the government, then from locals. Some refused to sell. That's when I got involved. I told the locals that we had to get together, organize, and petition the government."

"There's still a little Berkeley in there," Eric said. "What happened?"

"It didn't work. Things got worse. About three months ago the Americans came."

Eric heard a graveness in her voice as it lowered under the weight of the word 'Americans'. Eric felt a pang of shame.

"That was when the *accidents* started to happen—crop fires, road accidents, missing livestock," Amber said.

"You think this company was stealing their cows?"

“It’s about intimidation. They’re trying to frighten these people off their own land. So, we started to fight back. We raided one of their supply trucks, got a hold of some files, we found out what they really wanted.”

“Scarlet.”

Amber nodded, slowly, solemn.

“They brought me in, showed her to me. As soon as I saw her, I knew that we had to protect her.”

“Is that when you sent me the letter?”

Amber looked down guiltily. “No,” she said. “That was later.” Amber smiled and brushed some hair away from her eyes. Another small silence. Before it was broken they emerged from the covered section of jungle and out in to the open air.

Eric saw the same half-crumbled structure he had passed when he first arrived, and saw the same graffiti on the rubble. He remembered seeing it on the walls of The Temple.

“Everything is broken,” Amber’s voice said.

Eric looked, saw her watching the decaying wall, as if she was waiting for it to collapse at any moment.

“The writing, what’s it mean?”

“ ‘Que vive el sexto profeta’, ” she said, in a perfect (to Eric’s ears, at least) accent sounding both natural and striking. “It’s a promise.”

“Of?”

“Of change. That the world will be a better place. This company thinks they can stamp their name on these people’s homes like they do all of their equipment. To them, we are just another tool, another asset to be used up until it serves their purpose.”

They had kept walking. Before Eric knew it he realized he was back at what passed as the bus station. There was a bus there, of course, it was festooned with color and frills—their gaudy vibrancy still discernible in the moonlit dark.

“If I never see another bus, it’ll be too soon,” Eric said, in all sincerity.

Amber smiled.

“God, it’s just like the ones from school.”

“There’s a reason for that. They’re decommissioned surplus. The US sells them all over Central America.”

Amber walked to the rear of the bus, pulled on the Emergency door.

“What are you doing?”

“Come on, you big baby.”

“Are we allowed in there?”

“You’re kidding me, right?”

Eric looked around, remembered where he was—nowhere Nicaragua—but he still felt a twinge of nervousness. Unease.

The inside was not as festively painted as the exterior. A thick, warm muskiness lingered inside that gave the air a stagnant, soupy texture. Despite the sliding windows being down.

Something about the space gave off a claustrophobic feeling. The dark gray-green of the interior

panels seemed to match the jungle at night—yet another sign of camouflage. You could hide a lot in the jungle.

The seats themselves were covered in a swap-meet-style mishmash of hand-knit blankets and beaded seat covers (one of which was identical to a seat cover a cabbie had worn on one leg of Eric’s journey between airports).

“Looks smaller than I remember,” Eric said. And it was true, but despite this fact Eric had the same feeling of being small, a kind of confronted diminishment—like returning to your childhood grade school as an adult where some part of your mind lingered, remembered the memories: white chalk, black boards, and cheap sanitizer.

They sat down together on one of the benches. Eric could feel the knit cover on his seat making a thick layer of warmth on his back.

“Does this take you back?” Amber asked.

“A little too far, I think.”

“It wasn’t so terrible, was it?”

“Are you kidding me? It was a nightmare. I hated school.”

“Is that why you still work in one?”

“Please. It’s not the same.”

“No. It’s not is it?”

Amber looked out the open window. “Do you remember Randy?” she said.

“Are you determined to make me remember every bad thing that happened to me?”

“Shut up,” Amber said smiling. “Do you?”

“Of course. How could I forget? He stole my dad’s rabbit’s foot. Until you got it back.”

“He was a jerk,” Amber said.

“Remember when you told him off. He learned quick after that. I think he had a crush on you.”

“What? No.”

“Please. You were the only one he let call him Randall.”

They sat there, the humidity turning the air to Jell-O.

“Remember your seat?” Amber said.

“Of course. One row behind yours.”

“Well?”

They looked at one another, smiled, shot up to their feet.

“Hurry up, we’re going to be late!” Amber said, gleeful, sweetly.

They pushed each other into the aisle, scrambling. Playing.

“It’s your fault, you were late to the stop.” Eric poked her in the shoulder. “Again.”

“Na-ah,” some younger version of Amber said and slugged Eric in the arm.

“Talk about bullies...”

They fell into their seats. Amber’s a few rows back on the aisle, Eric’s one row behind her, by the window. They laughed through their smiles. Another peaceful silence stilled. Before long, Amber got up, sat next to Eric. Face forward she said: “You asked me when I wrote you. Why after all this time.”

Eric nodded.

“You remember what you told me the last day of school? Do you remember what you did—how you told me?”

“Oh yes,” he said. “It was the hardest day of my life. At the time.”

“You were so nervous.”

“I think I have been ever since.”

She pushed aside the cover on the seat in front of them. She grabbed his hand, put it against the metal back. She pulled his hand across. He felt the pits and raises there.

“What is this? This is a joke.”

“It’s not.”

Eric stood up, pushed past Amber to the aisle. He stood there.

“What are you doing?”

“I want you to know. This is how I knew I had to write you. How I knew you’d come.”

“I came here for you!” Eric yelled.

Amber’s eyes widened, she looked like she’d been hit by a blast of wind. The directness of it was so sudden, they were both taken aback. She came back, her voice low.

“You think you did, but this is why you’re here.”

“Don’t tell me what I think. Don’t treat me like a child. I know why I came here. No one brought me here. No one pushed me on the plane, or put me in that damn bus, but me. I came to help you. I came to see you. I came to be with you. That’s it.” Eric turned towards the Emergency Exit.

“Eric, wait.”

“No. I’m done with that.”

#

Eric held the dried Scarlet flower by the stem. He wasn't quite sure if he should have had the specimen out in public, or what passed for it here, but the bar was almost empty now, save for himself, Kervin, and a few sport drinkers. Eric twirled Scarlet around and around between his thumb and his first two fingers, making the bud spin and dance. He wondered how such a small thing could change the world. It—*she*—had already changed his. He put the bud on the open pages of the Lermontov—he brought it with him everywhere now, inside his satchel—and closed her inside the book. He emptied his glass, trying to forget about her or *her* for one second. He was unsuccessful. He exhaled a cloud of whiskey breath. He peered down into the glass, saw a cloudy K etched onto the underside of its base. He wasn't surprised. It seemed the jungle wasn't going to let him forget anything.

“They thought of everything, didn't they,” Kervin's voice said.

Eric looked up and saw Kervin with a bottle. He poured a generous shot into Eric's glass.

“I realize I'm running a little low on cash. Don't suppose you take credit cards, do you?”

“On the house,” Kervin said. “Where's she at?”

Eric shrugged. “Couldn't tell you,” he said.

“I could,” Kervin said. “If you wanted to know.”

Eric took his drink, finished it. Kervin filled the glass again.

“What happened?” Kervin asked.

Eric looked up at him, deciding. Kervin threw a bar rag over his shoulder affecting the look of a pro.

“I think I made a mistake,” Eric said, and took a drink.

Kervin hit Eric again. Another shot to fill the void.

“Welcome to the club,” Kervin said.

“I don’t think I should have come here.”

“Since I’m the resident bartender, and you’re clearly suffering some kind of crisis, I feel it’s my duty to impart some wisdom to you. If for no other reason than to keep you from crying.”

“Thanks,” Eric said.

“Yeah, well, I’m that kind of guy,” Kervin said. “So, you think you made a mistake coming here.” Not a question. “Then I think you should remember this,” Kervin thought a moment, his eyes glancing upward, searching. “A man once said ‘There’s nowhere you can be that isn’t where you are meant to be,’” Kervin put a little emphasis on *meant*. He and Eric looked at each other a moment, before Kervin said *There you go*, and began to idly wipe down the bar.

“That’s it?” Eric said.

“That’s it.”

Eric took a sip of his drink, not finding the words, then: “Wait—All You Need Is Love? Seriously? Beatles lyrics?”

“Yeah ‘Beatles lyrics’. John Lennon was a god!”

They met eyes. Eric couldn’t help but laugh. Kervin, too. It felt good. Unexpected. But it didn’t change anything. Kervin seemed to understand that. He considered his bar towel, and the spot he’d been wiping for the last minute.

“You and Amber—you got a past. You haven’t seen or heard from one another in, what a few years?” he said.

Eric nodded. “Four.”

“Four years. From what I’ve seen it doesn’t seem like it matters all the much, does it? When you can be apart from someone that long, and just . . . be back. I think that’s got to mean something.”

“But what? Do you suppose,” Eric said.

“I don’t know, man. Not nothing,” he said. “I know that.”

Kervin turned, pulled an ancient black and white photo, curling at the edges, off the back wall. He brought it to Eric. On it was a man and a woman. The man was a Cary Grant-type in khakis, her, an Ava Gardner in trousers and riding boots. He had his arms around her, they were looking into each other’s eyes.

“Who are they?” Eric asked.

“Friends of the original owner,” he said.

“What’s their story?” Eric asked. “Happy ending?”

Kervin thought it over, turned away from the photo “Couldn’t tell you,” he said to Eric before turning back to it. “But I don’t think they cared at the time.”

Eric handed the picture back. Kervin took another look and put it back on the wall. Eric took another drink, let it wash around his mouth. It was stringent. Strong. He swallowed. The alcohol carried a mellow burn down his throat.

“Well. . . ,” he said.

“ ‘Well’, what?” Kervin asked.

“I decided something.”

“What’s that?” Kervin asked.

“You’re not a bad bartender.”

“Thanks. I mainly do it for the cheap drinks.” Kervin pulled out another K-Tram brand glass, poured himself a drink, raised it. “Cheers,” said.

“Salud!” Eric offered, feeling a little drunk.

They drank their shots and slammed them down hard on the wooden bar. A second later they heard another crash. This one muffled. Outside. There was rumble in the ground—a trembling bass like the sound of car radios cranked through custom rides that were pervasive throughout California. But this was no radio. A rushing kind of sound whirled outside, like the wind of a distant storm. And something else, the high-pitched whine of a wounded cat, or maybe a crying baby.

Eric and Kervin both knew, but they didn’t say anything. They moved. Eric grabbed his book. Kervin hopped on the bar and pushed himself over the top.

In a second, everyone inside was outside. Still saying nothing. They watched the red plume in the sky. Eric heard a sound of streaking in the air, almost like a plane overhead, but it was different. Thunderous.

For a second no one said anything. They just stood there with that kind of anxious, tight-knuckled energy that came with the knowledge that their home was burning.

“Fire and air,” Eric said.

“What?” Kervin said, indignant. Almost offended, but it didn’t last. “They found us,” he said. “Keys,” he said to one of the drinkers. The man dug in his pocket and tossed the keys to Kervin.

They ran to the two trucks that were parked outside. Everyone piling in wherever there was room. Kervin and the drinker got into the cab of a pickup. Eric jumped into the bed. They left the bar in a cloud of dust in seconds.

They floored it to the village—Eric had to use every muscle in his arms to hold on over the uneven road. He looked out over the cab and saw the ominous orange glow growing as they got closer.

They pulled up and exited the truck as if it too were burning.

The village was gone. Replaced with a flurry of motion and the insanity of fire. Some of Cooch's men lay dead or dying on the grass, rattling blood. Some of the others attacked the flames, scooping dirt by hand on the fires, trying to smother the blazes—trying desperately to save something. Some swiped and whipped at the fires with blankets and shirts, the flames flowing back and then forward, licking at their attackers.

Eric ran, calling for Amber. The blaze carried its own noise, a crazy, windswept sound, that covered everything with its own kind of madness.

Eric moved through the cacophony, looking for Amber in the soot-covered expressions of the frantic survivors, and on the faces of the dead that he passed.

He saw the father on the ground and beside him the boy Eric had thought was his son, both shot, the honed knife between them, its blade unused.

Eric ran to the Quonset hut. It was a lost cause. The lab was engulfed. The nature of the building's permanence meant it took the longest to be consumed. The flames coming off of its corrugated shell rose higher than all of the others.

Out front was Cooch, gun in hand, lying on the ground. Blood had soaked through his shirt, flames had blackened his left side. Amber was there, kneeling, cradling him against her chest, her hands blood soaked. Eric fell next to them. Feeling more helpless than ever. Anger and terror and shock fighting inside his gut. Twisting his insides. He wanted to scream and retch all at the same time, but he did neither. He watched Cooch's chest rise and fall in uneven spasms, smoke still lingering around the darkened side of his body. Eric met Cooch's eyes, dragged himself closer while Amber continued to cradle his head. As soon as Eric was close enough Cooch grabbed Eric by the shirt. Holding on, Cooch pulled himself up as far as he could, only a few inches off Amber's body, but far enough for Eric to think that Cooch was still as strong as an ox. Cooch looked at Eric close, close, close.

"Be . . . worth it," he said.

Cooch fell back down against Amber, his hand still clinging to Eric's shirt. And then he was gone.

Amber wiped tears from her face. Blood and dirt smudged her cheeks, making lines of war paint. She pulled back from Cooch gently, not saying a word, but even above the din of the chaos Eric could perceive her sniffing.

"Amber?" Eric said.

She said nothing. She looked up, suddenly alert. She lowered Cooch to the ground. She looked at his body a moment and reached down, taking something from his pants pocket and placing it into hers. She moved to Cooch's belt, unloosening the buckle.

"Amber?"

She pulled his knife and its sheath off his belt and stood up, putting the knife on her own belt.

“What are you doing?” Eric said.

Amber moved closer to the fire. Eric followed her, not sure what she was going to do next. From where Cooch’s body lay, the heat from the flames was strong. But the closer they got to the hut, it became almost unbearable.

Amber ran to the side of the burning mass. The generator was there. A trail of fire was burning the cables that once powered the equipment inside.

The heat was searing. Amber put her hands up to shield her face as she ran to the burning machine.

“Get away!” Eric shouted, trying not to look into the fire. This close it seemed as bright as the sun.

“Amber!” he called. “Amber!”

She didn’t listen. She challenged the fire and moved closer. It was then Eric saw what she was after. The two jugs of gasoline next to the generator. Amber rushed in, but pulled back from the heat. She went in again, close, and grabbed the container furthest from the fire and pulled away. She went in closer again, kicked the second jug over. She retreated from the heat, and then went forward again, this time pushing the container further from the flame.

She fell back, coughing. Her hand went to her forehead.

“Are you okay?” Eric said.

“I’m fine,” she said.

Without a thought she picked up both of the containers and carried them to the Jeep. Eric watched, stunned. He could hear her sniffing, the night hiding most of her tears despite the light from the blazes.

Kervin came up, running past the burning remains of the lab. “Amber,” he said. “Thank God.”

He and Eric watched as Amber loaded the containers into the back of the Jeep.

“What are you doing?” he said.

“We’re leaving,” Amber said. “Get everyone to the buses. I’ll meet you at the path by the mountain road.”

“Where are you—,” Kervin started. He eyed the Jeep, stopped himself. “You’re going up the mountain,” Kervin said.

“I have to,” Amber said. “I won’t leave her for them.”

“We don’t even know where they are. Or if they can find her.”

“I’m not going to give them the chance,” she said. “Go. Get everyone out of here. It’s not safe anymore.”

Eric stood through this in silence, grasping everything: the heat from the fire, the taste of whiskey in his throat, the adrenaline pumping in his heart. Amber turned to him, as if finally remembering his presence.

“Eric,” she said. “You—”

“I’m going with you,” he said.

He meant it. She only nodded once, a sign of acknowledgement. There was nothing to say. At once, they were in the Jeep and headed away. The village behind them, where it would always stay.

#

In the Jeep, Amber floored the pedal. The Jeep showed its age—the engine whined, cried for mercy, but it held. Eric looked back, the fire still burning, lighting the sky. They rode up the mountain. Eric had wanted to ask how she was, he wanted to tell her that things would be okay, but he couldn't bring himself to. So, they drove, in silence—the orange light, mercifully diminishing in the rearview mirror the further away they went.

They ended up at the trail. Amber slid the vehicle to a stop, driving it almost into the jungle itself. They got out. Amber pulled the two gas cans from the village out of the back, and pulled a third canister, this one the same faded green as the Jeep itself, from its spot at the rear of the vehicle.

“What are we doing?”

Amber took one of the jugs and put it in Eric's arms.

“We're running.”

And they did. They ran. They ran up the hills, through the jungle.

Eric's chest was burning. His lungs felt like they were pulling in liquid heat with every breath. But he wouldn't stop. He stayed with Amber, kept up, side-by-side. They ran for what seemed only like a few minutes in the fog of adrenaline and pain and sorrow.

They reached the ledge, a place Eric had once thought he'd never see again. A place that the last time he was here seemed to hold nothing but beauty and wonder. Now it was dark and stained by what he knew they were going to do.

They stood outside The Temple.

“The old woman,” Eric said, “is she still here?”

“No.”

Eric figured that meant she was at the village. He had a hope that she was with Kervin and that she had made it out . . . before.

“What are we doing?” Eric wasn't sure why he asked. He already knew.

They were going to destroy a miracle.

They stepped behind the living door, pulling back the vines. Inside, Amber took the red plastic gas can and ripped off the black spout and without a word painted the walls with gasoline in frantic, heaving movements. With every toss of the can she spewed out a desperate, guttural moan. Then, “Eric!” she said, between two of those gasping vocalizations.

He knew what she wanted. He twisted off the lid of his own can, slowly at first then more quickly as her panicked, infectious urgency overtook him.

He bailed out splash after splash along the left wall as Amber worked her way along the right. He felt a pang of shame as he doused the prehistoric inscriptions with the gas. At once he saw the inscriptions begin to darken and blend back into the rock. He felt sick in his gut, the feeling exasperated by the wrenching motion of his body as he twisted about back and forth with the container. He wanted to throw up but the adrenaline he thought was enough to keep his stomach from jerking its contents up his throat, for now.

In short time, they worked to the back of the cave, to Scarlet's cradle. Which was once a place of reverence, now desecrated—a one-time altar of near-worship, now soon to be an altar of sacrifice.

The bitter smell of gas mixed with the fragrance of the flowers creating a disgusting stench that added to the mayhem in Eric's gut. The phrase *sickly sweet* flashed in his head and at once made perfect sense. He pushed it aside.

Amber stood a moment in front of the wall of flowers, in front of *her*.

"Are you sure?" he said.

"I'm sure," Amber lifted the gas can, threw the last of its contents over Scarlet. Eric joined her, raising his own container, not wanting this burden to be hers alone. It was almost purely symbolic as his container was almost empty. Amber of course had the foresight, even under these circumstances, to retain enough of the fluid to do the job.

"We should hurry," she said.

Outside the entrance, she took the Jeep's extra gas can and emptied it over the outside of the cave, drenching the veil of tetrastigma vines.

Eric stood, breathing hard, sure he was going to get sick here and now, but he didn't. He and Amber only looked at one another.

There were voices in the jungle. Without seeing, they both knew, it was the Americans.

"Amber. . .," Eric said, urgency rising in his voice.

The disembodied voices grew, their urgency matching Eric's own.

Amber pulled Cooch's knife from her belt. She pulled something from her pocket—the steel rod Cooch had used to start a cooking fire. She struck the back of the knife to the steel. A spark flew off, disappeared.

The voices were closer, more numerous. Amber hit the steel over and over again, as the voices moved in on them.

Eric could see the men coming through the forest, their gray figures moving through the jungle.

“We have to go,” he said.

“Not yet,” Amber said.

Eric watched her scraping the steel over the small pool of gasoline. Eric could smell it on the wind.

“We have to go!”

“No!” Amber said as she brought the knife down again and again, harder and harder as if she wanted to hurt the stone, to punish it for not complying, for not—

A spark issued off the stone. It did not ignite. But Amber opened her mouth in success. She scraped it again, there was no spark with the first strike, but there was from the second. The small star flew off the steel and found the pool. The spark started in its mark and created a flame, it spread undramatically over the top of the pool, seeming at first to float above the surface of the liquid before enveloping it. Then—finally—in a moment of fulfillment, the flame shot across the dripping lines of gasoline that trailed up the vines and beyond into the space of The Temple. The fire flowed back into the recesses of the cave. It climbed the walls and reignited the old candles that ran along its side, tunneling all the way back to Scarlet herself.

Eric touched her arm. Amber stood up, they stepped back together. Eric turned. He could see more of the men coming behind them. Eric and Amber ran into the jungle, sticking close to the wall of the ledge. They turned and watched the burning Temple. The men rushed out of the jungle, not far from where they were crouched. They had guns in their hands—more of those awful automatic rifles Eric had seen in the crates back at what was, for a brief time, his lab. Eric saw the blond man with the Egyptian eye in the lead. He and the others could only watch the fire burn. Eric hoped they felt something like Amber and the villagers must have felt as they watched their homes burn, but something about the man's demeanor told Eric that was asking too much. There was no such justice in the world, he thought. The blond man lowered his rifle, barked something Eric couldn't hear at his men and they retreated back to the jungle as quickly as they had emerged.

#

Eric and Amber had waited until they were sure the men had moved off. Amber had wanted to give them a far enough lead, which Eric thought was a good enough idea. When they thought they were clear, they moved back down the mountain along a different route, that only Amber could see. Even now, after all that had happened, she could still find her way. She was a fighter. Eric knew it. Had always known it.

Somehow they made it to back to the Jeep. Eric wondered if they had enough gas to get back, but, he decided, it probably didn't matter. Amber likely knew of another way. Amber: Queen of the jungle.

They spied the Jeep through the jungle's edge. They ran for it. Amber did her little trick and jumped over the door. Eric thought about attempting this and compromised: he threw his

satchel over the door. His constant companion, the Lermontov spilled out the top onto the seat. He pulled on the creaky old door to open it when a sound got his attention. Eric looked up and saw the boy from the village. The strange, quiet boy who, as far as Eric knew, hadn't—or perhaps couldn't—speak a single word.

Amber stopped and looked at Eric. “What are you . . . ,” Amber trailed off. She saw Eric's gaze. She followed it and saw the boy.

“Hey, pal,” Eric said in his least threatening voice. Something about the boy made Eric think he would scare easy, taking off at the first sign of trouble. He was right.

“Eric,” Amber said, a stiff directness in her voice.

“Hold on,” Eric asked. Then he heard it—the crunching sound of footsteps on the jungle floor. He had moved his eyes—slightly—Amber's way. Just slightly. But when he turned them back the boy was gone. Amber was still, frozen, and Eric felt the hair in his neck tingle.

“Hold it,” a voice behind Eric said.

Amber's expression said the rest. Eric heard the presence of the voice's owner grow closer, but Eric didn't move, not yet.

“Turn around,” the man said.

Eric could almost hear the man's breathing as he got closer. He looked at Amber, she must have seen something in his eyes, because she shook her head, almost imperceptibly, maybe only with her eyes, in fact.

“Do it, now,” the voice said.

He was almost on top of Eric, or Eric thought so at least. It wasn't until Eric felt a hand on his shoulder that he knew, but by then it was too late. In an instant it was over. Before even

Eric knew what had happened, he was turned around, the Lermontov in his hand, and the man on the ground. It was one of the blond man's men, the African-American man Eric had seen on the pass after the accident. The man was on the ground, down and out. Eric turned to Amber, her face mirroring his emotions. Her face was slack, her mouth an O.

“What did you do?” she finally said.

“I don't know,” Eric said. He meant it.

Amber still had the face of surprise and shock. It was only the threat of other voices that returned her to herself.

“We have to go,” she said. It was not a request.

Eric didn't argue. He had the book in his hand. It felt heavy. And for the first time he wanted nothing to do with it. He let it fall from his hands. It landed on the ground. The other voices neared. Eric and Amber decided not to wait to explain themselves. They ran deeper into the jungle, away from the voices, leaving the Jeep, and the mountain, behind.

They made their way through and ended up on the opposite side of the valley, away from the village, and Eric found himself back at the same mountain road he'd taken to get to this place.

When they found the road, they stayed back, hugging the edge of the jungle and waiting. By now it was almost dawn. Eric couldn't wait for it to come. They had been forced to watch the red sky over the village on the other side of the valley, and Eric thought, rightly, that the morning sun would be able to cast away the sight. They didn't have to wait long. Two lights came up the lonely road pulling a large shape behind them.

Amber stepped out onto the road and waved her arms. Eric felt a twinge of concern as the shape moved closer, hoping that it wasn't some trick of the company men they'd been evading this whole time.

The bus rolled to a stop and the door worked itself open. It wasn't until Eric saw the face of Kervin behind the wheel (he was apparently a man of many hats) that he let his guard come down.

"All aboard," Kervin said with his usual flare.

Eric, standing behind Amber, heard her release an amused, if not exhausted, breath. Kervin simply nodded to them both as they entered, smiling the whole time.

Eric and Amber collapsed onto one of the benches. Everyone was quiet. Spent. But there was a look of relief on their faces.

It was then the radio squawked. A pulsing, beeping static came over the channel. Kervin shut it off, with a swipe to the panel on its front. He announced something in Spanish and then touched the index and middle fingers of his right hand to his lips and brought it down on a small, novelty picture of Jesus Christ stuck to the radio casing. The colors of the photo were sun-bleached and fading. Christ's hair had turned from its dark brown into a pinkish red. His eyes were upturned, looking toward the corner of the photo, and beyond to something only he could see. Eric looked around the cabin and took stock of his fellow passengers. His fellow survivors.

Across the aisle and a seat up from him Eric saw the sad woman from The Temple. She had made it after all. She turned to him, her sad eyes changed, a smile on her thick brown cheeks. Eric smiled back. The woman seemed to nod slightly, pleasantly, and looked forward, anticipating the journey.

The bus's engine rattled. Somewhere underneath the driveshaft was spinning, it's vibrations rippling through the floorboards.

He looked down and saw it and relived that moment of his youth.

It was as fresh in his mind as ever, that morning so many years ago. When he knew he loved her. And he let the world know, in his way, scratching it onto the back of the bus's metal seat with the house key his father had given him.

Now, he traced the forms with his fingertips. Some marks were shallow, barely perceptible. The last leg of the *m*, the round swoop of the *b*, but they were still there. The lines awkward and uneven on account of the angle from which they were originally made (the + at such an unfortunate degree looked more like an *x*) and it was all in a clearly childlike scrawl, but they *were* there.

Amber x Eric

He looked over to her and she was already looking right at him. Into him. Through him. And despite the exhaustion, and the mud, and the blood, he saw—really saw—her. She was as she always was to him. Beautiful.

Eric, at the window, looked out. And saw the mute boy outside at the edge of the jungle. Eric saw something in the boy's hand. It was large and cumbersome against the boy's small frame. It was the book. The Lermontov. The bus pulled away, leaving the boy by the side of the pass. The boy made no attempt to move toward the bus. He merely watched. Eric could only bend his lips into something like a smile.

“Are you sorry you came?” Amber asked. Her eyes growing heavy, closed. Her voice slipping, trailed.

“No,” Eric said. “I’m sorry I took so long.”

Saying nothing, Amber put her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes. The sky was growing red. Sunrise coming faster than he expected.

Welcome to the Red Valley, he thought.

He sat there and felt her—the warmth of her. The world around them died out. The engine, the people, all of it was sucked away. He closed his eyes. He rested his head gently on hers. And he heard no sound. There was no sound. There was nothing but the heat.

#

THE GOOD SAMARITAN

It's cold, the kind of weather where everything seems affected. Even the light seems different, somehow diffused as it passes through the thick, quilted northern skies. Ashley waddles along the sidewalk. She's covered head to toe in layers of bright pink and girly purples—Technicolor armor against the harsh cold around her—all of it lovingly laid out by her mother that very morning. When Ashley complained her mother said *It's better to have it and not need it*. Then her mom followed up with her famous line: *Always be prepared*. Well, Ashley has plenty of it. So much so that she looks like an overstuffed jellybean. Cotton candy flavored.

Slowly, Ashley moves through the cold, passing the dead, leafless trees now just crooked wooden spires reaching up towards the sheet of white that blankets the sky from end to end. She seems lost, even though she's walked this street a hundred times, past the same bare trees and the same track housing that you find all over this part of Ohio and especially here in Milton. Ashley knows once she's past the old rec center she's just a few blocks from her house and everyone in it. Alone, the jellybean waddles on.

#

Sam stands outside the rec center, at the corner of El Ray and Carpenter. He stamps out the spent remains of a cigarette. Immediately, he reaches down into the backpack at his feet and removes a half-full pack of smokes. He pulls out another butt, lights up, and stuffs the pack into his back pocket. He shivers from the cold, making him pull awkward, nervous-looking puffs. At sixteen Sam looks older than most boys his age. Sometimes he even thinks he feels older too. And other times—now, for instance—he wishes he didn't. Right now, he wishes he could just act his age, just be a kid again, when a warm hug from Mom could smother all the problems, all the

skinned knees, all the hurt feelings, and all the bad dreams. But he knows it's too late. Things change. People die. And, after all, he's already cold.

Sam watches the silent building, pacing impatiently, until a group of people emerge from the double doors, pulling their jackets and collars up against the biting cold. The group—*Probably the family*, he thinks—walks in tandem around a handsome young man. All the adult men, save one, wear the hand-me-down uniform of the migrant worker—faded flannel and old denim. The knees are worn from their original blue to an off white color. Sam's heard stories about the workers. Everyone in Milton has. They come in by the busload every spring from Mexico or Guatemala or some Spanish speaking country, he's not sure which. They work the big corporate farms at the edge of town, all owned by the same corporation. During winter, the workers that don't get bussed back out work the neighborhoods doing odd jobs and yard work. Rumor is the town elders tell the cops to let just enough of them stay at the end of the season so that the yards stay clean and the driveways shoveled. Life in a small town.

Sam watches the emerging congregation closely—one of the men stands out from the rest. He wears a cream cowboy hat and is dressed in what looks like a brand new pair of jeans. *Definitely the father*, Sam thinks. The man certainly looks the part, dressed in all his patriarchal finery, complete with oversized belt buckle. The man is machismo incarnate. On another day Sam would surely have laughed, but not today. Today he doesn't feel much like laughing.

Several children mingle in the crowd. A couple of the boys look like tiny versions of the adults, complete in miniature flannels. The children surround the women who in turn surround the handsome young man. Sam wonders which one, if any, is the young man's mom. For a

second he doesn't think she had the nerve to show, but he keeps looking and he makes her—one of the women has a detached, doe eyed look on her face.

“Bingo,” he says.

Something tells Sam to look away. He does and meets eyes with the surrounded young man—he wears a single earring in his right ear. The boy looks at Sam and Sam looks back. There's something in the boy's eyes. Is it resignation? Sam thinks so.

“Sucker,” Sam says.

Even surrounded, the young man folds his arms tightly, as if he's consoling himself. As if he's alone in a crowd of his own family. Sam tosses the end of another cigarette onto the ground, reaches for a new one. As he lights up he sees a man in black step out from behind the throng—he is Father Keith. Sam fixes on the man. The women in the group surround the kindly looking Father and kiss his hands gratefully, as if he were the pope. The display sends a shiver up Sam's spine.

“Sam,” a tiny voice calls out.

He turns—it's the jellybean. “Ashley,” he says. “What are you doing here?”

“Took the long way home.”

“Barb doesn't know?” he asks.

She shakes her head and shoulders as one, barely able to move her neck from the thick scarf below her red cheeks. “She won't notice. All she does is watch the stupid news a lot,” Ashley complains.

“God bless the red states,” Sam says.

Ashley looks at him, confused.

“Never mind,” he says.

Ashley nods in agreement.

“Where’s Nick?” he asks.

She shrugs, “He doesn’t play with me anymore.”

“Me neither,” Sam says.

“Are you guys mad at each other?”

Her question surprises Sam. “Not exactly—you’re too young to understand.”

“No, I’m not. I got an A+ on my paper about my daddy’s work. My teacher gave me four stars too,” Ashley says proudly.

“Exactly.” Sam takes a drag.

Ashley looks down and sees the crumpled remains of several butts on the sidewalk.

“What are you doing?” she asks. “Are you going to help Father Keith at the center again?”

Sam ponders a moment as he stares across the way. “No,” he says. “Just taking the long way home too.”

Ashley looks over to the family as they escort the handsome boy to a bright white van idling at the curb—a steady stream of cottony white steam pours out of the tail pipe. A man and a woman with almost unnaturally wide smiles step out of the van to meet the young man and his family. The antiseptic white teeth behind the rictus grins of the strangers are the same color as their van. Sam and Ashley watch as the family puts the boy inside, and closes the door. On the side of the van door are a logo and some lettering that reads: *The Good Samaritan Group*

“Rebuilding today’s youths.” Then at the bottom in smaller letters: *A Republicorp Enterprise.*

The white dove logo above the words and the Jesus fish icon on the bumper tell the rest.

“Man down,” Sam says to himself, taking another long pull from his cigarette. He and Ashley watch the van drive off, taking the handsome young man with it.

“Where do they take them?” Ashley asks.

“Nowhere good,” Sam says.

“Why would they do that?” Ashley asks.

“Because they’re not good people.”

Ashley’s eyes widen at the thought. She turns to Sam. “I heard you guys fighting,” she confesses. “You and Nick. I don’t want Nick to go somewhere bad,” she says pitifully.

“Don’t worry,” he says. “He won’t.”

Sam and Ashley continue to watch as the head honcho in the cowboy hat gestures to the men in the old flannel. Clearly subordinates, the other men and a few children react instantly and move over to an old work truck at the end of the block. The truck is loaded down with tools and pallets of construction supplies. Two young boys in mini-flannel, eager to help, unload the supplies off the truck, their breath visible in the air as they pull and maneuver boxes and tools. Meanwhile, the man in the cowboy hat shakes hands with Father Keith, and then loads up the rest of the children and the women into another truck parked on the street. Moments later they too drive away leaving Father Keith and the workers outside.

From across the street, Sam and Ashley watch as Father Keith talks to one of the men and motions over to the building. The man calls out in Spanish to one of the boys who nods his head

in agreement. The boy runs to the work truck, and instantly begins unloading 2x4's and more boxes. The boy hauls the supplies inside the building with Father Keith right behind him.

“Hey Ash, do me a favor,” Sam says.

She looks at him, waiting.

“Go home and tell Nick something for me. Tell him I wish things . . . tell him I'm sorry. Okay?”

She nods, accepting.

“For everything,” he adds. Sam throws his cigarette down on the sidewalk as if he wants it to feel the hit. He picks up his overstuffed backpack and slings it over his right shoulder.

Ashley looks at the full bag. “You're not going somewhere bad, are you?” she asks.

“Not anymore,” he says.

She looks at him—a confused expression on her face.

“Get home, Ash. Don't forget. Get out of here.”

She turns to leave, lowers her head, stops. “Bye, Sammy,” she says before she shuffles off around the corner as fast as her little legs can take her.

#

Inside, the rec center is a maze of plastic sheeting and piles of wood and 4x8 sheets of drywall. The Father leads the boy through the unlit halls and into his office. It's the only room that doesn't seem to be under construction, although several stacked boxes sit inside. Once inside, the boy drops off his payload and rushes out to get more. Alone in the room, Father Keith looks outside the window and sees the rest of the workers busying themselves with their tasks. One of the men fires up a noisy, gas powered leaf blower. A pleased look crosses the Father's

face. He watches the eager young boy grab another armload of supplies off the truck and rush back towards the doors. Father Keith moves to the stack of boxes and pushes the top one over spilling a dozen colored tiles out onto the floor. The boy enters and Father Keith feigns a look of anger and makes an exasperated sound. At once, the boy falls to his knees to pick up the mess while Father Keith's face drops its façade. He watches intently as the boy crawls on all fours, scrambling to gather the pieces of several cracked tiles. As the boy moves, Father Keith's eyes fall to all the wrong places. He seems to be studying the boy, savoring every last detail. Again, he looks out the window and sees the men still working outside. Slowly, he circles the boy, moves towards the door. The boy turns and looks at him. Right at him. The Father flashes a disarming smile and a little nod, and the boy returns to his work. The Father stays focused on the boy, watching as the child crawls on the ground. At once, the Father thinks a million thoughts and only a few protests. His bottom lip quivers nervously, then stills into a scar of a smile..

Finished with his task, the boy rises. "More," he says in a thick accent.

"What?" Father Keith asks, surprised.

"More," the boy says as he points to the stack of boxes.

"Oh, of course," Father Keith says. He steps from the door, allowing the boy to pass.

Alone, the Father removes a handkerchief from his pocket and dabs at his red upper lip.

#

In the main lobby, the boy sees several of the plastic sheets blowing in the breeze. The boy sniffs the air. He pulls back the tarpaulin flap for a closer look and sees an open window letting in the ice-cold wind. Satisfied, the boy runs out the main doors and back to the truck for another load of supplies.

#

Inside his office the Father opens a small package on his desk. Inside are dozens of pamphlets, each one has *The Good Samaritan* written on the front. The Father places the package on his desk when a sound comes from the hallway. He turns and sticks his head out the door.

Curious, he peers out into the darkened corridor.

“Hello,” he calls out, waits. Nothing.

He moves down the hallway. About midway, he passes a storage closet, slightly ajar. He eyes the door, reaches out for the knob, and pulls open the door—it’s empty.

The old man exhales at the sight of the empty closet. He turns back to his office, falls to the ground. His left leg is useless. A shock of pain grasps his calf, his Achilles tendon feels as if it’s rolled up like a venetian blind.

On the ground, Father Keith turns. In the unlit hall all he sees is the faint outline of a black-gloved hand holding a small carpenter’s knife. From the darkness, a thin, hollow voice calls out to him. “Are you a good person?” the voice asks plainly.

#

Outside, the snow blower roars while the eager boy pulls on the double doors—they’re locked. The boy gently places the supplies on the ground and presses his face against the hazy glass, trying to look in. He knocks, but the noise of the leaf blower dulls his sounds.

#

Father Keith crawls down the hallway toward his office. He turns back—the outline stands in the shadows, watching. Finally inside his office, the Father drags himself towards his desk, struggling for every inch. From the floor, Father Keith reaches up to the phone on his desk,

but he can't make it. Desperate, he yanks on the cord hanging over the back of the desk, bringing the phone and the box of pamphlets raining down on him. He dials three digits and puts the phone to his ear—it's dead.

“Lord . . . forgive me,” the Father begs.

#

Outside, the eager young boy waits next to a growing stack of supplies. He walks around the building to the open window. He thinks about climbing in, but it's too high. He moves further along the wall, finds a side-door unlocked. The boy walks in.

“Señor,” he calls out.

The Father's office door is closed, cutting off any hope of ambient light from entering the corridor. In the dark the boy fumbles for a switch on the wall, but he slips on something wet. Somehow, he catches himself on the wall and makes it to the light switch, but it doesn't work. Finally at the office door, the boy turns the knob. He pushes open the door and sees it—the lifeless body of Father Keith tarred in blood and feathered with pamphlets, all of which read the same thing: *The Good Samaritan*. The boy screams. He tries to run, but he slips again, this time falling into the pool of blood that covers the floor. His eyes widen in horror as he scurries down the corridor covered in the Father's blood. He runs back out the side door and around the front, towards the rest of the workers. As he tears out of the building he steps on the butt of a still lit cigarette smoldering on the ground.

#

Ashley pushes open the front door of her house. She starts removing her many layers of winter clothing, hanging her scarf, hat, and thick coat on the rack along the wall. The inside of

the house is quiet, save for a droning sound from the living room. Ashley follows the noise to a buzzing TV and two talking heads blathering on the local news station about “media bias” and “liberal agendas”. She looks down. Something is catching her eye—it’s a dark-red spot on the floor. It looks like blood. She reaches down and touches it with her thick glove, removing the spot as it seeps into the fibers of the fabric.

“Nick,” she calls out. “Hello?” No response. Ashley goes down the narrow hall, past the living room. Along the wall, a dozen framed photos hang—the usual *mélange* of childhood memories and family vacations. Ashley stops and focuses on one picture in particular—her on the knee of a man in uniform, a police officer, her father. After a moment, she goes to a closed door. She reaches out for the handle when a sound rustles in the hallway behind her.

“Ashley,” a voice says.

Startled, she jumps around and sees her brother Nick, dressed all in black. His skin is pale and his face is thin and gaunt.

“Where were you,” Ashley says.

“In the bathroom,” he says.

“Where’s Mom?” She asks.

Nick shrugs and stands there, fidgeting impatiently, as if waiting for something.

“Ashley?” a voice calls down from upstairs. Ashley turns and sees her mom, Barbara, coming down the stairs. Barbara runs a towel through her long, brown hair, still wet from a recent bath.

“Hi, Angel,” Barbara says, surprising Ashley with the warmth in her voice. “Dinner will be ready soon.”

Inside the kitchen a cutting board and knife are laid out next to a pile of diced carrots and celery. Nearby, a pot of water boils away into rising steam. Ashley sits at the table—finally free of the layers of winter gear—contentedly coloring on the pages of a paint-by-numbers coloring book. Barbara washes more vegetables in the sink, occasionally looking up over the counter to see the news on the TV in the other room. On the screen is footage of a rocket lifting off, while underneath a story goes by on the ticker about a series of bus explosions in Nicaragua—“at least two Americans killed.”

Outside the house, sirens race by. Ashley turns excited. She goes back to the TV, eager. The sounds of the rockets’ engines silence as the screen goes black. From the kitchen, Barbara holds the remote in her hand.

“Ashley, go get your brother, will you?” Barbara asks. “Tell him to come set the table.”

“I want to see if they talk about Daddy on TV,” Ashley says.

“You know Daddy is away on business. Now do as I say, get your brother.”

Outside Nick’s room, Ashley reaches for the doorknob. She hears Nick inside, talking. She drops to the floor and puts her ear to the space between the bottom of the door and the floor, trying to listen in.

“. . . I didn’t,” a muffled voice declares, not Nick’s. “We got to go,” the voice adds.

Unable to control herself, Ashley throws open the door and bursts in, seeing Nick and Sam.

“No, you can’t go, Nick. You can’t,” she pleads.

“Ashley, be quiet!” Nick says.

“Now or never, Nick” Sam urges.

“You can’t go,” Ashley says and latches on to Nick’s leg as only a child can.

“Ashley, stop. Let go,” Nick says.

“No!” Ashley cries.

“What’s going on here?” Barbara’s voice calls out from the door.

“We’re leaving,” Sam says, stepping forward, undeterred by Barbara’s sudden appearance.

“Nick, what’s going on?” Barbara asks again.

“Now you’re finally concerned,” Sam says.

“You can’t understand, Mom,” Nick says, speaking up. “You don’t know how things are.”

Barbara steels herself, sighs. Her jaw tightens. The muscles in her cheek flex. “Nick, you’re just . . . confused. We can get you help. Both of you,” she says.

“There’s nothing wrong with us, Barbara,” Sam says.

“It’s because of Father Keith, right?”

For a moment the room falls silent as they consider a moment, but quickly Barbara comes back. “I know you’re both scared . . . and angry and . . . hurt. And whatever we need to do, we’ll do it. But Nick, this isn’t the way. You can’t leave us,” Barbara says, her voice taking on a soothing, motherly air. For a moment she seems to be getting through to them, but that moment also passes.

“It’s too late for that,” Sam says. “He’s dead.” Barbara’s spell is clearly broken. Her brow frowns, locks into place.

“Nick?” Sam says.

“No—it’s not too late. My daddy can help,” Ashley jumps in, desperate to do something.

“Sam. If you really care about him just think about this.”

Sam’s eyes well with tears. “I only went to tell him that if he ever hurt anyone else again, I’d stop him. I didn’t care if he tried to send me away, too.” Sam’s face turns pale and his eyes vacant as he remembers what happened next. “I saw him there, on the floor. I panicked. I was only trying to stop him from hurting anyone else. I swear.” An eye of calm seems to form around Sam as he reconciles the awful memory in his mind. “I have to go,” he says simply.

“No, Sammy,” Ashley commands.

“They won’t believe me. They’ll know I was there. I have to go,” Sam says, his calm slowly turning into disbelief. “I have to go.”

“Go then,” Barbara says, surprising all. “But Nick stays.”

“What? No,” Nick protests. “I’m not letting you go alone,” he says to Sam.

“She’s right,” Sam admits.

“What?” Nick says.

“I have to go. Just me,” Sam says.

“Go,” Barbara says. “Don’t tell us where. You weren’t here tonight.”

Tired and defeated Nick locks eyes with Sam. “Sam . . .”

“I’ll be back,” Sam promises. “I’m sorry—for everything.”

“Bye, Sammy,” Ashley says weakly.

Sam hops out the window and takes a final, accusing look back at Barbara before running off, out of sight. Instantly, Nick falls on his bed in tears and writhes into his sheets.

“Come on, Ashley,” Barbara says.

“But . . .” says Ashley, confused.

Barbara leads Ashley out. Ashley watches, stunned, as Barbara goes back to the cutting block and begins chopping vegetables. Ashley watches, even more confused.

“Daddy will be home soon. Everything will be fine,” Barbara says, unconvincingly. Suddenly, Barbara breaks down, crying. “I cut my finger,” she says blankly. In a daze, she leaves the kitchen and walks up the stairs. Ashley moves to the cutting board and sees a light smear of blood on the blade.

#

Inside the darkened master bedroom, Barbara opens a drawer at the nightstand next to the bed. She removes something from the drawer, but it’s indistinguishable in the dark. Suddenly, her face lights up as she brings the flame of a lighter up to a cigarette dangling from her mouth. She pulls a long drag and holds it in for an eternity. Finally exhaling, she turns on a small lamp that sits on the night table. She looks down into the open nightstand drawer and sees something else—it’s a pamphlet for The Good Samaritan Group. She takes another long drag and pulls out the cheap booklet, there’s a smear of blood under her finger. She looks at the fresh stain on the cover. She turns over the pamphlet and dials a phone number written on the back.

“Hello,” she says. “Yes. I think—” Barbara looks at the phone, confused. The line is dead.

“Mommy,” Ashley says gently. Barbara looks over and sees Ashley standing in the doorway. Her thin voice calls out to Barbara and asks, “Are you a good person?”

#

THE LAST TRADE

The desert heat wore on Karl's skin. It was as if the sun were a steam iron on his flesh. He'd been walking for hours. At least he hoped he had. He was willing the sun to set and to bring the cool desert winds he'd read about as a child. About all those books on the first settlers, the frontiersman, about whole families who had made the voyage across the Atlantic, just as he and his own family had done when he was still a boy. Who packed up their lives in covered wagons and pushed further and further west. And here Karl was almost literally in their footsteps. Moving west.

He'd passed the debris of an old wagon a while back. It was nothing but a rusted out rear axle, scoured to oblivion by years of shifting desert sands. The wood had long turned to dust, but Karl recognized the original shape of the metal. Karl was the son of a master smith, but he had given up all claims to the family business when he left Ohio to be here, out west, with his brother Jacob. That had always been Karl's charge, to carry on the family legacy. He had been held to different standards than his brother, despite being the younger. In truth Karl resented his brother for it. At times, it seemed, resentment was just another part of the family legacy.

It had been at least five hours since he'd awoken on the desert floor alone, without water, his jaw and head thrumming with pain and the previous night's rotgut whiskey still on his tongue. God, what had happened? He couldn't remember for certain. He only knew that she was a part of it. Theodora. He remembered her blue dress. He remembered music, dancing, and then darkness and heat. He awoke on the desert floor. The night wind and the unchanging hardpan hid any hope of following a trail back to town. Karl had only been in Nevada a few weeks, and his brother knew he was still unfamiliar with the terrain.

The cracks on the hardpan looked like maps to nowhere (or maybe everywhere) and Karl followed them blindly, hoping they would lead him out of this place, away from the stifling heat.

On a childhood dare he and his brother had once snuck into a silver mine. Inside they thought they had felt true heat. Another time, not long after the family had come to America, Karl had been allowed to accompany his father to the laundry factory where his mother had been working at the time. One of the large machines, a giant press, had been shut down and his mother, ever the entrepreneur, spoke up proudly about her husband's abilities. It wasn't until years later that Karl realized it was an early occurrence of his being groomed for succession. His brother had been so jealous, but if he had known his father's designs on Karl he might not have thrown such a tantrum. They had always been so competitive. One always wanted what the other had. So they shared. And so they both always got half as much as they wanted. His mother had told him of the conditions on the factory floor, of the enormous chomping metal presses and the jets of steam. Inside it was all noise and heat. Here, now it was silent. There was no wind through the trees. No trees at all. And no chomping machinery. Just the heat. Real heat. It was all Karl could think of. He felt it escaping the cuts of his clothing in waves. His collar felt like a steaming cauldron around his neck, but as much as he wanted to he knew that if he took off his clothes the sun on his raw skin would sap his strength even faster. Karl had his jacket on his shoulder, his waistcoat open, the bow tie hanging loose around his neck. He had the look of a man coming home from a long day's work, which he supposed was true.

The suit he wore had been his grandfather's. The last one he bought before his death in '79. It was English cut and old fashioned for the time, but still a fine suit. It had never fit Karl's poppa, but not much ever did when it came to Klaus Trammel. A stern man. Karl could never

relate to him. They never saw eye to eye. That was partially why Karl left Ohio. That and the flood.

Karl still had his bowler hat on his head and he was thankful for it. The small scarlet red feather that stuck out at a jaunty angle was likewise still in place. Karl's hair had already started thinning. He was not as young as he used to be (although that can be said of anyone). He knew he had to keep going. It was his way, his family's way. Moving ever forward. It was a standard that had always been expected of him. It was the only way. Besides, he was not ready to die. Especially not out here. He had not even sired any children. No, this would not be his end, could not. So Karl moved forward because forward was all he knew. Over the next hill. And the next dune. And the next, with no end in sight.

Karl stopped and pulled the hat from his head. He tried to fan himself with it. When that didn't work he fluttered his waistcoat just to feel a breeze; the brass buttons caught the light of the sun. He pulled a monogrammed pocket square from his jacket and wiped his hands, brow, his neck which he could feel reddening with every minute of exposure. Karl put his head back and twisted the pocket square, ringing it out over his mouth, squeezing out a few drops of perspiration. A small sore on his lip burned as he tasted his own salt. On the surface of his tongue each precious, sour drop offered only the slightest clinical relief. He clenched the square in his palm, hoping to maybe scavenge another drop further down the line. It was then that he saw a cloud on the horizon. Rushing toward him. A sound followed. It was a horse, kicking up the scant sand from the hardpan. The beast ran by, keeping its distance, but close enough that he could see it was rider-less. The horse was fully saddled—Karl saw the loose stirrups swinging free as the animal rode hell-bent for a new horizon. It reminded him of a moving picture he'd

seen on the boardwalk in one of the nickelodeon theaters in New York before the family moved to Ohio. He'd read that some Indians believed a spirit horse would take them to the next world, but Karl didn't believe such things, although he wasn't sure if it was exactly real either, until the trail of dust wafted by. That was real enough. It got in his eyes, he tasted it in his mouth. He considered chasing the beast, but thought better of it. The animal was in a full trot and he knew he had no hope. It was simply too fast. So he watched it go. As it went he thought of Theodora and his brother's jealousy. He watched the horse's trail fade into nothing. Karl switched his jacket to his other shoulder and moved on. To where? He did not know. He knew of no towns that lay ahead. Nor any way station or shelter of any kind. All that he did know was that without water he would surely die.

#

He walked for what felt like miles. His strength was fading with every step. He could feel the grains of sand grinding against the blistered flesh inside his old boots. Sand was everywhere—its featureless monotony was broken only by a scorched patch a few yards ahead. He approached and saw it was the remains of a campfire. Definitely, yes, a fire made by the hand of man. He thought perhaps the horse belonged to this mysterious Prometheus. Whoever it had been, at least he wasn't alone.

Despite the unsettling nature of the missing rider Karl tried to take it as a good sign: there had been others this way. Maybe he wasn't left to die out here at all. Maybe his brother meant only to teach him a lesson. Perhaps it was just a prank, like when they were children. Whatever the reason it was little comfort in the here and now.

He remembered being lost in the woods as a boy. It wasn't until well after night that his poppa had found him. Home hadn't been so far away. Just over the next ridge. The next day Momma took him outside and pointed to three trees in the forest, taller than all the others. She told him to look at the shape they made and remember. *Look homeward, Angel. And remember* she had said then. He tried to imagine them now through the miles, into his first home. It was difficult to see. He was the first of his family to come into manhood an American. But some part of him always felt kinship with the old country. Karl thought of his momma stirring a pot of stew and felt the shadow of a smile trying to force its way up through his muscles—it hurt to do so. His lips were cracked like old paper mache, his skin pale and dry like unnourished leather. The meat on his neck steamed from the fleeing heat in his collar. He passed by the remains of the old fire and some pang from inside told him he was on the right path, even though there was no such thing before him. Only the cracking senselessness of the desert's skin beneath his feet.

Look homeward, Angel. And remember.

#

The few dunes and hills of this place were at his back now, the only sure sign of his progress, if that was the right word. He had been looking down at his feet for some time. When he looked up he saw something new in the distance. A shadow? A speck of dirt in his eye? Just a mirage? No, it was real, as sure as the sun in the sky. How far was it? One mile? Two? It was impossible to tell, but it was there. He moved in slow, lurching steps. His head seemed to swim behind his eyes. His vision was untrustworthy. He fell to his knees. He could feel his raw skin on the desert floor and he knew he'd finally ruined his suit. Karl got up, tried to stay that way. It grew harder to do so with every step, but the shadow was closer now, yes, definitely closer. He

saw the ghost of a child shimmer in the waves of heat before his body betrayed him and his mind withdrew.

#

Karl dreamt of the desert. Even in sleep he was trapped there, but this time it was different, cooler. He was there standing. His suit felt brand new on his body. Again, he saw the rider-less horse in the distance, but it too was different. The stirrups and saddle were gone and Theodora was on its back, with nothing but a thin lead to steer the animal. He tried to call her name but his throat was dry and his voice hollow. He couldn't make a sound. He threw up his arms. He kicked and waved, but she rode by on the animal at a full gallop and never looked his way. As she passed he saw where she was going: a wall of water was bearing down on them.

He watched as Theodora rode headlong into the charging wave.

When Karl awoke the sun was gone and a breeze really had come onto the land. He saw a dark young boy looking down at him. Behind the boy he saw an old man, maybe the oldest Karl had ever seen. He could have been from one of those paintings in the curio shops back in Ohio. The old man had long gray hair hanging down around his shoulders. Two worn, dark feathers mingled among the strands. The old Indian was wearing a waistcoat not unlike the one Karl had on, except the old man's was moth-eaten and dusted with desert sand. It hung open, Karl noticed, and was without buttons.

"Water," Karl said. His tongue felt like a bloated, foreign husk in his mouth. The boy only shook his head. No water. Karl struggled to sit up. His head was still swimming.

"Slow," the boy said.

Karl was surprised to hear English from the boy's mouth.

“How long have I slept?” Karl asked.

“Long,” the boy said.

“You have no water?” Karl said.

“No water,” the boy said.

Karl sat there, holding his hand to his head.

“Do you have a motorcar?” the boy asked.

“What?” Karl said. He thought he must have misheard.

“Grandfather wanted to ride one.”

“No motorcar. Sorry,” Karl said. He didn’t want to talk, but it worked the pitiful saliva in his mouth. “I have seen one,” he said. God, how his head hurt.

“Tell me,” the boy said. His eyes lit up.

“In a city,” Karl said. “A big city. East.”

“I would like to see a motorcar,” the boy said.

“Give me a good horse any day,” Karl said.

The boy nodded once. He raised his chin as if to repeat the movement but he never finished the gesture. He seemed to find something on the wind.

The old man watched in silence.

The boy was bare chested, brown and smooth. He had old, dark slacks, honest to God slacks rolled up almost to the knee. He had no feathers in his hair like the old man, only simple bands of rawhide around his neck and wrists.

There was a small fire burning before him. It was not like the fire he had seen before; the shape was all wrong. They were camped among a group of large, smooth stones that appeared to

have jutted up from the ground. Karl had heard talk that what were deserts today had once been oceans eons ago. He wondered what event would spring up such a place as this with these rocks that looked like fat giants huddled together for warmth.

At the core of the fire Karl saw a bundle of grassy weeds burning and what looked like some wooden debris, probably scavenged from somewhere, possibly the old wagon he saw earlier.

“Have you seen anyone?” Karl said.

“I see you,” the boy said.

“No. Before me. Have you seen anyone like me?” Karl said.

The boy shook his head.

Karl tried to stand, the old man and the boy watching him, probably waiting to see if he even could. He did stand, barely. Slowly. He tried to let the blood settle in his body, hoping upon hope that he didn't black out again. Karl walked to one of the large stones. There were carvings on its surface. One looked something like a man. Another a tunneling spiral about the size of a dinner plate. He reached out to it. It was cool to the touch. The design was painstakingly done with what looked like one clean, deep line etched in stone.

“What are these?” Karl said.

The old man spoke for the first time, in a language Karl didn't know. It sounded like the fits and starts of a madman to Karl.

“What's he saying?” Karl said.

“I don't know,” said the boy. “Grandfather is old.”

Karl thought he understood.

“You have a name, boy?” Karl asked.

“I am Gabriel Lonechant,” the boy said and gestured to the old man. “Abraham Lonechant.”

“Well, Gabriel, Abraham. I am Karl Heinrich Trammel. Pleased to meet you.”

The wind picked up. The fire grew a little.

“Do you know this land? Are we close to people?”

“No.”

“To which?” Karl asked.

“Does it matter?” Gabriel said.

A depleted look took Karl’s face.

“There is a road,” the boy said.

“A road? Where?”

The boy pointed over Karl’s shoulder. East.

“Close. A day. No people,” the boy said.

“We can follow it. We can find people,” Karl said.

The boy nodded once more.

“Well, what are you waiting for? You said it’s close. Show me. We can go. Right now,” Karl said. Anger had crept into his voice.

The old man said something to himself.

“I don’t understand,” Karl said. “Tell me where. I can find it then.”

The old man spoke again, waved his hand.

“Not at night. You must rest, wait for the sun. Soon.”

Karl thought of leaving, but the night was still dark, cold. Some part of him knew the boy was right. He'd likely get more lost on his own and end up like the missing rider.

Karl sat. Breathed the cool night air. He felt his heart beating hard in his chest.

"I thought you were a vision," Gabriel said.

"You're likely the only one," Karl said and rubbed his hand over his thinning hair.

"Tell me a story, Karl. How are you here?"

"One hard year," Karl said. He kicked a heel of dirt towards the fire.

Karl saw the boy waited for more.

"I left my family. Went out on my own."

The boy seemed to understand this. Karl wondered if the boy was out here because of some rite of passage, like he'd read about in his books.

"A flood wiped out my farm," Karl said. The word flood made Karl lick his lips. It was little help. He felt a need for water rise in him. Neither Gabriel nor the old man seemed affected by thirst. The boy seemed strong. His resolve no doubt hinted at the man he would become and the strength that must lie with his line.

"I came to work with my brother," Karl said. "He came to learn banking. You know this word?" Karl asked.

"Money," the boy said.

"Yes. Money," Karl said. He smiled. Karl looked down at the fire. "My brother, Jacob, had seen the home of a banker back east. It was a grand place. Very fine. He would always say 'Karl, there's always money in banks'."

The old man snorted. The noise turned into a booming laugh. Gabriel's eyes went wide. Likely surprised that those old lungs were capable of such a noise. Karl couldn't help but laugh along with the old man. Even Gabriel joined in, although Karl thought he didn't quite understand.

"Our father didn't trust banks," Karl said. He turned back down to the fire.

"Will you go back to your brother?" the boy said.

"I don't think so," Karl said.

The wind died, lowering the small flame of the fire.

"Who is Theo-dora," the boy asked. He had some trouble with the name.

"Where did you hear that?"

"You said. In sleep."

"My brother's wife," Karl said.

"Your brother. Is he dead?"

"No," Karl said.

The boy said nothing. The fire played in his eyes and Karl thought he saw judgment there.

Abraham spoke. The boy listened.

"What did he say?" Karl asked.

"The sun is coming."

Karl turned, it was true. The sun was budding at his back. Its light illuminated a thin gray line on the horizon.

The old man spoke again. It was a long and winding line.

“What did he say,” Karl asked.

“He said we must trade.”

“Trade?” Karl said.

The old man had a leather object in his hand. He held it out and touched the boy’s shoulder with it. Gabriel took it. The object wasn’t leather, but wrapped in it. Gabriel unwrapped it. The object looked dark and burnt in the night.

“We must trade,” the boy said.

The boy held out the burnt object. Karl took it. It was a blade. It looked salvaged rather than forged. What passed as a handle was a strip of leather wrapped in threaded, beaded strands. It looked very old. A line of rusted markings seemed petrified on its pitted surface. It looked like it might crack and blow away in the next strong wind, but in his hand he felt its weight. It was solid through and through.

“But I have nothing,” Karl said.

The boy and the old man waited. Karl put the blade on the ground. He rose and removed his waistcoat, he handed it to the old man. The old man smiled toothlessly. He didn’t speak just smiled beyond words as he held up his acquisition.

“That’s good luck,” Karl said.

The boy translated for the old man (although Karl thought Abraham might understand more than he let on).

The old man spoke, the boy responded to him. The boy turned to Karl.

“There will be rain today,” Gabriel said. The boy seemed unmoved.

Karl felt the weight of the Indian's blade and had a moment of regret, it felt like a burden in his hand and an anchor on his heart.

The boy and the old man also stood. The old man sloughed off his old coat and put on his new one. He admired the brass of the buttons. The old man looked to Karl and nodded thanks. He and the boy turned away and started deeper into the desert, the way Karl had come.

"You said the road was this way," Karl said.

"That is not my road," the boy said. He raised a hand, but did not wave. Karl did the same. The boy turned away with the old man at his side. Karl turned and looked to where the boy had said. A day's walk? Karl could do it. It was his way. The line on the horizon was growing clearer. It would be with him soon. It seemed to be carried in on winds that blew on him like the breath of the world. Karl put on his jacket and hat. He straightened his shirt and followed his own road with nothing ahead. Nothing but the promise of rain.

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APPENDIX A: WRITING LIFE ESSAY

These stories have lived with me for years. In some cases the ideas came to me before I ever considered entering the field of creative writing. As a lifelong reader I always enjoyed the worlds I found in works of fiction, but I was always equally fascinated by the strange and occasionally fantastic stories found in reality. Often as a child I read as many historical texts as I did novels. From the epic tales of Homer's *Iliad* to Barbara Tuchman's *The Guns of August*. The scope and horror of such stories seemed as fantastic to me as anything by Melville or Dickens.

As fantastic as some elements of these stories may have seemed I was always reminded of the old adage about truth being stranger than fiction. It is that aspect of reality that inspires me as a writer of fiction. It is what urges me to try and find the line where reality and the fantastic begin to blur. And the more I push toward that line the more I find that reality pushes that line further away. Every day, unspeakable acts of violence and evil are reported in the media from somewhere around the world, and every day equally amazing acts of love, compassion, and wonder are occurring right alongside them. My work is inspired by all of these acts, and my characters, often cynical, often jaded, are forced to confront these events. As they do, they frequently use said events to justify something to themselves or to simply make sense of a sometimes senseless world. My characters are looking for order, for meaning, much, I suppose, like myself. Fiction has always been a safe way to explore the unthinkable, the unattainable, and the unavailable. And I have always been drawn to these types of characters in one way or another.

As a child, I actually drew my characters. Inspired by art, I spent much of my childhood harboring dreams of being an illustrator. To this day I still have folders filled with drawings. I would find a form and experiment. I wouldn't deviate too far. I would keep the template the

same so that all my characters were linked, but with each character I would add endless variations. If I were drawing muscular barbarians I would experiment with their weapons: new swords, spears, shields, horned war helmets (the bigger the better). Often I found the little details were the most fun. Eye patches. Scars. Tattoos. It was the small things that really separated my characters from one another. When I tired of barbarian hordes, it was Superheroes, which were all about the costumes. Cape or no cape? Chest logo? No chest logo.

These were the questions that were most important to me.

Then, later, it was Monsters, and, later still, Aliens, and on and on. I drew them all. I gave them all cool names and detailed backstories (an early attempt at truer storytelling, I think). It's only now, years and years later that I realize that I have always created "characters". By changing this detail or that, this color hair, these colored eyes, these kinds of clothes I was actually creating . . . something. Now as an adult I see that not all that much has changed. I still use a pen and paper to create my characters, still use ink to make my characters take shape and I'm still fascinated by their endless variety.

The characters in this collection are much the same. They are all people and still separated by sometimes only minor variations. This is especially true of the larger themes in this collection. Love, relationships, and most of all, obsession, work their way into the lives of all my characters. Is the obsession that the character Greg feels for his hometown in *Nightwalker* so different than the obsession Michael feels for his family's past in *The Antiquarian*? Is the love that little Ashley feels for her brother in *The Good Samaritan* less meaningful than the love Eric feels for Amber in *The Bus*? I don't think so. And while the details surrounding their stories and

the circumstances these characters find themselves in may vary, the crux of them are all the same.

This is represented, I think, by the title of the collection: *A Clutch, A Pride, A Murder*. There is an emotional journey implied by the title that all the characters travel. From the gentle, warm embrace indicated by *A Clutch*, to the deeper, more meaningful emotion of *A Pride*, to the fiery, unstable, obsession that leads to *A Murder*, this emotional journey is one that all these characters find themselves taking for better or worse, and in this work of fiction, as in reality, the worst does happen. But even in those unfortunate situations, I hope, again as in reality, that tragedy can ultimately lead to some good.

It is my desire that the world of these stories—for that is how I see it, as a unified world—continues in two other volumes of stories that continue to expand upon the life of the citizens of Milton, Ohio, and the world at large, so that I can continue to explore the pasts and futures of the people there and uncover all their individual nuances and endless variations.

APPENDIX B: READING LIST

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