

ABSTRACT

Title of thesis: BEYOND VÉRITÉ
Anna Lorraine Rowser, Master of Fine Arts, 2013

Thesis directed by: Associate Professor Maud Casey,
Department of English

Beyond Vérité is a collection of fictional short stories exploring what happens when characters' perceptions of truth get shaken up. Landscape plays a central role in this collection, from the deceptively dangerous beauty of Yosemite, to a reserve in Madagascar where the surreal becomes possible, to the Mojave Desert where it can be difficult to determine reality from illusion—or fact and fiction, as in the “Hole Card,” a retelling of the legend of Death Valley Scotty. In each story, the landscape is harsh yet indifferent and reflects the characters' current struggle, from Bryan's relationship with his mother in “Ranger Danger,” to a zoo curator's more recently lost son in “Keeper,” to Lindsay's compulsive fixation in “Beyond Vérité,” to Meg's pervasive guilt in “Why They Call It Death Valley.”

BEYOND VÉRITÉ

By

Anna Lorraine Rowser

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment

Of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

2013

Advisory Committee:

Professor Maud Casey, Chair

Professor Emily Mitchell

Professor Howard Norman

© Copyright by
Anna Lorraine Rowser
2013

Table of Contents

Ranger Danger	1
Keeper	32
Beyond Vérité	63
Why They Call It Death Valley	95
The Hole Card	135

Ranger Danger

Just after Bryan Bacon turned sixteen, he forged his mother signature on the parent/guardian consent form required for him to intern at the county coroner's office. He'd been signing his own forms since he was in sixth grade, so this wasn't that big of a deal. He thought he could probably even get away with signing her name on the documents required to drop his stepfather's last name and replace it with "Eurysm." (His name would then be pronounced, "Bry-An-eu-rysm.") But eighteen was less than a year away, and he could wait.

Bryan talked about his internship constantly, so his mother's shock that afternoon in October when she ran into him coming out of the morgue came as a shock to him. Apparently she thought that he was just *trying to get to her* with his descriptions of sponging off corpses and the human goo he'd found in the wastebaskets he started out emptying. Bryan now stood in on autopsies every so often, and he'd learned some tricks of the trade. For instance, it was easier to take fingerprints by lopping off the fingers, especially if the body was still in rigor mortis. And if a body wasn't going to be displayed in an open casket, then to verify dental records you could just rip out the jaw and send it to the dental expert. Afterwards, you were supposed to bag up these pieces along with the body. People got upset if parts went missing.

Bryan's mother might have taken the revelation of his internship better if the *Ranger Danger business*, as she referred to it, hadn't been all over the news. She was already pretty worked up about that. Brian Finnegan, aka Ranger Danger, as he was known in the media, was a Yosemite ranger who doubled as deputy coroner. After an

incident in which he'd encouraged some teens to engage in risky behavior, authorities began an investigation into his behavior. Witnesses came forward, and it was soon concluded that for the past decade Ranger Danger had been encouraging visitors to take risks that, frequently enough, resulted in their deaths. He was charged with reckless endangerment. There was some speculation that Ranger Danger had taken body parts as souvenirs, and that he might even be keeping a collection. But with the huge chunks of granite making up the valley, people were sometimes eviscerated from a fall, or decapitated. In such cases, it would be strange for parts not to be missing.

After running into him coming out of the morgue, Bryan's mother stepped up her therapist visits to once a week. Bryan knew this because he often overheard his mother and stepfather talking; they seemed to think their bedroom walls were soundproof. What most horrified her was the fact that after instigating their deaths, Ranger Danger would be the one to photograph and then transport their bodies to the morgue. He was most often the one responsible for breaking the news to the family. Bryan's fascination with Ranger Danger also deeply troubled her. Since he'd forged her signature, she'd be within her rights to pull Bryan out of his internship; however, her therapist suggested that Bryan was "going through a phase" and the internship was just part of this. The best thing to do was to just ride it out; he'd likely come around in the end. The "likely" allowed his mother plenty of room for anxiety, which Bryan aggravated with talk of the convicted ranger, pointing out similarities between them, such as how they had the same first name. Bryan stopped this when his stepfather (also named Brian, and with the "i" like Brian Finnegan) started pointing out that he actually had the same name, which aggravated Bryan because he always stressed the one-letter distance between them.

The therapist further suggested that Bryan’s mother should make a point to “spend quality time” with him. But Bryan felt at least as much disgust for his mother’s sudden attempts to be his buddy as she likely did about his fascination with morbidity. For the past three years they’d been taking their annual family camping trip to Yosemite, Bryan had been free to do whatever he wanted. Now, this year’s trip would be his mother’s last chance to “reach him.” As he told it to Dylan, his best friend since kindergarten—for the past six years everything had been about his half-brother, Colin, and now, suddenly, she was interested in him? Not that he wanted her to have been in his business all this time. He was just saying.

Bryan’s mother sent her two immaculately sculpted standard poodles galloping into his room that morning when it was barely light out, followed up with the usual refrain—*We’re going to be late! We’re going to be late!* This refrain was almost as bad as the burst of an alarm clock, which it turned out, were harder to destroy than one might think. Bryan had kept a hammer under his bed, for a time, for just this purpose. That satisfying silence after the crack of metal against the snooze bar. The first of his alarm clock victims had held on for days, the display becoming more and more difficult to read. *You could electrify yourself!* That was when he’d really gone at it, taken it out to the garage and smashed it to bits with the sledgehammer, one of his stepfather’s tools that hung unused on pegs in the garage. So Bryan’s mother had given up on the clocks. Now, if Bryan wasn’t up by what she considered *a decent hour* she set the dogs on him.

Once he was settled in his mother’s big, white SUV, Bryan actually began looking forward to what he was certain would be his last family camping trip. This would be the last time she’d nag him repeatedly to *get moving* so they could get on the

road before the sun appeared over the hills. The dog sitter had cancelled at the last minute that morning, which tripped his mother up enough that the sun had gotten ahead. She'd taken her frustration out on the BFD, who was now taking it out on the GPS. He was poking at the keypad roughly and swearing under his breath when his thick fingers didn't hit the intended mark.

The BFD was what Bryan's stepfather (Brian with an "i") was called for the purpose of differentiation. Like Big Fat Dad, or Big Fat Deal, the BFD had said, poking at his belly in that jokey way that made Bryan picture the subcutaneous fat layered like mounds of yellow jelly over what little muscle he had there. Bryan and Dylan often switched out the words that made up the acronym to amuse each other—flaccid, flatulent, fistulated—like the cows they'd learned about in science. Most of the time, BFD stood for Big Fucking Dork.

Colin slept on the bench in front of Bryan and Dylan, just behind the front seats. Dylan was already plugged into his iPod. The orange and pinks of sunrise had faded, but the sun was still low in the sky. His mother said, "I just hate getting such a late start."

Bryan turned to Dylan, who was already plugged into his iPod. The first song on Sh!t UR Entrails' most recent album was audible through the headphones, the refrain the lead singer more growled than sang. *Gaaaaaaaaaaaaa! Caaaaaaaaaaa!* Bryan and Dylan had debated if the singer intended this to be more of a death growl or actual words—"caca" or maybe "got caught," like Ranger Danger had.

Dylan probably couldn't hear him, but Bryan started in with a recap of their plans anyway—more for his mother's benefit. "First we'll hit Ranger Danger site #1—that

spot above Vernal Falls where he got those guys to jump.” If his mother was so determined to have family time, she could follow along while he and Dylan visited the scene of one grisly death after another. “And we’ve got the Half Dome passes for tomorrow. Lots of people die there.”

“That’s enough of that talk, Bry,” his mother said. “And you agreed we’d do Half Dome as a family.” The *Bry* thing was new.

“Did you hear how they found Ranger Danger’s collection of human parts? Mostly from Half Dome victims. Just last week, right Dylan?” Bryan nudged his friend.

“What?” Dylan said. He cut the music.

“Ranger Danger’s reconstituted cadavers. You heard about that.”

“Sure,” Dylan said. “WWRDD.”

What Would Ranger Danger Do? In this way, Dylan acknowledged that he’d play along. Bryan’s mother likely assumed the acronym for their game stood in for the longer name of another obscure death metal band.

“He didn’t do that,” Bryan’s mother said. “The papers never said he did that.”

“Well, either way, we won’t have anything to worry about this year,” The BFD said. He smiled at Bryan’s mother in his typical dorky way. “With Ranger Danger behind bars.”

“Fifteen years seems heavy,” Bryan said with a faint smirk. “You know, since he didn’t actually kill anyone.”

“He displayed willful or depraved indifference to human life,” his mother said, emphatic. “And since his job was to protect, this equals gross and wanton negligence!”

Bryan shrugged. “It’s not his fault that people are stupid.”

“He encouraged a group of children to climb on rocks, and they were swept away by the current. Children!” His mother ended on a shrill note.

“They were thirteen and fourteen,” Bryan said. “Hence, teenagers.” “Hence” was his go-to word for communicating disdain.

“He was convicted in a court of law!” His mother insisted. “Tell him, Honey!”

“He was convicted in a court of law,” The BFD confirmed. He sounded like he also thought Bryan’s mother was being unreasonable.

Bryan’s mother turned up her easy listening station to signal that she was finished with the conversation. This meant he’d won, but also that it was time to back off for a while. He didn’t want to risk pushing her so far that she cried.

Bryan had accidentally packed his iPod, and there was no getting it now. Precious and Sweetums were back there with the luggage, and he didn’t feel like dealing with dog food breath in his face. He could hear one of them chewing a piece of rawhide behind him, with a sound like one of those notched instrument you rubbed with a stick. Chuk-chuk-chuka-chuka-chuk, but with a wetness that echoed down the dog’s throat.

This noise was similar to the one the dog’s teeth made against the cat skull displayed on the bottom shelf of Bryan’s collector’s cabinet. His mother had presented him with what she’d called a “display case” his sophomore year, but her intent had been

to conceal. So he kept the doors open, and the more exotic of his collection near the top—the bison, and the alligator and dik-dik that appeared to be grinning—specially assembled to greet his mother each time she opened his bedroom door.

Bryan eventually drifted off. He woke briefly a few times, and each time his mother was staring at him in the rear view mirror, like she thought that if she looked at just the right moment she might get a glimpse of some secret he was keeping. But he wasn't hiding anything! In fact, he was quite intent to reveal what he was made of. Like when he'd drawn the outlines of the bones of his foot with a sharpie on the knee-high crimson boots his stepfather had agreed to get him for his fifteenth birthday. The outlines started at his metacarpals, reaching up to the fibula, tibia, femur. He'd drawn a few dermestid beetles here and there for good measure. And when she'd demanded, *what have you done to your boots?* (she considered them "bad enough" already) he'd tried to tell her all about how the beetles were used in forensics.

His mother responded to any talk related to autopsies or the break down of bodies with her pre-projectile-vomiting face—staring straight ahead like a person possessed by a demon in a movie. This was the same look she'd made when she ran into him outside the morgue, and when he'd told her a week later that the pieces of bone stuck through the holes he'd stretched in each ear were middle phalanxes from human fingers. (The BFD spent the rest of the night trying to assure her they were plastic Halloween novelties.) It was the same look she'd given him when he came home with his chin-length hair dyed a deep red and shaved close to his head along one side. The same look she'd made when he pinned to the back of his denim jacket the sketch in permanent marker of a skeletal Satan riding a hot rod skull motorcycle, glowing eyes for headlights, shooting up over a

mound of corpses he'd spent painstaking hours making sure were anatomically correct. The handle bars of the motorcycle were inspired by the prize of his collection, the goat skull with the flat horns that came up then folded back and out to either side like bent bunny ears of bone, or like the handles of the Big Wheel bike he'd rode around their apartment complex, before the BFD had entered the picture.

Bryan had spent years learning the lines that joined skull to horn, jaw to cheekbone to the hole left by the cartilage of the nose. He'd put on headphones if his mom was home, crank up his music, and sit at his desk with a specimen in front of him, tracing these lines over and over again onto paper. These lines connected him to his father, who had died in a motorcycle accident when Bryan was three years old. The lines connected him to the physicality of bone, to that which still remained after the organs liquefied and rotted along with what skin wasn't consumed by beetles or maggots. These lines formed variations of his own jaw and forehead, mimicking the skull of that long-lost father. The lines revealed the specter of death on which life was necessitated—that which, with the absence of these lines, was only absence. These were the lines he'd first began drawing with a colored crayon to try to make sense of where his father had gone. The lines gave presence to what his mother seemed so determined to forget in her efforts to *get on with her life*.

Like that whole thing with Colin's cat last summer. The BFD had buried Socks in the backyard, and after an appropriate amount of time, Bryan had dug up the remains. The decomposition process sped up considerably if the body was left above ground. He and his mother had a game of it for a while, his mom reburying the cat in different parts of the yard, beneath bushes or under large paving stones. He tried to explain to her that

viewing the dead body really wasn't as traumatic for Colin as she was making it out to be. Wasn't there something nice about the clean, white skull to remember Socks by? His mother didn't think so.

The cat was supposed to be buried, properly, in the ground and in a box. Finally, Bryan just ended up keeping the skull for his own collection, rather than presenting it to Colin like he'd intended. Bryan's mother wanted things boxed up. She wanted things organized. She had her consulting business—Alexandra Bacon Consulting, or the ABC's of Organization, for which she set up systems and routines for her clients to maintain, as she did her own schedule of clubs and organizations; her routines for meals and house cleaning, and concocting her organic shampoos for pets with sensitive skin in a pot in the kitchen. With the successful repetition of these routines, she imagined that she had control of her life.

Once they passed through the entrance station, Bryan's mother began a lecture on her favorite topic, safety. "Now that everyone's awake, I just want to remind all of you that we are entering a wilderness area. While no one has been killed or dismembered by a bear at this park, plenty have been at other parks."

Bryan said, "There's no way that any of us are going to get dismembered by a bear. You want to know why?"

His mother shot him a stern look in the rear view mirror. They were driving along the Merced River, large boulders along one side and granite hillside visible in patches between the trees.

"Because we're all going to make good use of the bear locker!" the BFD said.

“No,” Bryan said, “it’s because bears maul. It’s wolves that dismember, so they can distribute the pieces to the members of their pack. Remember the story of the bear going after the candy bar under that kid’s pillow? The bear didn’t dismember the kid, it just busted through his head like a piñata to get at the candy. So none of us are in danger of being dismembered by a bear. Only of being mauled.”

Colin had been barely two years old when they’d heard the candy bar story at a campfire talk at a much smaller state park, the first of their family camping adventures. Bryan had spent the night jolting awake with each *oh!oh!* his mother made at each cracking twig. In the morning, she’d vowed never to return to a park that uncivilized. Bryan told Colin the story each year, in order to illustrate the importance of using the bear locker.

“Your mom was telling me the other day that the only record of death-by-animal in this park was actually at the horns of a deer” the BFD said. “So watch out for those horny young bucks!” He chuckled way too hard at his joke.

Bryan’s mother took her eyes off the narrow two-lane road through the park long enough to glare at Bryan. “Squirrels carry the plague, and rabies. So do raccoons. So don’t get too close. Don’t try to feed or pet them.”

Colin said, “Squirrels never get close enough to let you pet them.”

“Do you know what happens if you get the plague?” Bryan said.

“That’s enough, Bry,” his mother warned.

“First you bleed out your ears,” Bryan continued. “Then your skin rots off.”

“I said, that’s e-nough!” His mother turned all the way around.

“Most deaths in the park actually occur due to unsafe road conditions and a failure to adequately and efficiently watch the road,” Bryan said.

His mother snapped her attention back to the windshield.

If it weren’t for the fact that the BFD looked forward all year to his outdoorsman routine, Bryan knew that his mother would much rather take Colin to Disneyland. But Yosemite was still pretty tame—nature paved and labeled and made easily accessible. There were showers so his mother could wash and style her hair each day, a Laundromat, restaurants, scenic loops and trailheads you could arrive at via a convenient shuttle. It was sort of amazing that, given all this, sometimes people didn't return home alive.

“The next most common cause of death is drowning,” Bryan went on. He knew these statistics much better than she did. “Then falling to your death off a cliff, or being crushed by falling trees or struck by lightning in back country areas. Unless you’re holding Ranger Danger responsible for *every* accident in the park.”

Bryan’s mother let him have the last word here too. Another win.

They turned off to the camping village, and snaked on the road between the tent cabins until they found the appropriate number. It was set up kind of like the subdivision where they lived, but instead of houses there were small concrete structures covered with canvas. There was also a river and more trees, a communal bathroom—and the possibility of bears attacking, even though no one had been either mauled or dismembered *at this park*.

“So where do you boys want to hike to first?” The BFD said as Bryan’s mom cut the engine, before Bryan and Dylan could leap out.

“I already told you. Dylan and I are going to head up to Vernal Falls,” Bryan said. This was a relative easy hike, and it featured a number of key Ranger Danger sites.

“I thought we’d all go on a hike together,” his mother said. “We don't get to do a lot together anymore. With all of our busy schedules. I’ll just run the dogs to the kennel, and then we’ll head out.”

Bryan forced an exit before Colin could hold him up. He then immediately set to work unpacking so that they could finish as quickly as possible. This would be his opportunity to ditch his mother.

“Great name for a band, PMS-er,” the BFD said, like he’d never before seen this t-shirt Bryan wore at least once a week.

Bryan grabbed the other side of the cooler to help the BFD lift it from the back of the SUV. “PMSR,” he corrected. “Pus Monkey Slay Ride. Hence the picture.” A band of deranged and sore-ridden zombie monkeys hung off a sleigh, wearing Santa hats. They held scythes and machetes slathered in gore. The BFD could compliment Bryan all he wanted, but as long as he went around in those stupid bowling shirts he wasn’t going to win Bryan over. Most people were lame without trying; the BFD worked at it.

Once they’d stowed the coolers and dry food in the bear lockers, Dylan and Bryan carried their stuff to their side of the tent cabin. The structure was divided in half with a cinderblock wall, so that his mother and the BFD had some privacy. Colin was already

inside, lying on the top bunk with his pillow and duffle bag. Bryan raised an eyebrow at Dylan, a look they both understood to mean WWRDD?

Each side of the tent cabin had a larger bed and a set of bunk beds covered with waterproof material. Dylan said, “You know, Colin, on the top bunk, spiders come down from the ceiling and lay eggs in your ears while you’re asleep.”

“No they don’t,” Colin said. But he moved down the ladder to the bottom bunk.

“See the monkeys on my shirt?” Bryan said. “That’s what happens if you get plague. And when squirrels get inside a tent, squirrels with the plague, they always head straight for that bottom bunk.”

Colin didn't say anything this time. He just moved his stuff to the larger bed on the far side of the tent cabin.

Bryan said, “You know what, Dylan? Maybe we should take the bunk bed on the other side, with the grown-ups. All this talk is really creeping me out.”

“And leave Colin here all alone?” Dylan held down the edges of a smile with a thumb and forefinger, which made him look like he was seriously considering it.

The BFD yelled from outside the tent, “No candy bars under your pillows, boys!” Then he chuckled to himself. The BFD seemed to think that he was playing along with them. Colin immediately burst into tears.

It was one thing for them to tease him like this, but another thing to get it from his father. “What a Belligerent Fatheaded Dickwad.” Bryan muttered to Dylan, quiet enough that he doubted the BFD could hear. Although, he didn’t care if he did.

“It’s okay,” he said to try to calm Colin, but it didn’t have much effect. Bryan wasn’t even sure what was he trying to tell him was okay, exactly. He began rifling through his bag for his iPod. He thought he heard his mother’s voice outside the cabin, even a dog bark, but she was dropping them off at the kennel, so he must be hearing sounds from somewhere else.

It wasn’t until they heard Bryan’s mom yell, “C’mon boys!” from outside the tent that Colin’s tears tapered into sniffles. Bryan’s window of escape had just closed, and sooner, somehow, than he’d expected.

When Bryan emerged, the BFD was resting in a chair with his hiking boots on the rim of the fire pit. The grey of a rock face was visible behind him, through the break between trees. Bryan’s mother held the dogs taut on their leashes. Precious trained his eyes on a squirrel, while a raven taunted Sweetums from a nearby branch. “What happened to the kennel?” Bryan said.

In preparation for these five days “camping,” Bryan’s mother had done herself up with make-up and her platinum hair styled with the ends reaching forward along her cheekbones, like a wind blew her from behind, or she was leaning too far over one of the severe cliffs surrounding the valley. Based on her irate expression, her emotions were now in a similarly precarious state.

The BFD said, “Your mother didn’t call ahead to make reservations, and now they’re full.”

“If we had just arrived even thirty minutes earlier,” Bryan’s mom glared at the BFD, and then at Bryan. She took a deep breath and smiled like she was trying to make

the most of this bad situation they'd put her in, when it was her own fault for not calling ahead, and for having those stupid dogs in the first place. "Anyway," she said, glaring at the BFD again. "It's only a day kennel. I was led to believe otherwise."

The BFD stood, shrugged off the responsibility she was trying to pin on him. "They told your mom that we can only camp with the dogs in one of the campgrounds, but you know how she feels about sleeping in a tent. Even if we'd brought one."

Bryan wasn't sure how these lodgings were any better. There were no locking doors, just flaps of canvas that tied with a little bow. A bear could come right in and get into bed next to you if it wanted.

The raven swooped over the dogs' heads while they leapt at it and barked. "What are we going to do with them?" the BFD said. He shook his head, then chuckled in that dorky way of his.

"They gave me a list of nearby kennels," Bryan's mother said. "The dogs just have to stay on the paved walkways, so the hike to Vernal Falls should be fine. I'd like to get some photos of Precious and Sweetums on that big rock with the mist behind them and a rainbow. It would be the perfect shampoo label. Then I'll drive them somewhere."

"My concern," The BFD said, "is that one of them might twist an ankle. We'd have to take them to the vet, and there goes our vacation."

"Nah, you just shoot them," Bryan said. "Like horses. We can just ask around for a gun. That guy over there probably has one." He pointed to a man with a camouflage baseball hat just across the road, headed to the bathroom.

His mother ignored this comment. “Well, dogs aren’t allowed on the shuttle, so we’ll have to walk them to the trailhead.”

“Good thing I’ve been training,” the BFD said. He flexed his calves like that mass of hard blubber was supposed to impress someone, then he chuckled again, in that way his mother described as “happy-go-lucky.” It grated on Bryan’s nerves.

Bryan’s mother got Dylan to agree to take the pictures of the dogs against the waterfall as they set out through the other tent cabins to the main road. The dogs became more and more unruly, like they thought that all threat of being kenneled was now behind them. By the time they hit the main road, they were alternating between straining at the leashes and refusing to budge from the site of some new scent they’d found. The BFD attempted to assist Bryan’s mother by standing with Colin a few feet ahead and clapping and calling for them.

Dylan conducted a commentator routine as he and Bryan went along a ways ahead. “And coming up on your left is an interesting landmark,” Dylan said.

Dylan snapped some photos, while Bryan picked up the commentary, “This is the employee housing, where Ranger Danger lived for just over a decade.” Then he added, loud enough he thought his mother would be able to hear, “It was in the walls of this first cabin that authorities recently found his collection of human parts.”

But Bryan’s mother was oblivious to his taunts while she and the BFD wrestled with the dogs. They had to pull them away from squirrels, and from trying to sniff everyone passing by, from mounds of dirt that they wanted to roll in. They were tired of being kept immaculate, which Bryan understood, but they were totally stealing the show.

“And on your right, in that clearing just on the other side of the river? Do you know what happened there, Dylan?”

“This, boys and girls, is the site of Ranger Danger’s first, and possibly only, rescue,” Dylan said in his ranger voice. “Two retired school teachers, who’d gotten stranded on the wrong side of the river and couldn’t find their way back across the bridge. That current is swifter than it looks, folks! Luckily, the husband had a cell phone and they were in one of the areas of the park with reception.”

The wooden arc of the bridge was visible a ways downstream, and the road must have been visible to the couple as well. They could have gone toward either the bridge or the road—either of which was no more than a half-mile from where they were “stranded.”

“If they were so old and out-of-shape that they couldn’t make that, they shouldn’t have been out here in the first place,” Bryan said. “No wonder Ranger Danger lost patience with people.” Bryan interpreted Ranger Danger’s motivations to be more fed up than malicious. If people couldn’t use simple common sense, then they had it coming.

“Yeah, well,” Dylan said, then snapped a few more pictures.

They reached the trailhead, but still had to wait for Bryan’s mother, the BFD, Colin and the dogs. A man stood behind a rickety stand, and they tried not to look too closely or make eye contact with him. He wore a ranger uniform, with shorts.

He started talking to them after a couple minutes anyway. “What do you boys know about park rangers?” the man said. He had a brown beard and soft eyes like a deer.

The boys exchanged their WWRDD look. “We know about Ranger Danger,” Dylan said. “And based on that—”

“Yes, yes,” the man cut him off. “But that was an exception. Rangers are protectors of the wilderness and of the people who visit.”

“But what if people destroy the wilderness,” Bryan said.

“Well that’s part of our job too,” the ranger said. “Making sure that people are following laws about hunting and cutting down trees, building fires—”

“So Ranger Danger killed people to protect the wilderness?” Bryan said.

The ranger’s smile faltered only briefly. “I bet you didn’t know that rangers can also provide useful information! Do you know what kind of bird that is? A Steller’s Jay! Only crested jay west of the Rockies. And how can you remember to avoid poison oak? Leaves of three, let it be! And poisonous snakes? If it rattles, skedaddle!”

“Gosh,” Bryan said sarcastically. “I didn’t know rangers were full of so much...information.”

A Steller’s Jay perched on the railing separating the man from the river below. The bird turned its black, crowned head from side to side, watching them, then the approach of Bryan’s mother with the dogs. When Precious and Sweetums got within lunging distance, the bird flew off.

“Helpful and informative, that’s what it means to be a park ranger,” the ranger said as Bryan’s mother caught up with them. “My job is to encourage you to take precautions. So watch yourselves up there,” the ranger said, still smiling patiently.

“I think we’ll be fine,” the BFD said. “We’re just going up to the falls.”

“We’ve had a dense snowfall, and the water is really moving,” the ranger said.

“Follow the signs and make sure you don’t go beyond the guard rails.”

The dogs looked ridiculously out of place with their sculpted pom-poms, glaringly white against the backdrop of pine trees and dirt. Two squirrels scurried up a nearby trunk and chided them from the safety of the lowest branch, which was still well above Bryan’s head. The dogs were getting really worked up, like they thought the squirrels were laughing at them.

“Ma’am,” the ranger said, “you do know that dogs aren’t allowed on the trail.”

“I was told I could take the dogs on paved trails, and this is a paved trail.”

The ranger coughed. “The Vernal Falls trail is off limits to pets, ma’am.” He clasped his hands behind his back and rocked on his heels. He’d stopped smiling.

Bryan’s mother laughed like she was on the verge of losing it. “I tried to check them in at your kennel, but it’s full, so I don’t know what you expect me to do!”

“You can take the dogs anywhere along the paved trails on the valley floor,” the ranger repeated. Bryan considered that if they had to deal with many visitors like his mother, then quite a few of rangers probably considered Ranger Danger their hero too.

The shuttle stopped and let off a couple handfuls of people that merged on to the trail like onto a conveyer belt. Bryan’s mother shot a desperate look at Bryan and Dylan, like she thought they might take off and disappear up the trail with all the other people.

The BFD sighed. “I’ll take the dogs.”

Bryan and Dylan exchanged a look, but Bryan didn’t know how to WWRDD this one. This was already the best outcome he could hope for, getting rid of the BFD.

“Alright then,” the BFD said. “I’ll catch up with you guys in a bit.”

The BFD wasn’t catching up with anybody. He might think he could drive the dogs to a kennel and then sprint all the way to the top of the falls, but there was no way.

They started out on the trail, the gaps between groupings of people growing as the trail grew steeper. “This is why we usually come the weekend before Memorial Day,” Bryan’s mother explained. “Just before the tourist season really gets going. But with Bryan’s grades this year, I just couldn’t justify taking him out of school.” She made a point not to look at Bryan. Who was she telling this to? Colin? Dylan? Bryan wished he’d been quicker about ditching her.

His mother followed up this failed approach with a new one. “Aren’t those shoes comfortable? I see a lot of boys your age wearing sneakers like that. They seem popular.” She eyed the shoes he’d worn so he didn’t mess up his boots, these canvas skater deals she’d left as one of many offerings for him in his room, along with the slacks, collared shirts, and trendier items from the juniors department that she placed in his closet. Her hope seemed to be that he might wake up one morning and accidentally dress like everyone else.

“Baaaaaaaaa!” Bryan bleated like a sheep, loudly enough that the old couple in front of them turned to look. Then they sped up slightly.

His mother had the eye part of the projectile vomit face going. She bent back a branch that had grown across a narrower portion of the trail, then waited for Colin to catch up, and then continued holding it for Dylan so that it didn't fling back into his face. When Dylan held it out, Bryan let it snap back without looking to see if anyone was behind him or not.

They hiked in silence until they got to the bridge. From the middle of it, they had a clear view of the falls. Fir trees lined the river on either side, and boulders created obstacles over which the water surged. These were the boulders that Ranger Danger had encouraged the children to climb. Their bodies must have been swept right under where they stood.

Bryan's mother sighed. "We're too late this year to see the dogwoods in bloom." Bryan remembered from last year that there had been a lot of trees blooming along the water, but the dogwoods looked the same as any other now. He felt the sting she must have intended with this remark that echoed her earlier one, and noticed how sharp the two pieces of hair she trained to come forward on her face were. Bryan searched for just the right comment to sting her back.

A sign positioned across the boards in the railing warned that *Violators will be cited and charged for rescue. Parents / Guardians will be held responsible.* Three teenagers were standing near it, laughing. A girl and two boys, maybe a year or so older than him and Dylan.

"But this is still nice, isn't it?" Bryan's mother backtracked, trying again with something positive. "Spending time together like this?"

Bryan said, “Would you pay to have my dead body dragged out of the river, or just leave me there? I mean, not much point if I’m dead, right?”

“I wouldn’t have a choice,” his mother said. Her voice was flat, tired. “They’d haul you out and charge me, regardless.”

“So why was Ranger Danger charged with those kids’ deaths?” Bryan said. “According to that sign, shouldn’t their parents be held responsible?”

Bryan’s mother had no response for this. She kept silent, watching the water. She reached down and tousled Colin’s hair. “You’re going to be seniors next year. It’s time to make some real life decisions. You’ll need to find colleges to apply to this fall.”

Bryan said. “I’m getting all the experience I need cutting people open to get a job. I don’t need to go to college.”

“Of course you need to go to college!” The muscles in his mother’s jaw clenched. Bryan felt a smug satisfaction at the fact that whatever she’d hoped to accomplish with this conversation, and this special family hike, obviously was not working out.

“Tag! You’re it!” A sweaty hand clapped Bryan’s shoulder. The BFD had somehow caught up to them after all. How was this possible?

Bryan’s mother demanded, “Where are the dogs!”

“Oh, hey. Funniest thing,” The BFD said, panting. “I ran them by the kennel again and this space had opened up. I figured this way I could join you guys, and then we could all make a family adventure of finding them a new kennel later on.”

Bryan's mother tugged at her hair tufts like flaps on a winter hat. "I'll just take them. I'll go now and take the damn dogs to the damn kennel!"

Bryan knew this exchange would likely go on for a while. "Race you to the top," he said to Dylan.

The BFD now looked pretty annoyed. "Why don't you just wait? We'll all go later. Just calm down." He was talking to Bryan's mom, but as Dylan took off Bryan clearly heard the BFD say, "Hey, you guys, wait up!"

As Bryan sped up to after Dylan, he glanced behind him to fling a smirk in his stepfather's direction. It felt great to pull out ahead, until they hit the steep ascent. A good portion of the path past the bridge consisted of stone stairs carved into the side of the mountain. The mist from the waterfall made them slippery, and Ranger Danger was charged with inviting two park patrons to untimely deaths here. Bryan's felt it in his knees and slowed down to match Dylan's pace. His canvas shoes soaked through from the heavy mist around the spot where his mother wanted to photograph the dogs. His hoodie felt heavy with water, and it affixed his jeans even more tightly to his legs. Dylan held his face in a grimace. Dark, wet rock surrounded them on all sides. The Merced River to the left of the trail thundered from the cliff above into the pool below them. Bryan yelled to be heard above it. "We lost him, right?" Dylan shook his head, but likely because he couldn't hear him. Bryan looked back; he couldn't see the BFD.

The trail set them out some distance to the right of the falls, so Bryan and Dylan pressed on across the plateau of granite sloping down to the river with rises and dips that formed slight hills and valleys. People sat or sprawled out on the sun-heated rock, while

squirrels scampered around in search of handouts. Bryan and Dylan staked their spot just past a grouping of three tenacious pines that had dug in and formed a grove. Most of the trees grew farther back, somehow getting their roots between the rock and into any available soil. There was a similar sort of island of rock and trees in the center of the river, between the deeper Emerald Pool and where the river sped up in the shallows approaching the drop off. A guardrail continued along the river, then veered back the way they'd come, along the side of the cliff. If someone were to cross this barrier, the drop over the falls would be completely unprotected.

Bryan lay on his back and gave himself over to the sun drying his soaked-through clothes. He imagined that decomposition might feel similar. All of his skin and organs falling away so that there was only the bone remaining. His skeleton was solid, like the rock beneath him.

"We're headed up there next, right?" Dylan pointed above them, along a mountain ridge. "Where Ranger Danger got that guy to jump?"

Bryan said with his eyes shut, "Yeah, but we're in no hurry."

"There you guys are!" The BFD. Bryan's eyelids few open. He sat up. The guy was in better shape than he'd thought.

"WWRDD?" Dylan said, but Bryan didn't know.

"Your mom was worried you'd go wading above the falls!" The BFD shouted. He seemed to think they couldn't hear him over the water.

"No-ooo," Bryan said. "There's a sign. Death or serious injury. Submerged boulders."

"Submerged boulders," Dylan agreed. He nodded emphatically.

They both gestured toward the large sign posted along the railing. It stated that if you fell into the water you would go over the edge, and if you went over the edge you would die. There was even a picture of a person going over to make the point clear.

“I’m just saying that’s what your mom said after you guys got her all worked up about dead bodies,” the BFD said. “I’m not worried. You boys are sturdy enough to handle a little current, aren’tcha?”

The river was moving fast, like the ranger had said. It cascaded over boulders, formed eddies and white caps and then within seconds was pouring over the abrupt drop. Crossing might be less of a risk up near the Emerald Pool, but the water was deeper, which meant potential undertows and the danger of hidden boulders. The granite was worn smooth by the water, slick with algae, and hard enough to shatter bone.

WWRDD? Bryan thought to himself. He still hadn’t answered Dylan’s question. It occurred to him that this was really the same question as what-would-his-mother-not-want-him-to-do. Thinking of it like this, Bryan knew the answer.

“Hey,” Bryan said to the BFD. “Why don’t I take your picture by the sign?” One of the lamest photo opportunities out there. *Keep Off The Grass* with someone standing on the grass. *Please Don’t Touch* with a picture of someone touching the labeled object. The BFD would be totally into it. And it would be guaranteed to freak his mother out.

“Why don’t I take your photo?” the BFD said. “That would *really* freak your mom out.”

Bryan felt a strange sensation, similar to that he'd imagined of decomposition, but much less pleasant. "Okay," he said. It felt like a dare, and he saw no space for backing out. Bryan rose, and Dylan followed. They walked with the BFD to the river.

Bryan removed his shoes and socks. Then he slid under the railing and stood in the almost-freezing water up to his ankles. It didn't seem to be moving nearly fast enough to sweep him off his feet, and there was at least thirty feet between where he was and the slip-and-slide of water and rock that led to the abrupt drop off, even if it did.

"You can do better than that!" The BFD yelled.

Bryan realized he hadn't even let go of the railing behind the sign. He opened his eyes and mouth wide in a fake amusement park scream, and threw back his free arm, like he was losing his balance. He even lifted up on the hand behind the sign for a couple seconds while Dylan snap-snap-snapped with the camera.

"That was a decent start," Bryan said, once he was standing on dry rock again, on the safe side of the railing. He was still twisting the question of what would really get at his mother around in his mind. "But what good is a photo that doesn't include the edge?"

Dylan said, "I don't think that's such a great idea."

"The signs are just there to warn people who don't know any better," the BFD said. "If you understand the risks and know what you're doing...right?"

He'd meant to suggest that the BFD should go out there. He now considered that the BFD was mocking him, suggesting something he thought was so outrageous that Bryan would have to back out. But didn't he believe that death was inevitable? Didn't

he believe that only cowards were afraid to face it? He considered the edge, what it would feel like to walk out there to it and stand there at the line between life and death. The water rushed with his pulse.

He could cross the river farther upstream, past the island, going along where the calm of the pool turned into white water. If he went around the island and made his way over on the other side, it looked like it would be easier. Plus, then Dylan could get more of the waterfall in the photo. What was impressive about the valley was the way that, even with all the thousands of people, it just made you feel small. He thought the photograph should express a sense of this. More of the waterfall in the photo meant crossing over to the other side. The rush of white or brown or whatever color noise the falling water made seemed to buffer the sense of risk. The edge didn't seem as sharp or abrupt, even though he knew better.

“Back in the day, the people of this valley considered this a test of manhood! If you could cross the stream without going over, then you were a real man!” The BFD was still yelling, but now it seemed necessary.

Bryan yelled back, “How many went over?” The BFD just laughed in response. He probably didn't hear him. Bryan thought he heard his mother call his name, but he knew she wasn't up there. He felt a surging up from his stomach toward his throat, a little like he was going to vomit. If his mother were here, she would put a stop to this. He focused on the sound of the surging water and tried to bring up a song in his head that would fortify him for the stunt, maybe something by Cannibal Chinchilla. Instead, what came to mind was this time when he was thirteen and had been naïve enough to let the

BFD try to be his buddy. They'd listened to Cannibal Chinchilla's first album together, and the BFD had gotten intense with air guitar, swinging his head around like a big dork with those Elvis sideburns he'd had back then. The first song on the album had a beat like trees falling in succession, which the lead singer punctuated with a growled word that Bryan thought must be "deforestation." But it turned out the title of the song was actually "defenestration." The BFD couldn't stop laughing long enough to explain to Bryan what the word meant. But he'd looked it up later. Throwing someone through a window? That was no joke. Bryan had assumed the BFD was laughing because he'd gotten the song's title wrong. But what if it was actually the BFD that Bryan had gotten wrong?

But Bryan wasn't afraid of the BFD, and he wasn't afraid to face the edge. He would go right up to it and look, unflinching, at the drop below.

That's when he noticed the teenagers he'd seen near the bridge. They approached the barrier a few feet down from where Bryan and Dylan now stood. They gave Bryan a thumbs up as they swung their legs over the top rung. "Stealing your pose, Bro," one of them said.

"Poser," Dylan muttered, and the other guy laughed.

Bryan stood watching them, until the BFD said, "So, you're backing out?"

An older guy sitting with his wife called out, "Hey kids, can't you read the sign!"

"You're just going to let them steal your thunder." The BFD shook his head.

“I’m going out,” Bryan said. “Get the camera ready.” He tried again to summon a soundtrack, but all he could manage was a verbal thumbs up to reassure Dylan, who seemed a little worried. “Gaaaaaaaaa! Caaaaaaa!” he yelled. Dylan responded with horns, pinky finger and index pointing up from his raised fist.

Bryan walked a little farther down the river, then swung his leg back over the railing. He stood there, testing the current, without holding on, the water only deep enough to cover the bony protrusion at the base of his fibula. He took a step farther out into the ice-cold tons of rushing water. Then another. And another, slow and deliberate like walking through deep snow. He knew the rock could be slippery, so he stepped tentatively, then dug in once he found solid footing. He thought of himself like a pine tree each time he wedged a foot in, immovable. The water was up to his knees and moving fast, but this seemed to be the worst of it. He was just above the island, at the center of the stream.

But then the guys who’d copied the photo opportunity sensed what he was up to. Bryan knew that they’d likely try to copy this too. He saw them exchange some words with Dylan and the BFD, but he couldn’t hear anything. And sure enough, they turned and started walking out directly to the edge. They were taking it fast. They weren’t giving their legs a chance to measure the current before moving the next leg forward. They weren’t testing for slippery rocks. A Steller’s Jay burst in with a warning. *SHACK-Sheck-sheck-sheck-scheck-scheck*. He told himself to keep moving. But he couldn’t tear his eyes away from the two guys coming up on the edge. He mentally kicked himself for the cowardice their bold action pointed out in him.

As he watched, the guy in front flailed his arms, then pointed toward the edge with one hand. The second guy, just behind him, made a sudden motion of crumpling in half at the waist and then popping back up into a standing position.

“Get out of the water!” A man called out. But he was too late. The guy in back stumbled, fell, and went right over. Bryan wasn’t sure if he heard him scream, or if it was one of the witnesses now standing along the railing. The BFD was gesturing with one arm for him to come back, but he wasn’t sure how he could take another step, as conscious as he now was that the water wanted nothing more than to carry him along with it. Bryan measured the distance back, but it didn’t much matter. His legs now felt completely numb.

Dylan was looking back and forth between the one guy remaining there at the lip, swinging his arms wildly for balance, and Bryan.

“Get out of the water!” The man yelled again, or maybe it was someone else.

As long as Bryan didn’t move, he still had his balance. He blinked, and just like that, the guy slipped onto his back, and went over. Bryan wasn’t sure if he heard a scream or not because he felt it inside him, in his foot, a deep clenching of the muscles in the sole. He bent down to pull up on his big toe, which he knew would disengage the muscle. But the motion of bending, and then manipulating his toe, disrupted the balance he’d worked so hard to maintain.

He fell. He slipped beneath the icy water, and was both pushed and pulled, as if two conflicting currents were fighting over him. His body scraped along the shallower

section and was thrown forcefully up against a rock. But it wasn't a rock along the edge. He'd been slammed against the island, and he somehow managed to pull himself ashore.

Bryan felt a weight in his stomach pulling at his extremities so they tingled like an artery refilling with blood, or a sensation like weightlessness, perhaps, as if he'd fallen, or part of him was falling still. His hands were bleeding, and so was most of his right side. He had a gash along his leg. He was exhausted and shaking, and didn't want to face the people lined up along the railing. He curled on his side with his back to them, on this tiny island in the middle of a raging river that wanted nothing more than to sweep him up and over the edge.

He imagined himself submerged like the two guys who went over, knocking up against boulders beneath the falls. No hope of a Search and Rescue helicopter, of a ladder thrown down. But if he had been swept over the edge, then they could finally put him away in a box and be done with him. With him out of the way, everyone's life would be easier. The feeling in his gut forced out tears that mingled with the water all around. Bryan waited, crying, half-expecting they might just leave him there.

Keeper

The blue head of the ostrich-like bird appears from behind the pampas grass as Serval Lowell watches. It approaches, tilting its keratin crown resembling a duck-billed dinosaur, one way and then the other with each step, as if considering him. If it weren't for the fence, the prehistoric bird could leap four feet in the air on its powerful legs and kick Serval in the chest. It could knock him down, then lacerate his carotid artery with that dagger of a middle third toe. It could eviscerate him. Instead, the cassowary pauses. It blinks. It grabs at one flap of its red double-wattle with its beak, drops it, grabs for it again. The bird seems to be experiencing a similar confusion of purpose.

Serval specializes in mammals, but the quiet he finds behind the Bird House draws him here. For the past ten years he has been the Small Mammal House curator, in charge of arranging and monitoring the collection, the things that go on behind the scenes. He also fulfills the duties of the species champion for the golden lion tamarin by overseeing the breeding programs for the captive populations worldwide. When he first took on the championship, he grew a thick strawberry blonde beard as a gesture of solidarity with the tiny maned primates. He shaved it after his son's death last summer.

Serval's heart hasn't been into the championship since he lost his son. His heart hasn't been into much of anything. Instead, all he can think of is getting his hands on an aye-aye, a fixation every bit as strange as the woodpecker-like mammal itself. The aye-aye is classified as a lemur but certain characteristics more resemble a rodent: its bushy tail the same length as its body and its perpetually growing teeth. It has the sensitive

hearing of a feline, with ears that similarly rotate like satellite dishes, as well as enhanced night vision and an acute sense of smell. Cloaked in thick, black fur, this creature stalks the forests of Madagascar, tapping on trees with its skeletal middle digit to detect beetles or grubs hiding in hollow spaces. This fixation has recently gotten Serval into a good deal of trouble.

The Director called Serval into his office a week ago, upset because an unexpected animal arrived in quarantine—a young female fossa, the stubby-legged predator from Madagascar that looked something like a small cougar crossed with a weasel. Serval placed the fossa order a year ago when the acquisition of another golden lion tamarin fell through. He agreed to take the fossa in the tamarin's place, failing to reason through what was now obvious: a fossa was not a tamarin and could not be housed with them. He was trying to garner favor with this zoo that had a breeding pair of aye-ayes, and he'd been too amenable. Once the fossa arrived, it became clear that there was no place to put her. Serval claimed the one remaining space in the Small Mammal House for "emergency specimen overflow." Really, it was on reserve for the aye-aye.

As he sat in the Director's office, Serval understood that he was being reprimanded. However, the director's precise words were difficult to focus on with the giraffe tie he was wearing, the mottled orange and brown neck leading down to the thickness of the body, the four legs that seemed perfectly arranged where the diamond began to narrow to its point. The fossa situation was arranged far less perfectly, but Serval couldn't just return the animal like an item of clothing. There was a checklist of protocols for moving an animal, and a period of quarantine. The process took about a year, which is why Serval's slip-up had only come to the Director's attention now.

“I can’t just give it back,” Serval said.

“No, *take* it back.” The Director said. “Take a leave of absence and take the darned thing all the way back to Madagascar. With your apparent fondness for the animals of the region, this might just be the best get-a-way for you. Maybe a change of perspective will help you get your head on straight. We’ve got a contact at the Kirindy Reserve, so you can fly into the capital, transfer to the nearest town, and hire a car to the reserve from there. You’ll virtually pass right over the capital, which is where the March coup was centered. You’ll still want to be alert and wary, of course.”

Serval understood that the sympathy he’d previously been extended was at an end, and that his job could even be on the line. But what commanded the majority of his attention as he rose to leave was how perfectly the giraffe’s face was centered on the knot of the Director’s tie. The two ossicones that gave cartoon giraffes an insect-like appearance were perfectly aligned at the top of the knot, and the head appeared perfectly connected to the body. How many times must the director have tied and retied that knot to get it just right? And why all this effort for such a silly tie? What was the point of it?

Now, the whine of a child cuts through the stillness outside the Bird House. The cassowary looks up. “The Panda House is closed. But we can get you a stuffed one at the gift shop. Okay? Would you like that? Would that make you happy?” Serval can’t make out the words, only the sharp, gravelly texture of the child’s response.

Tomorrow, Serval leaves for Madagascar.

#

Early morning light rims the window of the cabin where Serval wakes after only a few hours of sleep. He has flown for two days and crossed seven time zones. It was afternoon when he arrived at the airport in Antananarivo, the capital city. His views of it were only from the air: rice paddies stretched out around the city and in raised levels cut into the surrounding hillsides, alongside the dark pink of staggered adobe dwellings. The runway was paved, but the main building of the airport was little more than a shed. He filed off the plane with everyone else, then packed into a tiny room with a single outlet, like a funnel. Periodic announcements were made over a PA in French, which Serval did not understand. He barely got his visa processed in time to make his connecting flight.

Farmland was visible in all directions as the plane began the descent into the seaside town of Morondava. Palm trees and large circles of green, the patchwork of rice paddies awaiting the rains. Miniature zebu lolled around puddle-sized watering holes, with wading birds stuck around the edges like pins. The sea was only visible as they landed.

From this even smaller airport, Serval hired a taxi. He checked in to a hotel with individual cabins on the beach, arranged a driver, then eventually fell into a sleep devoid of the recurrent dreams he'd been having for the past year.

Upon waking, Serval can feel the absence of these dreams, like the absence of his son, whose presence he can feel, somehow, at the heart of them. Although his son is nowhere to be found, this seems to imply, in the logic of dreams, that finding him might still be a possibility. If he were to simply follow the sound of the aye-aye's telltale tapping, beyond the branches torn loose from trees, and the claw marks slashed into the

ground, thick as tires. Out beyond the tamarins shrieking from above with their nest boxes raided. Beyond the concrete iced over with the water splashed from the sea lion's pool, the crystals glistening in helicopter searchlights while the sea lions ark-ark-ark a disapproval so deep that their entire bodies flop from side to side until their slick pelts freeze to the ice, and they are stuck there.

Serval lies on the thin mattress listening to the ocean waves until the cries of individual birds become more of a chorus, and early morning light brightens the window around the curtains. Time to get up. He showers, readies himself for his journey. He slips on his pants with the zippers just above his slightly bowlegged knees, buttons his travel shirt to the neck to hide his wiry chest hair. He is on the thin side of stocky, with a proportionally smallish head and particularly round eyes, accentuated by puffiness around the lids. He dons his brimmed hat, then props his framed backpack on the bed, eases his arms into the straps, and hoist it onto his shoulders. Then he picks up the fossa in its carrier and heads out to the hotel restaurant and patio.

The patio is open, overlooking the ocean. Serval orders breakfast while he waits for the driver he arranged. He watches teams of dark-skinned people wade out and spread huge nets just beyond a concrete structure that lays partially submerged near shore. It resembles a child's blocky chair, giant-sized, and overturned with the back submerged. Flat, round clouds fan out from the horizon like squadrons of advancing checker pieces. A dog whines somewhere nearby. Serval looks up at an assortment of shark jaws hung to dry from a pole near a doorway, out of which a young man materializes with his breakfast.

A yellow dog approaches at the smell of coffee and eggs. The dog looks poorly fed, like the fossa could probably best it in a fight. Serval bites into a roll, and the dog wags its tail hopefully. So as not to encourage the dog, Serval avoids eye contact. He stares at a poster tacked on the other side of the patio, depicting three giant yellow moths, and a chameleon, superimposed over a pristine beach. The poster lacks a baobab tree, the main tourist draw on this part of the island, as well as any species of lemur, the main tourist draw of the island overall.

The poster reminds Serval of the mural outside the visitor's center of the zoo, a glazed puzzle of creation incorporating all the animals the artist could fit together within the allotted space. A gibbon stretches an arm around a hippopotamus; an elephant curves its trunk over a pair of pandas riding on a komodo dragon's back. But there remains a conspicuously empty space between the top of an elephant's head and the diagonal slope of a giraffe's neck that bothers Serval each time he passes. It seems to him a glaring error on the artist's part. Something should be placed there: an insect, a bird, a small lemur. The poster suffers similarly.

Serval imagines the walk up to the visitor's center, past the elephant house and the cheetahs stalking the visiting children, and past the mural, of course. He'd attended a curator's meeting the day before he left, taken his usual place at the long conference table in the meeting room on the second floor. Circling the walls were the same photographed nature scenes that no longer seemed familiar. A woman from the Serengeti Trail sat beneath a photo of a mother zebra nursing its young. She posed a riddle to a man from the Invertebrates House. "Why did the snail want an S painted on the side of his car?"

The man blinked. “So when he drove past people would say ‘look at that S-car go.’ Get it? Escargot?”

As he sits on the patio, Serval pictures the sharp s-curves of a dark road and still fails to see the humor. “The zebra is one of the few animals that actually smiles,” the woman said. He remembers her hair pulled back with a thick streak of grey along each side. When the Elephant House Curator moved into the seat beside him, Serval turned to her with his response. “It’s just a gesture,” he said, “like lowering the ears.” The Elephant House curator made a bracing smile like an elephant might before wrapping its trunk around a heavy log. “I’m sure I don’t know at all what you mean.” At first he’d thought she didn’t know the answer either. But then there was the woman with the streaks through her hair. She was the one who asked him the question. But “hair in despair” was all he could think to say. Could this be the answer?

Serval and his wife, Celia, thought to preserve what they could of the natural world they both loved by impacting it with only one, additional set of carbon footprints. Optimistically, naively, they’d made their one, small claim on the future—not yet understanding that the stewardship of nature is incompatible with its very laws. It isn’t too late, perhaps, for them to try again, but Serval doesn’t know how he could possibly bear the worry that around each corner might wait another potential cataclysm.

Serval stopped seeing a shrink some months past, another individual who’d posed questions without any answers. He wouldn’t be surprised to discover the man now, concealed behind a piece of wicker furniture, taking notes, wagging foot over knee in that manner that still makes Serval nervous. Every time Serval asked what he was

writing, the man said, “dig deeper.” These two words filling page after page, wearing holes in the tablet through repetition. And now here he is in Madagascar. He has dug through to the other side of the world.

A man appears through the doorway leading to the street. Serval notes that the inhabitants of this country aren’t much shorter than him. The man wears jeans, a checkered shirt, a faded blue baseball cap. He comes at Serval with one of the widest smiles, and some of the most exuberant French he has heard yet. “Bonjour! Bonjour! Bagages, no? Oui, je vais prendre vos bagages! Je suis votre chauffeur et porter et votre guide! Je suis Philémon! Allons à Kirindy réserve!” This must be his driver.

Serval understands that the man means to take his luggage only because he is grabbing for it. “Are you my driver? Parlez-vous English?” Serval’s ability to speak French is little better his ability to understand it. He suspects that the man’s French may be only marginally better since it lacks the nasal quality he’s come to recognize. He reminds himself that Malagasy is the native tongue.

“Philemon,” the man says. He grins and points to his chest.

Serval tosses the remainder of the roll to the dog. “No parlez-vous Français.”

The man points to the fossa carrier, still grinning. “Yes?” he says.

Then Serval understands that Philemon must be the man’s name. “Serval,” he says, pointing to himself. Philemon leaves the carrier with him.

Serval places the fossa in the carrier behind him in the back seat, while Philemon loads Serval’s backpack in the hatchback of an old, compact car that sits low to the

ground. The car appears to have once been painted red or orange, and the sky seems even more vibrant against its dulling coat. The blue is bright enough that once they set off out of town, Serval feels as if he's been pressed into the pages of an illustrated children's tale, one in which the world has been turned upside down. The verge of fall has become the verge of spring. The branches of trees resemble roots, reaching for a sky that can't be much farther than the distance between passenger seat and windshield.

The land that stretches out on either side of them is similar to what he saw from the airplane window, but with more detail, until the car stirs up clouds of red billowing dust that cover over everything they pass. Mostly rice paddies or sugar cane fields, some bushes, an occasional baobab tree, then a cluster of huts growing in number and proximity until they form a village large enough for a market where people throng. The inhabitants dress in a western style, but the women wrap fabric around their waists, beneath their blouses. They hold plastic jugs or buckets in hand, or balanced on their heads. The car passes a field freshly burned for planting. Two boys sell charcoal alongside the road in giant sacks. Underlying everything is the scent of burning.

The road soon becomes less populated, with little more than stretches of brush. Then the engine begins to sputter, and the car comes to rest alongside a clump of palms. *Error and a spare*, Serval thinks to himself. But it isn't a flat. It has to be an issue with the engine. All the same, Serval doubts they have a spare tire and is certain there are other precautions that likely haven't been taken. He didn't even check in at the desk to verify that Philemon was the driver he'd requested. With a familiar pang of self-condemnation, he recognizes that this was the same kind of reckless behavior he'd unwittingly instilled in his son.

The line between what constituted safety and what might be a risk has blurred now that Serval understands that danger lurks everywhere. The protocols he thought he'd understood once Gabe had appeared thirteen years ago, less than a year after he and Celia graduated college, were nonexistent. They thought they'd grasped what life was all about when they first held their child. They imagined they'd moved from subjects to full participants in that sticky web of it, both children themselves and now parents, fully enmeshed. The web had revealed itself to be not so sticky after all, more tenuous than they'd imagined, and full of holes. They'd envisioned Gabe's chubby set of legs growing into adulthood, eventually merging with another pair, and another walking forward from that. They'd foolishly thought that this was the natural order of things.

"One minute," Philemon says. He smiles, gets out, raises the hood. "You take picture!" Philemon points to a number of raised concrete structures just visible down the dirt road a ways. "Sleeping," he says, as if to clarify.

Serval knows these must be tombs. He gets out of the car as he's been instructed. He stands there, watching, as a vehicle the size of his fist barrels toward them, leading a cloud of dust. It grows into a shiny behemoth as it passes, with a spare tire mounted on the hood as well as on the back. The driver honks, and Philemon waves. When the dust from the SUV finally clears, Philemon is staring at what lays beneath the hood with one hand on his forehead, and Serval knows that this predicament is his own fault. If he'd been willing to pay a higher price, he'd be moving down the road in an SUV just like that right now.

Serval walks down the road in the direction Philemon indicated, hoping to come across an endemic reptile, or a bird, maybe even a lemur, curled up and sleeping in the hollow of a tree. But there are few trees, little underbrush. Farmland mostly, a baobab tree now and again in the distance. Three women are bent in the fields. A couple birds perch on the backs of zebu. Something dashes across the road, crossing only inches from his feet. A tenrec, he speculates, an endemic species of hedgehog. He has a couple in the Small Mammal House, kept separate by sexes like the two elephant shrews.

It seemed strange to think that just a few days ago, he'd been at the zoo. He remembers recently feigning a deep interest in the elephant shrew's manipulation of its nasal appendage, hoping to go unnoticed by the particularly touchy-feely keeper who would often sneak up behind him with words of wisdom. "Do you realize there's no word in the English language for a parent who has lost a child? We have orphans, widows and widowers, but absolutely nothing for this one."

If he were at the zoo now, he'd likely be watching a golden lion tamarin fix him with a sour expression from its perch. The tamarins had just been brought in from their outdoor sleeping boxes and were not happy about it. They preferred to remain outside, as they did late spring through early fall, leaping through the trees while volunteers monitored them and educated the public on the plight of their wild counterparts in Rio de Janeiro—even after one of their young was snatched up by a hawk that spring. Volunteers had to wear these horrible red volunteer shirts with gold letters large enough to read from some distance: ASK ME ABOUT... On the back it read: GOLDEN LION TAMARINS! Since the infant had been taken, Serval didn't want to talk about the

tamarins or their newest batch of triplets they'd gone directly to work creating as replacements for their lost one.

Serval kicks at the red dirt, dislodging chunks with the toe of his hiking boots. Here, there are no words in the English language at all. Here, he does not have to explain himself. He thinks of the enclosure he will have to retrofit for the aye-aye, all the explaining required to get funding for the necessary black box enclosure. Serval imagines the creature making itself at home there, scrambling for the darkest of corners, its red eyes staring back at him. The middle finger scratching, moving forward by degrees, reaching out from the darkness. He can feel the tap, tap, tap against the plywood resonating through the floorboards and up through the bottom of his feet. He can feel the tapping through from the other side of the world. He can feel the tapping in his teeth.

The two women in the field look up. The tapping has taken on a presence beyond his imagination, a louder, stronger one. It's Philemon, pounding the engine with a giant wrench. The gesture seems to be one of frustration, but it works. The engine comes humming back to life, and Philemon jumps in, speeds toward Serval, then slows the car to pick him up. Serval is covered in a cloud of dust; he blows his nose and isn't sure if it is dirt or dried blood that appears in the handkerchief. To be safe, he makes a dust mask out of the cloth by tying it across his face.

The fossa is still there, in the back seat. As they drive past the tombs, Serval can see that they are painted with shapes and designs, a few recognizable: a bicycle, cattle, the sun. Something like Egyptian tomb paintings, he supposes. One of many awkward exchanges, comes to mind, this one with the Elephant House curator. "Elephants never

forget,” she said, leaning in close. “They are the only other animal that return to the bones of their dead.” He is fairly certain that she actually said this.

It has been just over a year since his son’s death. Almost a month beyond. The anniversary should have marked something, but Serval has felt no change. The only change is the arrival of the fossa. It is possible that in this is something. Perhaps some sense of letting go will come from putting it back, but he can’t imagine how letting go is any solution. He already feels like he is drifting at zero gravity, everything floating right along next to him whether his hands are open or closed.

When Serval returned home with the fossa, he knew Celia wouldn’t approve of the animal in the house or of his mission. Celia works for a conservation fund, and while she appreciates animals at a respectful distance, she doesn’t trust them up close. She complained that it seemed highly impractical, and very strange in terms of protocol, for an animal that was merely vulnerable, not even endangered yet to be set free in the wild. It made as much sense to Serval as anything else.

It made at least as much sense as the Ape House curator’s proposal that they should consolidate portions of the Small Mammals House into a new, renovated and expanded Apes and Primates House. “Lemurs started off in Africa with the apes and would have continued if they hadn’t got stranded on that chunk of island,” the curator put forth as his rationale. Serval liked the Ape House curator least of all the people he had to interact with. He suspected that the man was motivated by nothing more than a gluttonous desire to accumulate species. When Serval thought of him, he thought of the riddle of how to trap a monkey: put peanuts in a hollowed out coconut or jar with a

narrow opening, and once the monkey grabbed a fist full, it would be unable to remove its hand. The monkey would hold itself stuck there. Apes are supposed to be smarter than this, but Serval isn't so sure.

He tries not to think of the similar trap he'd unwittingly devised for his son. They'd watched all those nature adventure shows, and Serval had tried to instill in him a love of the wilderness and adventure, a willingness to "live a little" and take some risks—things Serval himself had never felt comfortable doing. He always wished he had the guts to be one of those guys rappelling down cliffs, crossing rapids, chewing grubs and biting into still-wriggling fish as a matter of survival. Where did this come from, this selfish desire to make his son into what he wished he could have been? His son had grasped onto these daredevil ideals, and this is what had led to his death, the joyride that culminated in him and a friend swerving off the road and into a ravine. At least the other boy survived; his life does not also have to weigh on Serval's conscience.

The car forces them to a stop again and again, so it is afternoon by the time they come upon the forest of the reserve. The trees have shed their leaves, and the spring rains have yet to begin to stimulate new growth. At the reserve, lodging is set up like a camp, with huts arranged around a large thatched structure at the center. Serval grabs the carrier and his backpack from the car. He almost can't believe that he's made it.

"Fossa! Mon Dieu! Ah! Fossa! Vite! Photo!" A squat man appears on the platform at the center of the structure and gestures toward a fossa running low past him. It disappears behind a group of huts.

The squat man seems jovial enough, chattering on in French as he shows Serval to the toilets, which are outside, along with a few wash areas with faucets, each made private with a wood partition. He takes note of the decrepit huts along the path on the opposite side of the wash area from the cabin the man finally shows him to. The hut is rustic in a way Serval finds pleasant, with fresh-hewn wood for walls. The roof is newly thatched, and inside is a table and a wooden bed. He sets the carrier on the floor, removes the handkerchief he still has wrapped across his face, and his shoes. He then falls asleep on the bed under mosquito netting, and is awakened sometime later by a strange sound. He hears it again, a piercing yip. He realizes that it's the fossa. She is probably hungry, which, he realizes, he is as well.

Serval unrolls the sleeves of his shirt to keep off insects and heads out to the restaurant structure for dinner. He stashes a flashlight in one cargo pocket and carries the fossa in the carrier. Darkness has begun to descend with its background hum and unfamiliar chirps, and the fossa's snuffling grows louder. She senses the other fossas, the plentitude of surrounding prey. A sliver of moon is already high in the sky. Winged creatures crowd the lights that have just come on under the thatched roof.

The only other visitor is a dark, wiry man slightly taller than Serval. He grins broadly. "Well, howdy," he says, waving Serval over. Serval understands that this must be his contact. The Director told him the man's name, which Serval no longer remembers. He remembers only that the man is supposed to speak English.

Serval sits down at the man's table, tucks the carrier under his chair. The man doesn't even glance at it. "What're you going to have, Pardener?" He draws out the

word into a three-syllable drawl. He chuckles, then nods toward the limited menu in Serval's hands. "I saw you come in," he explains. "With that bandana over your face like some Wild West outlaw going to hold us all up." The man chuckles again. His clothes are the standard travel combo and appear dusty in that deep down way of everything here, permeated by red earth.

The man orders two beers and both of their meals when the squat man reappears, in what sounds to Serval like impeccable French.

The food arrives, and the man attempts to make conversation while carving into his slab of zebu. "Nothing like grass-fed beef, yeah? Free range too."

Serval takes a hearty slug of beer. "Black's the new green," he says, then realizes that he's gotten it backwards.

The man chews on a French fry. "You've got that right! Slash and burn agriculture, trees chopped up for charcoal. And this was before the coup! But they spare the baobab trees, at least. In these parts. To cut them down is *fady*."

Serval shakes his head to indicate that he doesn't know this word.

"Forbidden, taboo. They think the baobabs hold the souls of their ancestors. The trees are saved by superstition."

Serval says, "You're the one I'm supposed to see about the fossa?"

"The fossa." The man looks Serval over. He sticks a piece of meat in his mouth, then resumes talking as if he doesn't understand what Serval is getting at. "You've seen the camp fossa, I assume. Eating fossa is *fady*, but not killing it. At least, not around

here. The taboos vary village to village.” The man gestures at Serval with his fork.

“Here, they probably let them live because of the tourists. But the industry’s been pretty grim since the coup. Even the lemurs are feeling the pinch.” He then leans in. “Some lemurs are actually quite tasty, or so I hear.”

“To a fossa, I’m sure,” Serval says. He remembers the Big Cat Keeper’s suggestion to put the fossa on Lemur Island when the director raised the issue at the last meeting. The Big Cat Keeper referenced the cartoon, and how the lion uses self-control to avoid eating the zebra. He’d said, *We can demonstrate to the public how predatory animals adapt to captivity in this way*. Serval thought the guy made a good point: if the fossa were being fed, it would be on its best behavior. Hunting is a hassle; hunting is hard. What creature would want to hunt if it didn't have to?

The man chuckles again. Like everyone else, he seems to get some joke that Serval doesn’t. “You want to know why eating fossa is *fady*?” the man says.

“Sure,” Serval says.

“They’ve been known to prey on small children who wander off into the forest alone.” The man puts down his fork, leans back. “No one wants to accidentally eat a child. You got any kids?”

Serval shakes his head. He hopes the man isn’t going to draw this out much longer. The meal is beginning to remind him of ones at home. Meals spent debating accident and fault, and exactly who or what should be held responsible. One lawsuit dropped or thrown out, just as a new one is filed, then consolidated with suits already in play, like a legal version of gin rummy. Celia’s vendetta of blame only accentuates his

feelings of responsibility. She and her lawyer went after the company that manufactured the car the boys had taken out—an issue with a recall and faulty brakes. They’d gone after the state for its poor maintenance of country roads and necessary guardrails. Serval knew that such inanimate objects were not to blame, but he did his best to play along, like one of many markers in a board game, his motions dictated by a roll of someone else’s dice. Often it felt like an invisible hand lifted and moved him. And so he slid from one square to another—home to work to home again, from sleep to waking, from past to present to a future that slipped into the past again. Going through the motions even though he’d already lost.

“I noticed you wear a ring,” the man says. “But there’s still plenty of time for all that family stuff, am I right?”

“Guess so,” Serval says, a little more abruptly than he intended. He pushes the chicken to one side of his plate to better extricate the rice trapped under the bone.

The man tries again. “Have you gotten a load of that erotic funeral art over by the old huts?”

“Erotic?” Serval asks, then wishes he hadn’t.

“Yeah, don’t ask me.”

They chew in silence for a moment.

“I assume you’re my contact,” Serval tries again. “About the fossa.”

“Yeah, I’m the guy.” The man sighs. “But I’m sensing there’s something else you came for, yeah? Something you might like to take back with you?” The man fixes his gaze on Serval.

Serval feels a moment of alarm. There is nothing he wants! He had to make the journey. He was directed to take the fossa back. “The director—” he begins, but the man doesn’t let him finish.

“Anything is possible. The country’s in the midst of a coup. I can even get you the proper transport papers. You’re sure there’s nothing else you might want to take back in the fossa’s place?”

There was nothing! With the word he sees the soon-to-be empty carrier, the empty zoo enclosure, the aye-aye that would so perfectly fit inside both spaces.

“You want one of those dancing sifakas for your zoo? Take one. Or two! Or four! You could teach them to waltz. Hear that?” he says, holding one hand behind his ear. Serval hears a whistle, then a chirp. “That’s a mouse lemur. Very popular! Which is why they’re endangered. You could fit a couple dozen in that carrier of yours. They’re nocturnal, so they’re out and about. Even as we speak, ripe for the taking.”

The Ape House curator’s words come to him: *You’re halfway to turning the Small Mammal House into Madagascaria.* And the Reptile House curator: *The Mad House. That’s what we’re going to have to start calling it.*

Something whirrs past Serval’s cheek. He turns, but it disappears into the darkness. When he turns back to the man, he finds himself speaking. “What about

another nocturnal lemur?” Serval says. “The aye-aye. If I could trade the fossa for an aye-aye.” He can feel possibility in this.

The man takes his final bite, puts down his fork and knife. “Well, you know, Pardner, if it points that finger at you.” He holds his middle finger out horizontally towards Serval, then moves it across his own throat. “They say it sneaks into huts and murders the occupants. That the middle finger can puncture an artery as well as it can a bark-dwelling grub.”

“That sounds like superstition,” Serval says, but he feels uneasy.

“Heh-heh. Malagasy for I don’t know. Heh-heh. Aye-aye. Sounds the same, yeah? Superstition. Reality. One thing I’ve learned is it’s not always so clear where to draw the line.” The man wipes his mouth, then balls up his napkin. “But if you’re set on making this trade, I just need you to set the trap. If you can do that, I can have it done for you by morning, most likely.” The man hands him a baggy across the table. “Pour a handful of these grubs in the carrier and put it somewhere dark, where I can easily find it. How about over by last season’s huts? You won’t be able to miss the carvings I was telling you about. After gorging itself, it should just fall asleep. They’re fairly easy to catch using this method.”

Serval nods. The man points him in the direction he saw the fossa come from when arrived. “You can just let the fossa go over there behind the trash heap. With the others.”

The man excuses himself, and Serval watches him cross the perimeter of dim light into darkness. He didn’t asked for any payment, and Serval wonders if he will. He

wonders if he'll have enough to pay him. The squat manager collects the plates and empty bottles with a few words in French. Serval sits for a moment, trying to decide what to do with these fairytale-like instructions. He sits there long enough that he only makes it down the few steps from the deck before the lights cut out.

At the zoo, Serval often wandered the grounds at dusk. He would make his way as far as he could to the far quadrants the visitors have vacated, where the skittering of squirrels and foraging of birds in the underbrush would be all he could hear beneath the buzz of cicadas slowly rising over the chirrup of crickets. The darkness he finds himself in now is much less comforting, much less familiar. All of the sounds and sensations are disconcerting, strange. It's a darkness with teeth.

Serval pulls out his flashlight. The beam reflects off two sets of red eyes near the kitchen. His heart skips a beat. The fossas, he realizes. They appear to be moving closer, and Serval's heart starts beating fast. But he is the one moving closer, approaching them, and he reminds himself that he is much too big to be considered prey. Still, he holds the arm with the flashlight extended above his head so that he will appear larger. The red eyes back off a ways. He sets down the carrier and unzips it. He sets out the chicken bones, as incentive for the other fossas to approach. Then Serval retreats to the edge of the dining structure to wait, flashing his beam across the trash heap every so often. After carrying the fossa all this way, he feels compelled to see her off.

In what light is left of the setting moon, he can see the long outline of bodies around the red eyes reflecting his flashlight. They move forward, sniff and vocalize,

circle around the carrier, then retreat, return again. Finally, his fossa scampers off with them.

Serval waits a few minutes before retrieving the carrier. When he does, it feels too light. Lifting it, he can feel the emptiness of the enclosure at the zoo. He's certain he can make out a tapping in the distance. It would be something like a fair trade, a one-to-one switch. Besides, he won't be able to sleep for some time after that nap he took, and probably not at all as long as he knows the aye-aye is out there, searching in the darkness for grubs, potentially reaching beneath the sill and pulling open his window, mistaking the pulsing along his throat for the motion of something edible.

The air is just shy of being warm, but by no means cold. Still, just thinking about the creature, Serval begins to feel that chill in the extremities that accompanies panic. He heads towards the older huts the man mentioned before he loses his nerve. The barriers of trees and bushes make getting a big picture view difficult. The moon has slipped behind them. Blue-silver pinpoints shine back at him from the shrubbery, the eyes of giant hunting spiders, some the size of his palm. They move out from his feet as he steps through fallen leaves. He moves tentatively. He doesn't want to walk into a web, or branch, or...anything else.

He can make out the roof of a hut, the outlines of palm fronds hanging down at odd angles. The jagged fingers of thatch seem to reach toward him. The aye-aye could be around here anywhere, watching, waiting.

He walks a short ways down a path and comes upon two four-foot wooden markers that he doesn't want to examine too closely. These must be the ones the man

was talking about. He sets down the carrier as he was instructed, then sets off, back in the direction of his cabin. He heads toward the eating structure, then takes a right and curves around. But instead of coming upon the structure, he ends up returning to the exact place where he'd set the carrier. He shines the flashlight around him to try to get his bearings. The open window of the nearest huts gapes a darkness his beam can't penetrate. His tentativeness turns toward panic.

Serval breathes in deeply. He tells himself that he must be disoriented. He must have missed the turn off from this path onto that of the one that leads to the newer huts. He remembers seeing these huts when the squat man gave him the tour. He'd made mental note of how the path to his cabin deviated from the route to these. He tries again, taking a softer right, but again he arrives back at the carrier. Serval then heads in the opposite direction, even though he is sure this can't be right. This new way only leads him back around, and this time, face to face with the erotic carvings. They appear almost life size in the gratuity of their embraces. Larger than life. An impossible phallus, hands grasping huge, melon-round breasts, nipples the size of grapes.

And again he tries. And again the circle. And again these grinning totems. Maybe he is right to panic. Maybe this is exactly what he should be doing. No, he tells himself. The path simply goes in a circle. It's a circular path. It's just a different path from the one he is supposed to be on. If he can take a minute to breathe, to clear his head, he can stop this heart-pounding dance around these wooden markers. Procreation, which leads to death, and then decay, which leads to growth, procreation, which begets death and more decay, and inevitably, procreation. Around and around the markers like the endlessly repetitive cycle.

But it isn't endless. It has a very definite end. And with this thought, he reaches a certainty, as if watching himself in a horror movie—he will not make it out of this alive. His piece is finally being taken off the board. This is what the moment before death must feel like. His son. And he can feel it, that finger reaching toward him, the creature's presence filling the immensity of all that he cannot see. The darkness obscures the rot and decay of the huts, the insects feeding off of it, the spiders fanning out around him to capture and feed on them. He kicks at his ankles, each in turn with the opposite foot, one and then the other, against the light touch of spider legs moving under his cuffs and up his pant. Something prods his shoulder. The aye-aye. Serval propels himself straight through a cluster of bushes.

There is some flapping and chirping—of bird or lemur, maybe both—as he bursts through the dense foliage. He shakes out his arms and legs and wipes at his head and face. Then he immediately swings his flashlight in front of him. And there it is! The dining structure! He can find his way from here.

When Serval awakens in his cabin some hours later, it's to the aye-aye tap, tap, tapping. A cold dread seizes him, but there is light beyond his eyelids. Daylight. Someone is knocking at the door. Serval opens it to the man from the night before. He has the carrier, and sure enough, the aye-aye is inside. The black mound of fur looks perfectly harmless, like a hedgehog or a kitten, only a little larger and with longer limbs, and an incredibly bushy tail.

“You ready? This guy's going to take you back.” The man points to Philemon.

“I’m not sure that car’s going to make it,” Serval says. But the engine does sound a little better when Philemon starts it up.

Down the road, it dies again. Philemon indicates, with the word “auto” and pantomimes of pushing, that Serval should help him push the car. If Serval remembers correctly, there’s a village somewhere down this road. He works up a good sweat, over which the red dust settles, but they manage to get the car there.

Serval checks on the aye-aye in the back seat while Philemon approaches an old man sitting beneath a shade structure a ways back from the road. Palm fronds are spread out in front of the man, fanned out like an entire deck of cards. Serval surmises they are being dried for a hut similar to the one he’d slept in last night. Philemon and the old man gesture energetically to him.

The old man wears a loose-fitting shirt and shorts, a cloth hat with a brim. He gestures to a pile of rocks under the shade structure. A yellow dog trots up from the main part of the village with its tail wagging. Philemon points to the dog, then throws one of the rocks at it. He misses, but the dog scampers off. Philemon nods, then indicates to Serval that he should take the man’s place in the shade with a gesturing of palms and the word, “here.” Philemon and the man head off toward the car.

The village is set a little farther back from the road between the few trees. There is no grass, little plant life. The green of the palm fronds make a pleasing contrast against the exposed red earth. Every so often, Serval can hear the aye-aye adjust its position in the carrier.

Soon, three children approach him. A dog follows. Serval gets ready with a rock, but the children shoo it away. There are two boys, and a younger girl. They wear shorts but no shoes or shirts. The oldest boy has what appears to be a homemade ukelele pieced together from scraps of wood. The strings appear to be made of gut.

The children speak only Malagasy. The girl says, “firy kilao?”

Serval shakes his head, and the boy with the ukelele picks a few twangy notes. The three of them rotate positions. The youngest boy then says, “firy metatra ny sakany?”

Serval shakes his head again. He holds out his palms as further indication of his puzzlement. The boy strums a few notes this time, and the three rotate. When it is the oldest boy’s turn, he passes the instrument to the younger one.

“firy metatra ny halaliny?” The oldest boy asks.

Serval doesn’t know how else to indicate that he doesn’t understand what they are saying. It must be evident to them, yet they continue this game. Finally, after a few more rotations, he gestures to the carrier and says, “You want to see what’s in here?”

“Eny, eny!” the girl squeals. The boys nod.

It must be the gesture that they understand. Serval unzips one side, and the children get down on their hands and knees so that they can see inside. The aye-aye is still sleeping.

“Aye-aye!” the oldest boy says.

Serval can't help but smile at his enthusiasm.

The younger boy gets up. He looks somewhat disappointed. The girl stands as well. She appears amused.

“Veloma!” the older boy says, as he also stands to leave. The other two repeated this word after him and wave as they walked off. The last word, he understands, must be a farewell. *Veloma*, he thinks, making a mental note. *Good-bye*. This is the only sense he can make out of this encounter.

When Philemon returns a couple hours later, they set out again, and the car seems to be running more smoothly than it had on the entire trip. But when they reach the stretch of road lined with the species of baobab tree endemic to Madagascar, the *Adansonia Grandidieri*, the car starts stuttering and shaking again. Philemon has to pull over, and this time Serval is relieved to get out. He wants to stretch his legs, walk along this stretch of giant trees. A band of children point at him, delighted, and yell “Vizaha! Vizaha!” a word Serval understands to mean “visitor.” They request *bonbons* and crowd around him, then disperse when they see he has nothing to give them.

Serval wanders down the road a ways while Philemon consults with a local about the car. He pulls a camera from one zippered pocket and takes pictures of the squat trees that line the road. He makes sure to keep the carrier with him. A boy in shorts tails behind him with a baobab fruit, grinning and bartering for it playfully in basic enough French that Serval understands he is suggesting astronomical prices. He looks like the boy from the village, but of course this isn't possible. Serval points his camera up at the trees' root-like branches curving toward the sky, then takes a picture of a man peddling

past on a bicycle. A few zebu graze between these trees as old as ten, fifteen, twenty generations. The boy with the fruit smiles up at Serval and continues proposing prices until Serval finally slides the camera back into his pocket. This reminds Serval of something, a game he used to play with his son when he was about the same age. The boy places the oblong globe in Serval's empty hand.

Another boy appears. He is slightly older and holds the same type of ukelele-like instrument as the boy in the village. The boy holds the instrument out to Serval, then sees that he has his hands full already—the fruit in one hand and the carrier in the other. The boy pulls the instrument back and strikes the tinny twang of the strings himself. He shouts something that gets the others riled up. They jump around the musician and shout. He plays faster, leading them down the road, toward a column of smoke rising from beyond the rice fields. Flames lick the horizon. Zebu low in the fields. The boys turn and dance back toward Serval again. He is so intent on watching them that he forgets, for a moment, about the fruit he is holding. The boy is still standing next to him.

“How much?” Serval says.

“Heh-heh,” says the boy, switching back to Malagasy. He moves his shoulders. *I don't know.* “Ity ny zanakao lahy,” he says. The other boys return, and the younger one throws up his arms with the rest. He leaves the fruit with Serval and begins to dance, while Serval stands there watching. The carrier pulls one arm taught at his side. He holds the fruit in his other palm, cradling it at the level of his chest. Serval stands like this until he hears the engine rev in a way that sounds promising. He takes the fruit with him.

They stutter their way back to the seaside town where Philemon attempts to drop him as close to the front door of the hotel as possible. But the sand covering the street comes up under the floorboards and beaches the car. Serval has had enough with ruddy dirt roads and unreliable cars to last him a lifetime. He is exhausted and could use a nap, but more than that, he wants to get home. Philemon yells out the window to a gang of boys. As they come running to push them out, Serval imagines wrapping his arms around his wife, the sweet mint-rosemary scent of shampoo that clings to her hair. He knows it's time to return home.

As the car moves forward, Serval imagines the soft warmth of that certain spot against Celia's neck, just below and between chin and ear. How long has it been since they'd fit together this way? How long has it been since he'd thought to miss her? He feels like he's spent the past year here, or somewhere just as far away.

Flights back to Antananarivo leave three days a week, and if he misses today's flight he'll be stuck here for another three days. He doesn't trust Philemon to get him there in a timely manner. As soon as the vehicle is freed from the sandbar, Serval leaps out. He pays Philemon, retrieves his backpack and the carrier. He finds what appears to be a more reliable taxi on the street.

At the airport's security checkpoint, Serval pushes his luggage through the x-ray machine, one he doubts even works. There is little interest in the transport papers for the creature, as he'd expected. The officers at Charles de Galle will likely make up for this lack of scrutiny. Seconds after Serval's backpack slides through the machine, the security guard watching the screen sucks in breath sharply, and exclaims "aye-aye!" He

jumps back, as if to avoid the aim of that accusatory finger. This strikes Serval as comical, a joke he finally gets. It's only once they refuse to let him board the plane that things become serious. They eventually located someone who can speak enough English to explain that the pilot considers it "against the luck" to fly with the aye-aye onboard.

Serval determines this should be easy enough to get around. He'll just take the next flight out. But when he approaches to the counter to make this change to his ticket, the man with the limited English is there. "I give you money back," he says when Serval tries to make the change. He points his finger at the carrier, and then spits over his right shoulder, like warding off the evil eye.

Serval returns to the hotel. He finally has the aye-aye, and he isn't giving it up that easy. There has to be a way to get it out of the country. He could hire a car, travel by road to the capital, where people are supposed to be less superstitious. But there is only one main road going north, and it is poorly paved and crumbling. There will be military checkpoints and possible complications from the coup. If such a trek were to proceed without incident, it would take a day or two; with incident, who knows how long. The early morning wake-up and the events of the afternoon have exhausted him. He falls into an afternoon nap. For the first time since his arrival, he dreams.

He knows that he is still in Madagascar, but he does not recognize this part of the island. Giant logs are being dragged from clear cut forests, through empty fields of churned up mud, and loaded onto ships maneuvering between partially submerged battleships near the docks. Chameleons are sold at the food stalls, still clinging to the sticks on which they were roasted. Piles of lemur carcasses, all long limbs and tails. But

not an aye-aye among them. The creature is still lurking out there somewhere, within the ruins of an old buildings he has yet to explore, or within the deeper cover of the forest that has not yet been pulled down completely. The night has the same texture of black fur, and through it can he feel the hard marbles of the creature's eyes, its sharp teeth for extricating grubs from their tree bark burrows. Thunder cracks in the distance. He can smell fire. Celia, his wife, is there. They're hold hands, staring past the balcony overlooking the sea, not looking at each other. Manta rays rise up from the deeps, their wing-like fins working just as well on air. One carries a child on its back. When a ray rises with a second child, Serval knows he has to do something. It is his responsibility. He can't just sit here as long as the aye-aye is out there on the loose.

Serval wakes with a jolt and looks immediately to the carrier. The sunlight is low; it's almost twilight. Serval heads out for a walk on the beach, and brings the aye-aye. He sits on the sand and watches three men pull in a canoe-like fishing boat. Two boys run up to meet them. One boy resembles the one who'd given him the fruit, who resembled the one from the village, but neither boy could have traveled all that way here on foot in this amount of time. It bothers Serval that he can't seem to tell them apart. He can't remember what he did with the fruit. He must have left it in Philemon's car.

Serval unzips a portion of the carrier's top, waking the aye-aye. It reaches out its hand to grasp the peanut he offers with its long, clawed fingers. It bites through the shell, using the ghoulish middle digit to scoop the nut out. He considers that its big-eared gawky appearance is almost cute. Almost harmless. As long as he can keep his eye on it, he can see how harmless it really is. Maybe when he returns to the hotel he'll even let it out to get some exercise. He'll set it free to scamper about the room.

Beyond Vérité

Steve drives the big black Suburban with his right hand on the wheel. Lindsay sing-songs these words in her head, tapping out fifteen syllables from thumb to pinky on her bare left arm that supports the camera. Moses rides shotgun. A round perfect five. The tapping provides a calming rhythm as they glide along the Sonny Bono Memorial Freeway, heading toward and through Palm Springs. Near Indio, they'll turn off onto 111 and follow its curve along the eastern shore of the Salton Sea, then camp somewhere out near Bombay Beach. Lindsay sits in the back, with the camera aimed out the driver's side window on a wide shot of fifteen windmills with their blades turning, the turbines growing larger-closer, with the question of how well she knows these guys. How well do they even know each other? But this is no serial killer movie with overhead shots of couples in a Lincoln convertible, lounged against suicide doors. This is just a short road trip with a couple guys from film school.

“How're things looking from back there, Linds?” This is Steve's way of noticing that she hasn't said anything in a while.

“I think I'm getting some good windmill shots.” She keeps the camera focused on the rotation of turbines. The camera strap is loose around her hand. Linds, five letters that merge in one beat. Five rhymes with alive. Five maps the symmetry of the human body with its two legs, two arms, and the head on top. Three is the number of triangles, four of squares, and five is circular. A number of completion and balance. Five fingers and toes. E-quil-i-bri-um. According to Aristototle, it's the fifth element that fills the sky

and keeps the planets in their proper orbit. Anything that doesn't add up to five, or cannot be divided by five, leaves a space that bad luck will fill if she can't find a way to neutralize it. This means filling the space with syllables or blinks, words or gestures—each situation requires something slightly different.

“Look at what I brought.” This comes from Moses.

Linds turns the camera toward him, and he holds up a plastic baggie with five squares of paper inside.

“Are you up for a little acid trip?” Steve smiles at Linds in the rearview mirror.

Film students at different levels are mixed together for basic production classes, which is how Steve met Moses, and how Linds met Steve. Steve has completed his first year at the graduate level. He's the only person in the program who has made an effort to befriend her. She doesn't want to mess that up, and since she's managed to keep the windmills framed in multiples of five, no easy task, she might just be up for this too. Any sense of danger blurs with the turbine blades twirling on the pull-out window and the fact that Moses brought an auspicious number of tabs. What she says is “Sure.”

Linds turns the camera so that the miniature, framed version of Moses and Steve and the back of the seats is positioned between her and the original. She dials up the exposure until the line between body and seat is clear. Moses turns to face her, his dark hair spiky like plastic; Steve's is lighter brown, shaggy and straight. The metal frames of his glasses are visible in profile.

This project is not a school assignment. It's a creative experiment in line with the technicalities of "Dogmatic '95." This is what Moses calls Steve's obsession. Dogma '95, as the Danish movement is otherwise known, was started in the nineties and is now defunct. This back-to-basics movement was innovative for its time, and included a long manifesto of artistic rules for filming that even its founders have now tired of. Yet, Steve is fixated on taking this abandoned experiment further. He is fixated on capturing the essence of what is. Linds understands about fixations, but also that the project has the potential to be dull. Of course, this is why Steve brought Moses along as performer and catalyst.

Steve plans to create seamless continuity with the footage, like a giant net with no time code gaps for reality to slip through. The digital time code will link, but they have to change out two data cards from the adapter every forty to fifty-nine minutes. Three data cards fit in the adapter, and trading two out, equals a rotation of five. Since each card holds approximately twenty minutes of footage, switching two out just past the forty-minute mark allows a significant margin of error before the adapter plugged into the camera begins recording over the footage on the third card still in use. Their roles in this process are as follows: Steve drives, keeps time, and pretends not to direct; Linds shoots and swap out cards as directed; Moses downloads and costars. In approximately thirty-five minutes they'll need to swap out the cards again.

Moses says, "Reality is about to get a whole lot harder to capture."

Steve shrugs, responds, “I see it as nothing more than a metaphorical pebble for this film to work out of its shoe. It’s just one form of constraint, albeit a bolder one.”

This pebble theory comes from one of the Dogma ’95 founding directors.

As they enter town, the San Jacinto Mountains seem to glow purple just beyond the palm trees and watered greenery. Moses hands two bits of paper to Steve. Two for each of them. Linds gets one, as Moses explains, because she’s smaller. She hasn’t told either of them that this will be her first time.

“Get close with the camera,” Steve says. “Detail shots are essential, but do it vérité rather than getting all crazy with the zoom.”

Linds leans in close with the camera until Steve takes up the screen. He waggles his tongue, then places the paper scrap on it. The gesture is playfully intimate.

“Now there’s at least some chance that this whole thing won’t be a total snooze fest,” Moses says, placing two tabs on his own tongue. Linds pans over in time to catch the tail end of the movement.

Moses passes the final square to Linds. She holds it at the center of her palm, contemplates it through the viewer screen. She leans back against the seat to make half of Moses and half of Steve visible. Then the two guys merge into the shadows of their seats as she lowers the brightness to compensate for the exterior. They stop and start down the main strip lined with restaurants and bars. People, bleached and tanned, mill in small groups on the sidewalks. At the fifth stop, the scrap of paper still sits in the triangle formed by the lines within her palm. Off camera, she raises palm to tongue before the Suburban can move forward.

She readjusts the exposure, and now Steve and Moses' expressions come across on the screen. "It'll be epic," Moses says, grinning at Steve and then at the camera.

More epic than her telemarketing job, anyway, which is all Linds otherwise has going on this summer. It's a soothing job, comforting to push variations of ten numbers into the phone over and over again. A perfect round ten. But if she doesn't push herself outside her comfort zone, she fears being stuck like that forever. Like her mother with the light switches and hand washing, and is or isn't the door actually closed? *Lindsay, are you sure that you locked it? Let's just check it one more time to be sure.* She's never ventured this far outside the sprawl of the city. In the wide-open space, existence seems almost easy: fewer variables in the equation, first of all. As long as she doesn't think of another reason, this one can stand alone.

They've turned off the main drag, and Moses says, "Let's stop there." He points to a convenience store a couple blocks farther down.

Steve swings into the parking lot, keeps the engine idling while Moses gets out. Linds does her best to keep Moses in frame. Her dress bunches under her as she slides along the back seat of the Suburban.

"Whatever happens, keep it running," Steve says off camera. His voice isn't deep, but Linds finds its gentleness pleasant. This, and the fact that he seems to speak in rhythms of five.

Moses is laughing, lost somewhere in the pixilated brightness on the screen. "That's the spirit, man! Make 'em chase us!" Linds dials down the exposure until the brown and green swirls of his tie-dyed shirt materialize. He stands grinning in the

parking lot, framed by the window. It's 5:30; the sun sets at eight. Still a few good hours of sunlight left before it is time to switch over to the night-shot function. Then exposure will be automatic.

“The display screen eats up the batteries,” Steve says, scolding like he's just caught her. “Hold the camera like an extension of your eye, Linds, like you're shooting film.”

Linds had wanted to be an editor. She'd wanted nothing but to sit alone in a dark room manipulating images and time code. The perfect equation printed to tape. But Steve says she should explore all her options, so here she is trying things out. It's not just that she thinks he's cute in a nerdy sort of way; she wants to learn this. But just as she gets the hang of one aspect, Steve adds another: framing, focal distance, slow panning, sound, exposure—now the eyepiece. She doesn't know the first thing about shooting film, but since it's Steve's camera, she moves to close the screen like he asks her. It takes her two tries. Which requires two additional pantomimed tries to equal four, and then the fifth to close it. She zooms in late, misses that perfect close-up of Moses aiming a finger gun, winking and firing, disappearing inside. This sixth element is one too many. She could switch the exposure to automatic, cut it down to five to ensure that she doesn't miss anything else.

“Let me put the window down so you're not shooting through the glass.” Steve powers down the rear passenger side window from the front. Hot air pours in the lowered window with snippets of botched heists playing in her mind, brought on by the anxiety of juggling all these camera elements. Distant sirens, gaining until border patrol

cuts them off on the straight shot to Mexicali. This premonition feels real enough that she even begins to imagine putting together the final product, *Moses and Steve*, the film she'll create from the salvage, like an homage to that chick flick with a similar title and its Thunderbird-off-the-cliff ending.

“How fast could we make it to the border?” Linds asks, trying to sound casual. “At top speed from here?” She slides forward and back on the seat, forward and back, physically wiping away the visions. One, two, three, four, five times. Out of mind, out of sight—or whichever way it goes. She keeps the eyepiece trained on the front door. She tries not to think of the Gus Van Sant film in which the two guys pull over for a hike and end up lost in the desert. She tries not to think about how it's based on a true story. How they run out of water, and one guy kills the other in an act of mercy, less than five miles from the highway. To cover the necessary five bases, she determines survival rules. Rule #1: Don't lose sight of the road. Rule #2: Have plenty of water. Rule #3: Seek shelter from the sun. Rule #4: Always cover your skin. Rule #5: Make sure to neutralize.

“How's everything going back there?” Steve says.

“Everything's just great!” She stops the sliding. She is making a concerted effort not to act too strange.

Just as she stops, Moses flies out the mini market doors to the fanfare of the banjos that must have been lying in wait on Steve's iPod. The clerk yodels after him the music playing in the car. Linds jumps her camera hand between Moses and the clerk in time with the music. The clerk gains on him at an appropriate tempo as well. One of

Steve's rule is that no sound can be added in post-production, so rather than editing to music, she has to shoot to it. It's a rhythm she can get behind, that allows her to shoot in beats of five. To keep things simple, she makes sure only one of them is in frame at a time.

Moses reaches, pulls at the front passenger side door, then the one in back. He motions with a pointed finger for Linds to open up. Meanwhile the clerk sneaks into the background. She tries the inside handle one and then two and then three and then four and five times.

"I can't open it." The imbalance created by the clerk in the shot is responsible for this.

"Child locks in the rear," Steve says chuckling as he powers the rear window back up. "Make sure you get some close ups on legs, shoes slapping the road."

"Why you fucker," Moses says with something like disbelief, just before the window cuts him off.

Steve steps on the gas. With the Suburban's jerky movements it's all wobble and blur. They lurch forward, onto the shoulder. The up-tempo music mocks Moses' attempts to catch up. When he does, he lifts madly at the handle again and again and again. His hand is out of frame, but Linds can hear the sound it makes. She blinks the difference when he pulls up more than once and less than five times, before Steve takes off again. But the blinking won't keep back the vision of Moses with tire tracks across his chest, his face, his legs, his feet. That little trickle of blood from his mouth. All it

would take is Steve accidentally throwing the Suburban in reverse instead of the try-to-catch-up idle.

Steve pulls a half rotation to the other side of the road. They make their way back to the mini mart in spurts, like they're running out of gas. Twelve stop-and-start, stop-and-start jolts as Moses runs to catch up, grabs the handle, is left in the dust, and catches up again and again and again. An action is required from Linds to neutralize this imbalance, so she slides fast to the other side, saying to herself under the powering down groan of the window: "neutralize to five." She barely whispers. The clerk stands at the finish line, where Moses gets in a good kick at the car's sleek exterior. He kicks it again. Linds pounds the back seat three times because it's up to her to make sure Moses makes it out of this alive.

Linds pans to Steve, and the driver's side window is down, so the yodeling and banjos spill into the parking lot. "I believe this young man owes you something."

She slides back across the bench, catching a close up just as Moses' jaw and eyebrows move in opposite directions. His hair spikes even seem to stand up straighter with the force of his astonishment. His nose looks especially witchy, and she wonders if this could be the drugs kicking in like the power locks, that all-of-a-sudden. It's impossible to get Steve in the shot, but the clerk is in the background.

"He took off without paying for his stuff," the clerk complains.

"Moses, I can't take you anywhere." Steve clicks his tongue slow.

Moses glares daggers, but Linds doesn't feel that bad for him. He went into that store with the intention to start trouble. He pulls bags of chips from his pockets, then throws them down with a disgusted look. He walks slow around the front of the car and clambers into the passenger seat. Linds adjusts her position and the exposure, and shoots the side of Steve's face, his hands gripping the wheel as they turn onto the main road.

Moses grabs the iPod, then silence. "Didn't think you'd be that big of a dick."

"And I didn't expect you'd kick the Surb," Steve says harshly. "So I guess we're both full of surprises."

"I thought there were rules," Moses counters. "Like the one about gratuitous action? I'm just saying."

"Chase scenes are only gratuitous if they involve another car." Steve is indignant. "That scene wasn't action for action's sake. It was about revealing your character's desperate faith in humanity, clinging to the hope that if you try hard enough you'll eventually succeed."

Moses is still peeved. "What do you think it revealed about yours?"

Steve has counseled Linds on the importance of exteriors, so she turns for a shot of the road from the rear windshield. She dials down the brightness to reveal one car riding in the lane behind them, more closely than is comfortable. One is neutralized. She can deal with one. As long as it doesn't grow into two, or three or four.

Moses shuffles through the iPod, bursts into song when he finds the one he wants. "*Driving that... Train! Hi-igh on cocaine!*" Linds turns, and he points to the mountains,

conjuring the train of which he sings. She adjusts the exposure again, and swings with the camera to catch the boxcars disappearing around brontosaurus curves, the foreground dotted with sorry-looking shrubs, yellow tufts of grass. She reframes after five boxcars move past. “Ste-ven *Jones you bet-ter, watch your spee-eeed.*” Moses is laughing. She can feel the car accelerate some. *Trouble ahead...trouble behind...*

A second car pulls alongside the one behind them, in the next lane, and now there’s a problem. Blinking will not hold back the visions of fiery crashes. Linds makes up the difference with the cars heading toward them on the other side of the freeway, but she can’t keep the equation balanced long enough to compensate. Something has to give. She sets the brightness to automatic.

Moses turns around, and at first she thinks that she’s been caught. “Are you feeling it?” he demands of her.

“What does it feel like?” She asks, unsure.

Moses slaps the dash, then looks at Steve. “You knew that we had a virgin on board!”

“Like I told you, I’m full of all kinds of fun surprises.”

“You’re full of shit is what you’re full of,” Moses says laughing.

Linds begins to lose track of what they’re saying with those cars following close behind. Even with her camera eye focused on them moving in their respective lanes, she can hear the grinding of metal, the glass shattering and the hiss of airbags being deployed. She can feel the shards in her face as she goes catapulting out the front

window. She suspects that the drugs are making the premonitions stronger, but they're still just as authentic. When they switch lanes into the turnoff for 111, she knows they'll collide with the other car. Her heart is pounding.

"Minute forty-two," Steve announces. "Time to switch 'em out."

Linds waits another three minutes until the dash displays 5:55 before she hands Moses the two memory cards. The rotation of cards at this precise time eliminates the threat of the cars, and just in time for them to switch lanes. She points the camera towards the front windshield, relaxes. Maybe the exposure isn't quite the same, but it's easier to manage. Bluesy guitars continue over the rumbling of horses. Mountains beyond the open expanse of dry grass and brush, beyond the hills of dirt packed like foundations for sand castles. Cowboys and Indians are seconds from pouring out of crevices, over cliffs, from behind rocks and desert shrubs. As long as they stay outside the viewfinder, she doesn't have to deal with them.

Linds notices that the edges of the seats have rounded, become cartoonish. Moses' teeth verge on caricature. Steve peers at her in the rear view mirror. If he asks her about the exposure, she'll just tell him. "I'm a super-magnet for disaster," she says instead. It would seem dishonest not to warn them.

"That's exactly why we brought you along!" Moses cheers her on.

Yet his enthusiasm can't hold back the premonitions. Linds glimpses their future selves lost in the same endless scrub appearing out the Suburban window, the same limitlessness of landscape that in the film (the one that ended with one friend having to kill the other) consumed all trace of the parking lot, and the trail and the gleaming metal

of their car, as if these things had never existed. As long as they stay in the car they can't lose sight of the road. And they brought along plenty of water. She has a flannel shirt for sun protection, boots for when the sun goes down and she can't see where she steps. A sleeping bag and pillow, and a cotton baseball cap. A hat provides essential shade out here.

The camera's low battery light flashes. When Linds pulls the camera from her eye, the light leaps on her skin, lingers like a flea between jumps. Two three four five times. "The battery's low."

Moses reaches forward, then back, and holds out a new power pack in one palm. "Here you go," he says with a yawn.

She tries to palm out the replacement battery quickly to minimize the footage break, but it no longer seems to have a concrete form. She snaps five times to recover it, and realizes that the movement of thumb against two fingers is like a rotation. And just like that, everything is fine.

"What do you mean, Linds," Steve says, "by a super-magnet for disaster?"

These words strike her, strangely, like a punch line from a joke. She bursts out laughing. "It sounds ridiculous, doesn't it?" Linds can feel her grin stretch across her face.

"Not ridiculous," Moses muses. "Just a little strange."

She is trying so hard not to be strange.

The iPod has finished its song, and it's now up to her to fill the silence with something to balance out the strangeness. When she fits the new battery back in, she knows that this has filled that similarly empty space.

She pans to Steve, zooms back out again. The movement of the lens is more interesting than the back of the seat, or the back of his head.

“My blinks are getting weird,” Moses says. “I can't stop blinking.”

With the repetition of the word “blink,” she feels the sharp, dual edge of two. Behind the lens, she blinks three more times. Inside the Suburban, the three of them remain neutral. One is like the point of a compass at a circle's center, but since they can sit here inside, the Suburban is like a circle itself, in which they are contained and kept safe from the elements. Linds stares through the camera out the window. They've been transported beyond civilization, out on a two-lane road with a worn afghan of brown and yellow tufts spread out on each side. The sun hangs low over purple mountains, over the glimmer of sea appearing like a mirage. A wishing well, the sun a penny.

She turns the camera back inside when Moses begins to speak. “They once used LSD for psychotherapy, you know. Power of suggestion, and all that. It's a life altering substance; mind altering; life and mind altering. You are what you think! I now release you from your mental chains. A-bra-ca-da-bra! You are free!”

She blinks twice to finish his syllables in an even five. Even as she does this, his enthusiasm is contagious, and Linds considers that it could be this easy to let it all go.

Moses turns to Steve. “How're you feeling?”

“I might be feeling it a little bit.” Steve is laughing tears.

“Just a little, huh?” Moses taps the iPod and music plays.

A blast of hot air as Moses powers down the window, then hoists himself up so he’s sitting in the window frame with his torso cut off. Moses leans his head in and points past Steve. “Train!” he shouts, then, “aim it up front,” he says to Linds.

Steve and Linds turn in unison, like a train is a rare, amazing thing. But it’s just the sea stretching to mountains in the blue of distance, stretching past the border horizon like a mirage. Linds counts to ten slow to get her bearings. When she turns, Moses has disappeared.

She keeps the camera pointed forward, but her eyes creep to the side window, and sweep the road. His body is draped across the windshield. Moses flaps his hands. Is he trying to swim or fly, but he’s blocking Steve’s view. Jim Morrison’s voice fills the car with its swagger, a tangible presence taking Moses’ place. *Surrender to the waiting worlds / That lap against our side.* Steve pulls the wheel sharp. She’s thrown against the door, but it’s like bumper cars, and she’s somehow laughing. Linds is certain that as long as they keep listening to The Doors, nothing can harm any of them.

Steve is laughing too. He swerves across the road in the pauses. “One more time!” Linds yells. “One more!” She repeats. She can’t conceive that Moses could be in any real danger. He is a human-sized insect, so it makes a kind of sense to try to knock off him the windshield. Steve’s face is distorted in crazed laughter. He speeds up, and then squeals to a halt.

The Suburban angles across both lanes. Linds, with the camera pointed forward. The yellow dividing line jump cuts back to itself suddenly like something has been edited out. Her heart is racing, but she's laughing, too, because where did that guy go? A car comes out of nowhere, kicks up dust on the shoulder. It makes a long honk. Faces break apart before they can add up. Four of them plus the car equal five, or three plus two times the car, or two plus all three of them. The boundaries between numbers have lifted, but this doesn't alarm her somehow. She understands that this is the something Moses was on to.

Linds waits to pick him out of the pixels. Jim Morrison moves into a new song, and heat creeps in the open window. *Faces come out of the rain.* She lets out a squawk when Moses drops in time with the music. *When you're strange.* Which she is, she has always been strange. And, just like this, the syllables add up to ten, if she waits for it. Steve snorts and starts the engine, revs it like bulls pawing ground. He squeals forward and swerves furiously to either side of the road, back and forth across the dividing line until they turn right sharp enough to neutralize the haphazard swerving onto a road paved so long ago that it returns to dirt under the tires, and she knows that this must be Bombay Beach. The squawk, snort, rev, squeal and swerve—somehow all these motions add up, all the sounds and each and every image so that both inside and outside the confines of the viewfinder is a unified whole, no longer separate parts that

“We need to trace our way back to reality from here,” Steve is saying more to himself than Linds “and if we can find the line we crossed over, then when we get back over to the other side of it we'll recognize the thing we now miss, and reality will be the thing we were missing, and we'll get to it by tracing the line”

across lanes, does he mean? Or the city limits marked with a sign swaying on two wooden legs with a faded sun, cracking and falling into the chain link fences surrounding plots of hard dirt with a trailer or a ramshackle shack planted in the center. Or the one made by a cat or maybe it's a tumbleweed crossing the road, or that they make moving past cars gleaming in driveways like shoes at bus stations or airports, of which all she can make out inside is the silhouette of a bent old woman through a glassless frame of house falling in on itself, the roof caving slow as she reaches into the shadows that both begin and end with no sense of limit or origin, her arms impossibly long and thin, reaching toward this town of shadow people, of vampires waiting for the sun to go down and she realizes Steve shouldn't be driving, and she shouldn't be here at all, so

She close her eyes, and breathes in to five. Five to neutralize. Then from six to ten. She opens them while letting out her breath in five beats for e-qui-l-i-bri-um, but something integral to the need has shifted because nothing is now in its proper place, especially not Moses who is sitting on the Suburban's hood when she turns to face the camera out the front windshield again, even when she wipes across the vision with the five fingers of each hand, which stirs the air with rainbows so that the trail of syllables and thoughts is lost somewhere in the streamers of colors that twirl and divide into the lines Steve is naïve enough to think that they can follow back, when really she can see that they're just leading them farther in the direction all the lines are leading, and where that is is

Moses is both gone and swinging inside the car, feet first with his hands grasping the top of the window frame. "Whew!" and reaches for the camera with these rubber hybrids of feet and shoe that grant his toes amazing gripping power with the sections that

remind his digits how to function as a set, like when he was a monkey all those centuries before he was here, settling back into his seat and saying to Steve, “You’ve been practicing your defensive driving, I can tell.” And to Linds, he says, “See, and nothing bad happened so your curse is lifted”

by this guy with a name closely aligned with rules, not absolution, and solidly attached to the neutral number ten. But even this number is out of her grasp, sliding with the syllables out and around, too slippery for her to catch, so she’s let go without even trying and now is watching them spin in a loop instead of spinning them, marching out in a counter instead of counting them out, because as long as she keep filming, they come back around and everything will add up on either side of the pauses if she can just be patient while they make this slow circuit, past a woman carrying a laundry basket out to do laundry in a washer and dryer in the middle of a dirt yard, until they lose sight of her below an earth wall that rises above her line of sight like a ziggurat and Moses commands, “stop here; we’re going over the top”

so Linds wants to put on her boots even though it’s still so hot, but it appears impossible to untangle the network of sandal straps wrapped around her calves and grown together to form a new, outer foot layer, and her bronze nail polish is in uneven layers, strata, canyons running between skin and nail, and she understands why it might just be easier not to go out in it when Steve says, “I’ll wait in the car.”

She scans the periphery, as this familiar feeling of foreboding instantly returns. The camera is a telescope, searching for figures approaching around the corner of words etched in the skin of a trailer and she says, “Is this a nuclear testing bunker?” since they

are in the desert, and this is the kind of thing that happens out here, as she slips her arms, one at a time so she can keep hold of the camera, into thin grey flannel that falls over her yellow dress like ash.

“It’s a levee,” Moses laughs, “for the sea,”

and she sees that his words are nonsense from a children’s rhyme until the meaning washes over her and she says it out loud, “levee,” feeling the “le” resonate deep inside her like she’s bringing it into being, and with the “vee” she sets it free into the world—“Levee, levee, levee, levee, levee,” she says, thinking how she wants to always create such beautiful things to send off into the

“Magic hour,” Moses says, and the world is glowing with an otherworldly light as he waves one arm across the landscape in a grand gesture, turning everything bright, saturated, enhanced with a pixel-by-pixel sharpness and

Steve says, “switch out the cards to be on the safe side,”

although it can’t have been long enough, and everything is just as safe as everything else, and Linds knows Steve’s times are more like estimates if his mind is working anything like hers when she steps out onto the hard orange tile and feels the door echo closed. She can sense Steve’s worry like the stench of something swamp-rotten left in the sun, and she waves it away with the rainbows trailing her fingers as they climb the stairway built into the levee, with Steve in the rear, and she’s laughing against the screech of birds up all eighteen stairs that Moses reaches the top of first, sweeping his arms in one glorious wipe to indicate the ground stretching out around them, saying, “Do you see the fish? They’re everywhere!” as she zoom in on Moses, and then out, and then in again

and out to catch the designs expanding around Steve's shoes like MC Escher tessellations; moving out in patterns of five, the edges reforming as they materialize and spread out to Steve's shoes stitched from a reptilian mesh of sinews and holes that she watches crumble the sun-baked surface with each step, radiating cracks across the open plain leading to the sea so that the tessellations break apart in fives and reform like fish are being released from layers of dirt below, and in this manner, they step deeper into this cartoon earth meets sci-fi, meets fantasy, meets Pixar 3-D, 4-D, 5-D, and on into new dimensions that don't require numbers since nothing will hold still long enough for her to count or for the camera to capture, and if it wasn't all so breathtakingly amazing she'd be struck with the futility of Steve's task, to find a straight, measurable line in all of this,

but Steve continues on, moving off to the water's edge where bird-like creatures congregate and call to each other in cries that are prehistoric, then post-apocalyptic, then both at the same time as they fly across this sea shimmering bile into the green of antifreeze, merging into the twirling pinwheel of Moses' shirt in front of once-meth-lab-trailers masquerading as skeletons of ancient whale-fish that litter the beach, their flesh and innards melting under a giant magnifying glass while Steve searches for the line at the water's edge and finds elephants and butterflies, and the magic hour coats her face and hands and covers her flannel arms like pollen or dust from butterfly wings or pixies, or pixels in the display window swirling like living things, like the movement of molecules so that no empty space exists between her eye and the camera that has become an appendage she can learn to efficiently manipulate to see the world like an insect with compound eyes, and

Steve calls out in the voice of a pelican and an elephant's head surfaces in the distance, raises its trunk to spray water, then takes flight as they trudge, crunching through cereal, then curving around until they come up behind Steve and the broken television he's been watching, a reflection of Linds' self with legs like sticks tethered to those irremovable sandals; dirty blond hair poking from beneath the hat licks her ears like tongues of flame, but it's just the birds streaking like meteors in the background, neutralizing five itself so that she can see that everything is always, has been always, rotating and spreading out in perfect multiples of feathers spread like fingers into the great void of

"The alkalinity of the soil conducts electrical currents," Moses explains as Linds pulls back to a wide shot including the line of electrical poles ending by the water then zooms in to the television again, and somehow this action conjures a white truck that appears on the levee like the end of a car commercial, and she frames a medium shot of two people getting out with boots and circus whips while thinking how strange it will be to look at the footage later and see what the camera determines to be real, everything out of frame left unacknowledged.

"We'd better go," Linds says, now that the television has turned to static.

Steve says, "You're driving, Moses." Then he laughs, "minute-fifty-nine," even though this can't possibly be right.

They change out the cards and cut to the yellow divider coming at Linds like coins she has to collect to get to the next level in some crazy videogame and she doesn't know how Moses can stay on the road when it's all she can do to try to keep the camera

steady when she doesn't really know what steady is since the seams of the world will no longer hold together, so "where are we going?" she asks instead.

"It's all in your mind," Moses answers.

Out the window, imprints of fish in dim light, like a flood washed them up and over everything. Linds rolls down the window to get a clear shot, but the glass falls out on the road, and she says, "the window's broken," which makes Steve sigh from the back seat, sharp enough to cut her.

"Speaking of broken," Moses says, and she loses track of what he's saying in the bleeding of orange into red on the horizon above the black cutout of the mountain range that catches the sun early enough that this June day becomes shorter than it should be, even with all the time spent searching for the first planet, anticipating the swirling of stars on the other side of the sky with the deep blue of almost-night, no longer immutable in the ether, no longer the childhood design with only five distinct points. The view is better from the front window.

Her consciousness jump cuts a stage closer to reality, back to the other side of that line. They're pulling into a campground, and there's just an old guy in an RV watching television in boxer shorts melting into his chair. If he stays here long enough, he'll be trapped in the belly of a skeletal whale as his structure comes to resemble those by the water. The energy broiling only minutes ago slows, becomes steadier. A POV shot as the door swings open from outside, and she enters the realm of mosquitoes. It's dark, and everything is lurking. A wide shot of Moses slapping at himself in the eerie light of the night-shot function, as dark swarms swoop their heads. Mosquito mother ships, or bats

swooping the mosquitoes. They call out shrilly, alert the creatures crawling up from the primordial ooze of their approach. But the creatures are still blob-like, and ill-suited to land. They've come back to the beginning of things. A full rotation. Anything feels possible, even being born again.

“Light! Camera! Action!” Moses says, hoisting a cord of wood. “Let’s get roasting marshmallows already!”

Steve disappears into the darkness while silhouetted figures leap over flames licking the edges of Linds’ mind, sticks held up to the moon as if to skewer it, squealing like birds, catching up Moses’ laughter and flying in faster circles, swooping with glee. They’re birds, of course. They’ve turned sleeping into waking to avoid the desert sun. They’ve rotated their schedules completely. Of course everything turns on its own, and it’s strange now to think that she’d thought for so long that she was able to turn it.

“What happened to you?” Moses says, but he’s talking to Steve. She realizes that Steve was lost in the darkness for a while.

“Minute forty-two,” Steve says, and they switch out two more cards.

Linds pans to a screen of trees like delicate paper cuttings. The shadows flat enough that she can see in all directions. Lights twinkle across the endless sea, the last settlement against the mountains. Beyond the screen of trees and across the road, only a few structures measuring the beach with desolation beyond. Moses swigs from a can of gasoline. He splashes some on his neck and arms, holds it out to her. They’re going to set the night on fire. “Mosquitoes hate it,” Moses says now moving out of frame.

She takes the can that in her hand becomes a jug of whisky.

Steve watches each streak by in red light. “Minute forty-two.” He says it again. It hasn’t been more than five, ten, fifteen minutes tops.

Moses close-up, laughing Promethean with a match lit and cupped in one hand. “First, we need fire.” He coaxes flame from matches to newsprint to kindling to logs. The coating catches fire and burns, melts, oozes, safe on metal sticks while the flames tongue char.

“It can end like this,” Linds says, full of sugary goo and the roaring contentedness of fire. She counts herself, Moses, Steve, herself, Moses, Steve to fifteen and thirty, forty-five, sixty. She doesn’t want to risk such contentment coming to an end. The only sound is the crackle of fire; the birds have descending into sleep as they continue to pass the whiskey. Moses says it helps with coming down, which is what must have begun to happen. She can feel Steve’s uneasiness grow, but there doesn’t seem to be anything to worry about.

“Minute forty-two!” Steve sounds commanding.

Moses and Linds exchange a glance, shrug. Maybe, so they trade out the next cards. “We should get going,” Steve says immediately after.

“Nonsense, we’ve hardly finished the jug!” Moses takes a swig. He must notice that Steve is acting weird too, and he’s trying to keep things light.

“Exactly,” Steve says, insistent.

Linds contemplates the distance between them and the town of shadow people with their shiny cars, the visibility of fire, the moon making its way west across the sky, chasing the sun. But they're safe in this circle where they can add up to fifteen or fifteen hundred, depending on where the counting stops. "We'll take turns keeping watch," she says soothingly. "Let's just stay here around the fire."

Moses pokes at the fire with sticks, and after what may or may not be an appropriate amount of time, Steve calls out to change cards. Steve still seems uneasy, and Linds isn't sure why until she notices that the RV is almost, kind of, hidden by the screen of trees. One might not even see it from the road. But the suburban is a blot on the scenery, a glaring announcement that they are here, in the middle of the deserted desert where they'd have to fend off any attackers on their own.

"We should move the car," she says suddenly. "Just a few spaces over, so that it will blend in better. In the shadows there." She's thinking that this will help to relieve Steve's anxiety.

"Action!" Moses says. He takes a swig of whiskey and breathes out fire with a match. But no one moves toward the Suburban.

"You should move the car," she now repeats. She feels a bitterness in her stomach. An urgency is building that has nothing to do with Steve.

"Would this be considered a special effect?" Moses blows whiskey fire-breath again. Fire fills the frame. "Can we keep this?"

“To camouflage it,” she explains. This is her third appeal. “The car needs to move. Just a little bit.” She’s shaking, her body wrestling with a sensation that’s all too familiar. One that won’t subside until the car is moved, but before it is she has to appeal two more times. In the middle of the desert night, just the three of them, there’s nothing else she can count to relieve this tension.

“Let’s set up the tent,” Moses says. Linds keep filming, like she’s supposed to. He gives a sideways glance to the camera, but he doesn’t say anything more. He’s acting how people usually do when she gets this way.

“First it needs to move,” she says, her fourth appeal. It needs to happen. This series of requests needs to play out. She doesn’t trust that these guys know the first thing about fighting. And she can’t use fives against guns and knives. Neutralizing only works as a preventative measure. “They can take it if they want it that bad! And leave us alone!”

“What kind of crazy are you talking?” Moses finally says.

One more syllable required for his words to balance out in an even ten. The situation is out of balance, out of control. Nothing good is going to follow this.

“What do you mean?” Steve says, scowling. “Who would take it?”

“I don’t—” Linds’ voice has become weak, unsteady. She can only get out these two syllables, which at least neutralize Steve’s eight.

“The Surb!” Steve repeats glaring. “Who’s after it?”

Four syllables plus Moses' one brings the deficit to five, which resolves the numbers but not this situation that is too far gone. She's only worsened Steve's paranoia.

"What's got you so worked up?" Moses sounds concerned. As well he should be. "Everything is fine." But it's Steve he's talking to, not Linds.

"It's made to be moved," Linds says, her fifth and final request. "This is why it has an engine, wheels." They won't find them if they don't see the car. They were safe inside it, but now that they were outside the rules were different. "Will you please move it?" She's not sure who they are, but she feels a presence, someone watching and waiting along the road.

"I'll move the damn car," Steve says. "I'll move it so far that no one can possibly see it from the road."

"Steve," Moses says, with his eyes wide and reflected with fire. "Why don't you sit back down, okay? Yeah. None of us should be going anywhere in our conditions."

Linds breathes in deeply, coughs on the smoke. The engine revs, and the lights flick on. The Suburban backs up and moves forward. She says as quietly as possible, "Reverse and drive, neutralize to five."

Moses is staring at Linds, so he doesn't notice at first, as she does, that the Suburban's lights continue past the patch of shadow she suggested. The lights continue down the main campground road to where it meets the two-lane highway. "Where is he going?" Linds says, confused. It occurs to her that perhaps her fifth request went on too long, into six or even seven.

Moses turns slowly. He looks up the road. “Not going to waste my time getting all worked up needlessly.” He looks back at her. The subtext is clear. “He’s got a big car and the road to himself this time of night.”

Moses and Linds watch the road in silence. Now and then a car passes, its lights tracing, then chasing along Steve’s path. Linds doesn’t know how to fill the space left. She’d almost imagined a spark between them, is certain that it is gone now. The project is ruined and there’s no way to redeem herself. Since the hard drive is in the car, they can’t download the cards. One rotation of cards she can switch out from the camera bag. She does that, then continues waiting. To preserve the battery, she turns the camera off. She waits for Steve’s return to press record.

But the car that finally pulls into the campground is not Steve’s. It’s low to the ground and pale like the moon. It stops where the Suburban had been, and one man gets out, keeps to the shadows. A second man exits, shuts the door with a gunshot sound. They’re thin, move fast and jerky like rats. This is the best description Linds can muster if they have to file a report later. She makes sure that she’s filming their approach. The guy in his RV brings the total number of people to a neutral five, which means that luck’s on her side and they’ll bother him first.

But the first man heads toward the bathroom while the other paces in the parking lot. This must be the thing her premonition was warning her of. Without the Suburban, advertising, they don’t even seem to see them. When they leave, she presses pause again.

Linds is confident her intervention saved them, but Steve still doesn’t return. The night unfolds, uncertainty opening wider and wider in the tedium of waiting, and wider

still. Until it's too wide for anything to possibly fill it. And they give up, put out the fire. They move to wait for morning in the tent.

Linds wakes with the sun shining through the tent like being microwaved under plastic. From the camera bag, she swaps out a new battery, and switches out cards. Her body feels corroded, like one of those structures up from the ziggurat. A crunchiness in her head and jaw, whiskey bile and sludge in her belly. She pans away from Moses who is porous and slick with sweat. She unzips the door, considers the large hole that there will be in the footage.

Linds emerges in the sunlight and pulls down the brim of her hat. Birds swoop and cry out, then land further off to wade and fish in pastel blue water spilled beneath pale violet mountains. The sun radiates its stark clarity on everything here. Sand gives way to barnacles and bones crunching under her feet. Twenty, twenty-five, thirty steps. Pockets of washed-up fish, skin peeled back from the skeletons. The recent dead float near the waterline. Five, ten, fifteen with blackened flesh, and she doesn't let her view-finding eye slide any farther. Even though one more or less may not actually matter. There's no neutralizing dead, blackened fish. The botulism and the sun have already worked together to do this. These fish are real, unlike the visions of tessellations from the day before. These fish aren't trippy, geometric designs; they're dead.

Shouldn't Steve be back now? This question makes her a little queasy. She thinks of that broken television by the edge of the sea, beyond the burned out meth labs masquerading as ancient whale skeletons. The television isn't connected to the power

lines; there's no mystical alkali current deep underground. There's no mystical connection at all.

Linds return to the campsite and sits at a picnic table, under one of the shade structures with slats until Moses emerges from the tent, bleary eyed. She films in snippets now to conserve batteries, but this awaking is an event, so she presses record.

“Any sign of Steve?” he says, yawning.

Linds shakes her head slow.

“Let's go see about that guy.” He points to the RV. “Over there.”

Linds follows Moses across the parking lot with the camera. She gets him jumping back, the RV door swinging open. The man stands at the threshold wearing boxers and a tank top. “Glad to see y'all in the world this morning. Thought I saw y'all roll up in a black Suburban last night, and I heard talk on the radio about an accident involving such a vehicle up towards Indio. Then, when I didn't see the car this morning, well, I just assumed.”

Nineteen syllables in his last sentence. This missing thump like a heartbeat removed from the equation. Heat-resistant goosebumps crawl up her arms. Steve, the missing syllable—it all becomes the same. Linds switches the exposure to manual, adjusts it so she gets the stripes in brighter areas like Steve taught her.

“Do you have a phone?” Moses says, then turns to look at her. “I'm sure he's fine, an accident is all.”

The syllables come back around, with an extra to make up the deficit. Steve will be all right. She pans slowly across the horizon. Once, twice, three times, four, five. The late morning light across everything. Moses follows the man, disappears into his RV. She uses the camera as telescope. But she can't find that hump of a black vehicle that should be visible beyond the shrubbery, can't make out that glint of chrome reflecting back the desert sun. It occurs to her that if she records over the remaining cards, if she starts over and makes sure to count seconds and balance images, there will be no space into which Steve can disappear. An endless loop, the perfect portrait of reality like he wanted. She'll film until the battery gives out.

In the world framed by the camera, Moses does not look happy. He nods for Linds to put the camera down. "Cut," he's shaking his head. "Let's shut her down."

But not with this glaring hole remaining. Linds pans the camera from him to the road. She tries to think of something to tip the balance, but her throat locks up, and she can barely breathe. As she gasps for air, she thinks of the fish at the shoreline.

"C'mon," Moses says wide-eyed with an expression that isn't quite a smile, like a grimace or a smirk or something fearful. "Let's just put the camera down." He opens his mouth like he wants to say something else but can't seem to find the words.

This is quite a change from Moses the daredevil performer. She is struck by this. Maybe the constraints have worked a certain magic after all. With enough continuous pressure, something must eventually break through.

"I said to put it down, okay?"

Linds can see that Moses is lost, stranded, the friend who realizes the other is dead, even as he has made it through to safety. Linds knows beyond a doubt that this is real. This isn't acting or him showing off. "I can't," Linds says emphatic. "I can't." Neutral, with the pause, and her heart is all aflutter. This feeling inside her is also real. And now that she sees it so clearly, right here, the fear and tears brimming in Moses' bloodshot eyes, she can't just put the camera down. This is it, the reality Steve wanted so badly for them to capture.

She follows Moses with the camera even as he protests and tries to hide. And that's when Linds sees the shape coming toward them on the main road. Even from this distance, she can tell it's the Suburban. The chrome on the grill, the side view mirror, the hubcaps are even sparkling, like maybe Steve drove into town and got it washed and waxed. She raises one arm to point, traces the Suburban's movement down the line of the road toward them. She keeps the camera on Moses, waiting for his response. But he just stands there staring in silence.

"That motherfucker," he says when the suburban gets close enough that they can see that it's Steve inside. Linds films Moses pulling open the door and pummeling him.

The old man is standing there, watching. "Paid me fifty bucks." He shrugs, then turns to the RV. "I wouldn't do it for twenty."

Lindsay blinks the last two beats to complete his speech on an even ten syllables. Her response may look incredulous, but now she knows that the fives are just as real as the rest of it, that it could only have been fifty. If that one variable in the equation had shifted, the old man's lie would have been the truth.

Why They Call It Death Valley

Rodriguez says that any roommate of hers sure as hell better have her back in the zombie apocalypse, and since it's our day off, we're heading out to shoot guns after breakfast. This is our second summer rooming together in one of the cabins the company running lodgings and concessions in Furnace Creek rents out to their employees. She insists that everyone calls her Rodriguez because it sounds tough, but she doesn't look Latina or anything. Her hair's the color of straw and her skin's paler than mine without a suntan, except for where it's covered with tattoos. She slathers sunblock over them so the colors won't fade like posters on the wall and the upholstery, which is why we're supposed to keep the blinds closed in all the buildings.

Rodriguez drags me out to the range at least once a week, no matter how hot it is. She says that if we let the heat get to us, we'd be trapped May through September, like the tourists we make fun of, who move from one location to the next in air-conditioned vehicles, only getting out for a minute or two at a time to snap a few pictures and try to pretend they aren't baking. Rodriguez has no respect for anyone who makes excuses or can't follow through. She doesn't sulk, or hold her tongue when she thinks someone might take offense to something. She doesn't believe in guilt or regret. I wish I could be more like her.

"You're forgetting something," Rodriguez says. She holds out my water bottle with the arm she's got tattooed in barbed wire with all the colored ghouls inked in around. Two feathers hang down her arm from the dream catcher design on the inside of her wrist. I take the bottle. Then she hands me a hat, an old black ball cap with

“D.A.R.E. to keep kids off drugs” written across the front in letters faded to pastel. She’s older than me, close to thirty, and this is how she looks out for me while also giving me a bad time.

“Don’t want to end up like one of the Lost ‘49ers,” Rodriguez says. Of course she means the dead guy.

Sometimes a reference to the Death Valley ‘49ers is about taking necessary precautions, like with the water bottle and the lame hat, but more often than not it’s a comment on my inability to make a decision. This story is her favorite one to tell, and sometimes I think that with all she seems to know about the history of the area, she should work for the park service as a tour guide. But the time she spent locked up in Chowchilla makes it so that nobody’s going to put her in charge of guiding anybody. They do a background check when you apply here, so whatever she did couldn’t have been that bad. Whatever it was, I can’t get a straight answer. My guess is something like theft with a failure to pay restitution—which would explain why she’s in the kitchen, not in housekeeping or in a position that involves handling money. Or interacting with people, but that might just be because of all the tattoos.

“Let’s go, Eggy!” Rodriguez barks. I put the hat on and follow her out. She’s wearing her standard summer uniform of cut-offs and a tank top, her straw cowboy hat rolled at the edges, with the gold paint chipped in places, worn in.

Rodriguez calls me Eggy, not Meg like it says on my nametag, with my state of origin, OR, abbreviated just below. This is because of last July when I tried to fry an egg on a rock. The temperature was supposed to get up near 130 degrees that day, and I just

wanted to see, you know, what all that heat might be capable of. It didn't fry exactly, but the clear part turned white pretty quick.

I get in the passenger side of Rodriguez's old Datsun with the peeling blue paint so we can stop by the General Store and pick up a six-pack for target practice. She kicks off her sandals and makes me hold them while she drives. She's got a map of the entire valley tattooed across her feet, but I've only gotten a good look at it once, the first time she told me the story. With the map, she said, she would never have to worry about getting lost like they did.

The story began in Utah, where the San Joaquin Company last stopped for supplies before they set out on their desert route. With their late fall start, no one wanted to risk ending up like the Donner Party. We were sitting on the floor of the cabin, and she pointed to the right of her right foot, past the scraps of Nevada she's got there—Rhyolite ghost town, the air force range and US 95 snaking through to Las Vegas. This space on the carpet was supposed to be Utah, a space to the right of her foot and slightly under, but only slightly, taking into account the entire curvature of the globe. It's supposed to be like she's standing on top of the world from the position of Death Valley, with the valley floor tucked into the curve between her feet. She's got everything labeled—where a portion of the company was tempted by the shortcut and split up, where they burned their wagons, where the man died. It's colorful but not exactly done to scale. Anyway, for it to work she would have to be a giant. Maybe this is why she usually keeps it covered up, either under boots or those heavy-duty sandals she says will protect her feet from scorpions.

She's got the typical tourist sites labeled too, mostly with Satan-inspired icons: the Devil's Golf Course closer to her heel, the Devil's Cornfield and Hell's Gate up near her toes, and the vista up the mountain, Dante's View just shy of her ankle. Furnace Creek Ranch, where we live and work, is on the left side of the right foot, labeled with a fiery oven, flames pouring out like water. Of the few places to stay in Death Valley National Park, Furnace Creek Ranch is the most popular. In addition to the General Store, we've got guest cabins, a spring-fed swimming pool and the golf course, a couple restaurants, a saloon, a gas station, a post office and even a small borax museum—but none of that is pictured—just the upscale Inn at Furnace Creek, shown as another furnace near the rise of her foot.

The Inn is only open for breakfast in the summer, the off-season. Most tourists come out to view the natural hellscape of the park without the heat to complete the experience, when a flat tire or putting too much trust in your GPS isn't as likely to be the end of you, like that kid a few years back. Or those German tourists who disappeared years ago, but whose remains just turned up last spring. Few tourists and employees stay on into summer, when the valley becomes a giant oven, with any wind just stirring the heat around. It's like something unreal, like the cover for a heavy metal album, with demons and everything.

“Shoes!” Rodriguez barks, as we pull into the visitor's parking lot just on the other side of the store. The drive can't be more than a quarter mile from our cabin; we'd have just walked if we weren't heading out to the range.

The black birds are wandering around on the shaded portions of the cobblestones out front of the store, the saloon, and the two restaurants, with their mouths open. “The black birds are out begging for food as usual,” I say.

“They’re Grackles, not blackbirds,” Rodriguez corrects me.

“Technically, they are black birds,” I say, and she rolls her eyes like I’m being immature.

“They’re mouths are open because they’re panting,” Rodriguez says. “They’re hot, and they can’t sweat.”

“Well, don’t you just know everything,” I say with a grin. She smiles back because while this may not be true, she knows more than me about most things.

Rodriguez and I get along fine now, but we started off a little rocky. When I came out here the October before last, she told me point blank, after just a week of rooming together, to either do it already or knock it the fuck off with all the moodiness. Waiting for the heat to build was just an excuse, she said. There are plenty of other ways to kill yourself, if you’re serious about it. She was right. That guy who shot himself at the top of the dunes that first January proved it.

I consider the sign staked in one of the planter boxes showing a hand with food in it with a big red “X” next to a bird’s open mouth. The message is clear even to tourists who can’t read English. “Maybe that’s what the sign really means: Don’t feed the birds because they’re hot, not hungry,” I say.

“That sounds like stoned logic,” she says, “You holding out on me?”

“Naw, just broiled,” I say. We use this term for the similarly slowed-down thinking that comes entirely from the heat. It’s like even your thoughts can’t quite stand up against it.

“You coming in?” she says, reaching for the front door.

I usually wait out front since I’m not twenty-one yet. It’s not like anybody cares, but Vicky, the lady who runs the General Store, is kind of weird. She’s got this scam going with the registers that lets her “put a little something away” as she says, like she’s some poor little old lady. This is probably why she’s been out here longer than anybody else. She’s got something on everybody, so if anyone gives her up, she’ll make it out like an employee conspiracy and take everyone down with her. Whenever I go in with Rodriguez, Vicky gives me an accusing look, like she’s got me down for something. Probably just underage drinking, but I still don’t like it.

“I’ll wait,” I say.

I’m sitting on the bench out front of the store, in the shade of the overhang, with one of those birds keeping an eye on me, when I see this big white truck pull up. It’s what Rodriguez calls a “compensation truck.” A man steps out wearing a white ten-gallon hat and a western style shirt with embroidery. He saunters up like he thinks he’s somebody, and then I see he’s got a sheriff’s star pinned to the breast. This takes me by enough surprise that I laugh out loud. He tips his hat in response, but there’s something in his expression that doesn’t look good-natured. He’s got these leather boots in red, white and dark blue, with eagles on them.

Rodriguez passes him in the doorway, and he tips his hat to her too. But she doesn't notice; she's got her eyes on those boots.

“Did you see that guy?” She remarks once we're back in the truck. “Boots in this heat! And those ones had to have cost him a few grand. Must be some hotshot on his way back from Vegas.”

The truck's air conditioner doesn't do much against the already rising heat, but Rodriguez barks at me if I roll the window down when the air conditioner's going. So I sweat and wait for the interior to cool down, which it won't until it's time to get out again. The smell of Rodriguez's sunblock is making me feel a little sick, or maybe it's the intensity of the heat through the front windshield. It's like a magnifying glass, which makes me think of kids and ants, and then of God focusing His wrath down on me. Maybe this is why the sun seemed like the right way to do myself in.

The guilt doesn't strike me like this as hard or as frequently as it used to. The community service sentence was punishment, but it didn't come close to evening the score. Raking and hoeing weeds couldn't atone for the blood on the white lines of the crosswalk that all that rain must have washed clean within minutes of the accident. Since I was a minor, the old man's family decided not to sue. I'd spent as many hours at a time as I could the summer after graduation, out there in my orange vest. But now the guilt seems to have faded like anything else left out in the sun. Or maybe it's baked into me, so deep down that I don't need to think about it. I can finally hold my hand steady when I pick up a gun, but something in my stomach quivers. And the few times Rodriguez has persuaded me to get behind the wheel, I've thought that I could do it, only to lose all

feeling in my arms and legs as soon as I turned the key. But she's trying. She's working to help me through this.

We turn off at the dirt road and Rodriguez holds out her hand for a beer. I pick up two cans, hand her one. We crack the tops in unison, then we shotgun them. Buzzed, we continue down the road until we end up at the abandoned mine with rusted junk piled up all over the place—cans, barrel bands, metal sheets. There's a ridge along one side and open desert on the other, and no shade in sight. In the summer months we only go early in the day, or just before sunset.

Rodriguez shuts off the engine, then throws open the door. She walks off carrying the gun and the two empty cans. As she moves away, the dragon snaking up her right calf and up and around her knee comes into view, breathing fire toward the ragged hem of her cutoffs.

Rodriguez arranges the two empties on the roof of the rusted out shell of a car. I pull two full beers from the twelve-pack by my feet and get out. I hand her one of them. She takes it, chugs at least half, then sets it between her feet. "You're either in, or you're out," she says, then belches loudly.

This isn't really a choice. The assumption is that I've already chosen "in." "In" means I'm a member of her survival party in whichever scenario we'll be playing out this time. "In" means that when the shit goes down, as she's convinced it will sooner rather than later, she'll keep me tucked safely beneath the dark, leathery wing she's got tattooed down from her left shoulder blade and wrapped around her upper arm. The wing tip falls

a couple inches below her elbow with the signature vampire bat claw. From a distance, it just looks like gray skin.

Rodriguez aims the gun, says, “This sun is like nowhere else on Earth. It could incinerate even the walking dead. Which is why, once we take care of the guests-turned-zombie, we won’t have to worry about any more coming in.” She fires and hits one can that flies into the other. Both cans tumble against the dust.

“Guests turned zombie,” I say, then sigh and roll my eyes. This one is her favorite. I heckle her, move slow—whatever I can do to hold off the inevitable.

“All right then, let’s try something else. China Lake, Fort Irwin, Area 51. We’re surrounded by military complexes on three sides,” Rodriguez responds. “Military conspiracies are always good.”

I give her my best smart-aleck smirk.

“Good as an exercise,” she clarifies. “You’re up.” She sets the gun on top of the car, then continues on about how the military has sent in undercover agents to unleash experimental nerve gas.

While she’s talking, I stare at the number 01 just visible in crumbling white against the car’s rusted body. I hate guns, especially shotguns with that kick. At least today she’s not making me shoot a shotgun.

“Death Valley is the one place the human race actually has a chance of surviving when the shit goes down,” she says. “It’s just that one guy’s death that gave it a bad

name. Stupid, really. More people have died in other places. More people have died in Chowchilla.”

The lost ‘49ers again, the story of how the valley got its name. The story that raises the question of how if maybe people had made different choices, this valley would have been called something else altogether. It’s a story that only adds dimensions of uncertainty to the already overwhelming ups and downs and inbetweens of any situation. Maybe I can’t talk to ghosts like Rodriguez, but I can feel the weight of potential consequences hovering near me at every turn. I’m haunted by indecision. Since the accident, every action seems subjective, a guess, behind which another accident could be waiting. Nothing is certain, except in hindsight.

In the forests of northern Oregon where I grew up, the boundaries of rivers and trees make the wilderness seem more, well, like that saying about not seeing the forest for the trees. Here, unless you’re caught up behind a ridge, you can look out across the open valley floor, with perfect visibility in all directions. Nothing but big picture. Nothing to worry about hitting but the targets. If there was anyone beyond the ridge, we would have seen them when we drove in.

Rodriguez slams one of her knees into the back of mine. “Quit stalling!”

I step forward, lift the gun from the roof of the car. The metal’s warm. I take the stance Rodriguez taught me and wrap my hands around the gun. According to Rodriguez’s scenarios, if I take the time to consider, I’m dead. “It’s you or them,” she reminds me. The choice is simple. Rear-end the woman in the car and die with her, or hit the man in the crosswalk and save yourself. Like a coin toss, there is no third

possibility. And choosing the right option seems obvious. Once my trigger finger bends, I have to shoot before I can put the gun down. This is Rodriguez's rule. No turning back, like the portion of the San Joaquin Company that decided to take the shortcut and then doubled back once they came upon the giant canyon that was not on the too-good-to-be-true map they'd been provided. Like the portion of the party that continued on, giant canyon be damned, I have to follow through.

I pull the trigger until it clicks. The muzzle flashes. A sound of impact. The court is generous because you're not quite eighteen, not out of high school yet, repentant. A steep fine, suspended license, extensive community service since accident or not. . .

One can topples. I open the eye I'd been squeezing shut.

"Okay," Rodriguez says. "Good. You've hit the first operative."

I tilt back my beer, finish it.

"Now, the other one," she says, "There's still one more. He's at the mouth of the spring, about to release the neurotoxin into our drinking water."

I sigh. But these ridiculous scenarios do make it easier to pull the trigger. Of course, once I shoot this one, there will be another operative at the head of the food line in the employee cafeteria. Another tampering with taps at the Saloon. There's always one more. And another. And another. We spend another hour or so out there, until I don't know how she can still drive, as woozy as I feel from the adrenaline and the beer and the sun. Since we have the rest of the day off, we head back to rest in the shade of our air-conditioned cabin. Later, we go for a swim.

After dinner, we meet up with Cheeseboro Sam and Larry. Cheeseboro Sam is from Wisconsin and wants to be a park ranger but hasn't gotten hired yet by the park service. He works in Reservations. Larry is his roommate, and he's always on-edge, pulling at his dark hair and making it stand up in these crazy configurations. He seems a little more relaxed on the days he rides his bike to the top of Dante's Peak and back. He does this at least as regularly as Rodriguez and I head out to the range.

We head out past the creek that's nothing more than a dried up bed this time of year for one of the nature walks Cheeseboro Sam takes us out on for practice. While we walk out past the lights of the ranch where we're more likely to see something, he tells us about this guy he saw today. He mentions the white cowboy hat, and there's no question it's the same guy. He also mentions that he had reservations for one of the cabins on the edge of the ranch, usually reserved for employees, and that once he checked in he just sat there in the office writing on a clipboard for at least a good hour.

"Rodriguez and I saw him this morning," I tell him.

"Was he wearing a sheriff's star?" Larry says. "I saw him at the Saloon just before we headed out." Larry is a bartender. "He was sitting, writing on a clipboard."

"There's something about this I don't like," Rodriguez says.

"Something about him doesn't quite seem right," Larry agrees, tugging at his hair. His first thought is generally to aliens, so no one presses him to explain. If drunk enough, he'll tell the story about how he was abducted from the flats on the other side of the Great Salt Lake from Salt Lake City, not so far from where the Lost '49ers set out.

“He’s just one of those Las Vegas types,” Cheeseboro Sam says. “There’s something about most of them that doesn’t quite seem right. That whole city could stand to be wiped off the face of the planet.”

Probably because we’re doing so much talking, we don’t come upon much. The highlight is probably the freshly killed fox on the side of the road. My first impulse is to bury it, but Rodriguez says there are the scavengers to think of. That’s how life works out here. Cheeseboro Sam points out that’s likely how the fox got hit in the first place, scavenging—going at some tourist trash thrown out a camper window. We should move the body off the road so no more animals get hit. But no one can find a stick, so we end up leaving it there.

The next day at breakfast, me, Rodriguez, Larry, and Cheeseboro Sam are sitting there eating, when the guy with the white hat and those fancy boots comes in. He stops in the center of the room, and clears his throat to get our attention, even though all eyes are already on him. He says, “Howdy, y’all.”

A few people “howdy” him back. Larry was right. Something isn’t right.

“Many of you probably noticed me hanging around here yesterday. I like to spend the first day observing, getting a feel for how things are already running.” Then he chuckles like he’s amused with himself. “Allow me to introduce myself. The company has sent me out to monitor y’all’s efficiency. The name is Lewis.”

“Louis, like a first name, or Lewis, like the last?” I whisper to Rodriguez.

The man looks right at me. “You can just call me Sherriff,” he says, then laughs like he made a joke, even though he looks completely serious otherwise.

A few people chuckle, but overall the room feels pretty tense.

Rodriguez explains the situation to me in more detail after breakfast. “He’s an efficiency expert,” she says. “Which means the company must be looking to cut jobs.”

“I’m not calling him Sheriff,” I say.

“Don’t you dare.” She shakes her head. “King Louis is more like it,” she says. I must look confused because she says, “You know, the French king who had his head chopped off.” I nod, even though this doesn’t sound familiar.

I’ve never been that interested in history, but I call him King Louis because Rodriguez does, although not to his face. He spends the rest of the day, and the one that follows, observing. At first, we suspect that this is probably all Vicky’s fault with her stupid scam. The company has finally caught on that something isn’t right with the bookkeeping. But then he starts in with the “new rules” that don’t seem to have anything to do with cash register fraud. His fourth day here, he announces that we have to start signing in and out for breaks. The next day he says that we’ll have to start keeping an inventory of the food we actually eat at employee meals, even though we already get charged for them. On the sixth day, he announces a new company policy that requires we show up to breakfast in our employee uniforms, the white polo with tan slacks or shorts.

Rodriguez and I make a pact that we will not suit up for breakfast, only for our actual shifts. “It’s fascist,” she points out. “He’s a fascist.” She compares him to Hitler, says we shouldn’t just follow blindly.

She’s right. He drives that big white truck up to the visitor’s center each morning instead of walking like the rest of us. He then spends the day moving between the saloon, the company store, the visitor’s center, the two restaurants and Reservations. Then he drives back to his cabin for a long mid-day siesta, and then he drives back to the visitor’s center again. Otherwise, the heat would knock him out in that costume, especially with that paunch. Everywhere he goes, he’s busy jotting notes when he’s not giving orders. Fascist does not seem like an overstatement.

Those who show up to breakfast in uniform on the seventh day are assigned shifts. Those who don’t show up in uniform, like Rodriguez and me, are not. But since it’s our day off, this isn’t a big deal. It’s the next day, when we are supposed to be on shift, that I feel uneasy about the whole thing. I can’t imagine not siding with Rodriguez, but I don’t want to lose my job. She drags me out to the shooting range after breakfast, and I realize that if I stayed on out here on my own, without her, I’d be pretty lost.

It’s the same thing on the ninth day, and Rodriguez drags me out to the shooting range again. On the tenth day, the third day of being kept off our assigned shifts, Rodriguez is beyond pissed. She says to me out at the range that if he doesn’t put us on a shift the next day, she’s contacting company headquarters. She’s certain that this suiting up for breakfast rule has to be violating some basic, civil right.

This is the first thing that comes to mind when we wake up the next morning and Rodriguez notices there aren't any bars for reception on her phone. When I go to check the heat forecast, there's no Internet. We check the payphone booth on the way to breakfast, but the receiver is already hanging by its metal chord. Sure enough, no dial tone. It seems impossible that King Louis could have known about Rodriguez's plan to contact headquarters, but that's what signs seem to point to. It must just be a strange coincidence, but being cut off like this has me a little paranoid. Death Valley Junction is the closest town, if you can even call it that. It's about thirty miles away, which doesn't sound like much, but with temperatures in the triple digits, distances seem to stretch until Furnace Creek may as well be a settlement on Mars, air conditioning as life support.

Sitting at our table for breakfast this morning is me and Rodriguez, Cheeseboro Sam, Larry, and Vicky who's been making the rounds from table to table each meal, making sure that no one is going to rat her out about the registers.

"In my five years out here, we've never lost contact with the outside world like this," Vicky says. "Just the occasional dust storm that shuts down the generator. At least we've still got power."

"This is much bigger than a generator malfunction," Rodriguez says. She's wearing her standard cut-offs and one of the tank tops that show off her tattoos. Her hair is pulled back in a thin ponytail. She shakes the ketchup jar, and the ghoulish faces that wind up her bicep on either side of the barbed wire shake along with it. Nothing comes out, so she goes for the knife, jams it up the bottle, then wipes it across her hash browns.

“No television, Internet, telephone—not even cell reception,” Cheeseboro Sam says. He’s told me before that the first thing you need to do in a survival situation is inventory what you have, but for some reason he’s going at it backward. “The electricity’s still working, but we get most of it from the solar farm down the road.”

Larry’s keeping quiet this morning. He’s piled his scrambled eggs into a hill and is carefully breaking apart his hash browns. I’m not feeling that hungry myself, so even though we’ve got the Sunday hot buffet, I just got some orange juice and a piece of toast.

Rodriguez looks at Larry. “So the sun hasn’t blown up, but all our satellites have. Who or what could have done that that?” She poses with her elbows on the table and one hand over the other, with her chin resting on top. I’m sitting next to her so I can see the mostly-cleaned cow skull inked on the outside of her wrist, and most of the vulture perched on top of it. Her chin cuts off the scavenger’s head just below the cow’s eyeball held like a plum in its beak.

Larry doesn’t look up. He breaks off a piece of the hash brown hill and flattens it while we watch him in silence. “You making a map of where the mother ship is going to land?” Rodriguez smirks, but I don’t get the joke. Larry doesn’t seem to either.

“Well, as long as we’ve got air conditioning,” Vicky says. She bites into a sausage link and continues talking while she chews. “I’m sure the Internet and what have you will get taken care of soon enough.”

Louis stops by our table first this morning to distribute our schedules. He puts Vicky on shift right after breakfast, as well as Cheeseboro. Larry is on for the evening shift, but Rodriguez and I don’t get anything. Again.

“What the hell?” Rodriguez says. “Communication is down, but Cheeseboro gets a Reservations shift? Eggy and I haven’t been given a shift for the past three days!” This means that we don't get paid.

“Arriving visitors still need to check in,” Louis says, a little too calmly. He writes something on the clipboard, likely about Rodriguez’s insubordination.

“So, what’s with the phones and Internet?” Rodriguez says.

Louis laughs, tucks the clipboard back under his arm. “With fewer distractions, y’all should be able to concentrate that much better on your jobs.” He tilts his white hat forward, like a character in some old movie. But he hasn’t really answered the question.

“Eggy and me need shifts,” Rodriguez says. “Or we’ve got nothing to focus on.”

“Then suit up for breakfast,” Louis responds. Then he seems to reconsider. “I’ll tell you what, if Meg here dresses for the afternoon meal, I’ll put her on tonight.”

We don’t have a pact about suiting up for lunch. Anyway, I’m desperate to both get some work and avoid the range. “Okay,” I say, and Louis grins from ear to ear. He jots something else down.

“As for you, Sarah, we’ve had it with the tattoos. Cover ‘em up. That’s company dress code.” This only applies if you work with the public, and we all know it. This is also the first time I’ve heard anyone call Rodriguez by her first name. I watch her carefully for a reaction, but she keeps her face neutral, which means she’s so far past angry that she’s become calm again.

“Until you can follow the rules, the day is yours to spend as you see fit,” King Louis says. He adjusts the clipboard to write. “And how do you plan to spend it?”

“That’s none of your business,” Rodriguez says, her eyes on fire.

He flips through the pages of the clipboard, like he’s searching for something. “Yes...here it is...you’re on probation.” He continues grinning, and Rodriguez’s mouth pinches small. “We need to rest assured you’re not getting into any trouble. Wouldn’t want to have to get the law involved.”

Rodriguez meets his gaze without flinching. A couple tense seconds pass in which we all try not to stare.

“Well, this morning Eggy and I plan to head out to the Amargosa Opera House,” Rodriguez says. Technically this isn’t a lie. To get to the range we head out in the same direction, and this is what she had planned if we were left off another shift. She can’t tell him this since it’s against the law to shoot a gun within the park boundaries.

“What a lovely way to spend a morning,” he says sarcastically. “While you’re there, I’d appreciate it if you could pick me up a postcard to send my mother.” He says this like a threat, but I don’t really follow how or why it might be one. Still, I know nothing good is going to happen. “I’ll be looking for you at lunch, Meg.” He tips his hat and moves on to the next table.

After breakfast, Rodriguez and I head out for Death Valley Junction. She’s all set on getting him that postcard. But mainly, she says, she wants to see if the hotel has

communication. I'm worried that with this detour I might be late for lunch, but she's right: we have to know what's going on with the outside world.

We turn onto the main road that runs through town and pull in front of the hotel. It's an adobe structure in a square U with an overhang that wraps around, the kind of place you'd expect a shootout. This woman from New York turned the building into a hotel and has been living there for the past thirty years, renting out rooms to people hoping to see ghosts. Rodriguez says that when she stops off there, she can feel the dead reaching out to her, all the people who died building the original structure, and a few who died along the road.

I stand outside the truck and wait while Rodriguez goes in to select a postcard. It's got to be close to a hundred degrees out, and it can't be past nine am. I should have worn a hat, but at least I put on sunscreen. If I go hatless the sun bleaches blond into my hair and burns out the oil, so I can get an extra day or two between washings and conserve the water we're supposed to so there's enough for the guests, the pool, the golf course, and all those linens and dishes that need to be washed. The adobe building is painted a glaring white, and there's nothing else in the town but a handful of rundown houses, and the remains of an old repair shop and gas station across the street, with a platform and rusted pumps left there to rot.

Rodriguez emerges from the hotel, her cowboy hat glaring back gold at the sun. We get back in the truck and we head back down the main road. She hands me the postcard. On the front is a drawing of three Charlie Chaplin muscle-man clowns with handle bar mustaches wearing round hats and striped shirts. Two clowns are doing

handstands, clicking their ankles above the third that is lying on his belly with his chin resting on his hands.

“You like it?” Rodriguez says. “That’s where we’re going to have him. Lying there on his fat-ass belly like the dog he is.”

I decide not to point out that the clown in the middle looks perfectly content.

Rodriguez hesitates like there’s something she’s not sure she should tell me. “There’s no Internet or phones at the hotel either. And I get a bad feeling from the spirits.”

A similar bad feeling is growing in me. We head back down the main road, and turn off at the dirt road that leads to the range. We shotgun the usual beer, arrive, and then Rodriguez sets up the cans. “You’re either in or you’re out,” she says, again as usual.

“What happens if I choose out?” I say. The communication situation has me thinking about all of this a little more seriously.

Rodriguez turns to face me. The metallic flair along the front band of her hat flashes. “You shoot, you’re in,” she says. “You don’t, you’re out.” She gives me the same look as when she uses up my shampoo or lotion and I so much as roll my eyes in response. So I don’t point out that she didn’t answer my question.

Rodriguez aims the gun, says, “Once we take care of the guests-turned-zombie, we won’t have to worry about any more coming in.” She fires and hits one can that flies into the other. Both cans tumble into the dust.

“You’re saying zombies took out the communication?” I say.

“Zombies are the least of our worries.”

I laugh, but it comes out sounding forced. “What could be worse than zombies?”

But Rodriguez isn’t joking. Her mouth is pinched like it was at breakfast.

“You’re up.” She sets the gun on top of the car, then continues on about how if the communication isn’t back tomorrow, we’ll head out of the valley. We’ll get some food, water, gas—Cheeseboro and Larry, and just head on out. Something just isn’t right here. Communication at the ranch is one thing, but at Death Valley Junction too?

I pick up the gun, feel the weight between my hands. Picking it up every day now for the past four, it seems to have grown a little lighter.

“It’s you or them,” she reminds me. A simple choice made with the simple action of pulling the trigger. I pull it toward me. Fire from the muzzle, the sound of impact.

One can topples as I open the eye I’d been squeezing shut.

“Okay,” Rodriguez says. “Good.”

“Now, the other one,” she says, “It’s King Louis. He wants to know where the hell we think we’re going. He’s seconds away from bringing in troops from the department of corrections. They’ll throw us in Chowchilla and throw away the key. We’ll die in there like all those other women. Unless you pull the trigger. Now!”

I pull the trigger again. The other can topples. We each shotgun another beer for more targets.

Not more than an hour of this, and then we're back in the truck and on the dirt road, and I'm hoping that Louis doesn't come close enough during lunch to smell the beer on me.

We're coming up around Zabriskie Point, the hilly ridges streaked with darker and lighter colored earth, when Rodriguez says, "Everybody on that excursion must have had something they were looking to get away from, something big enough to risk a situation like the Donner Party."

"Captain Hunt was Mormon, right? So he probably had spiritual reasons."

"Yeah, spiritual reasons," Rodriguez scoffs. "Like making money off all the suckers who can't figure out their own way through."

"Money for the church," I say, then realize that Rodriguez is turning left instead of right at the upscale Inn at Furnace Creek on the hill. "Where are we going?" I say.

"Where the final, remaining party ended up making camp," she says. "Badwater Basin. But we're not going all the way down to where they found the well. It's amazing that they managed to find it. Drinkable water, way out here?" I can tell by the way she's stressing this pretty basic information that she's up to something.

From a distance the salt flats almost look like an ice skating rink planed between the towering mounds of dirt forming mountains on either side. Up close, the white-crusted formations vary in shape, some even look like lily pads.

"Tomesha. What the Paiute called the basin," Rodriguez says. "It means, ground afire. Fitting, don't you think?"

“Sure,” I agree, “Fitting.” Hadn’t someone told me recently, Cheeseboro maybe, that the word actually meant coyote?

Rodriguez turns down that raised dirt road that cuts through the Devil’s Golf Course, a stretch of especially rough terrain that would make it virtually impossible to hit a golf ball. She veers the truck to a halt at one of the pullouts. She holds the pistol in her lap and stares straight ahead for a couple seconds. Like the road, the pullout is raised above the mud and salt that, now hardened, could almost be mistaken for small waves. Rodriguez stares straight ahead with the gun in her lap for a moment, like contemplating suicide. Just as I think this, she tilts the gun towards me instead.

“This is what ‘out’ means,” she says. “You asked me at the range, remember?”

If she were serious, she’d keep her wrist straight. This is what I think at first. But then she gestures with the gun for me to open the door. “Get out,” she says. “See how you like it.” I grab for my water bottle, but she shakes her head. “No water. And good luck finding any.”

I somehow manage to get the door open. “Walk!” she yells after me.

They found a man’s remains here last spring, after he’d emailed his wife a suicide note from his room the summer before that. Once you make up your mind to walk out here far enough, there’s no turning back. At some point, you’ll collapse. Your skin will split open. Your body will be picked over by scavengers, scattered, and what remains will be mummified in salt. These pieces won’t be found for months, possibly years.

I trudge down the road toward the salt flats, the lowest point in the park, and the hottest. I don't stop walking until I hear the truck's engine start up. Then I turn around. She's pulling back onto the road and heading back the way we came, kicking up plenty of dust for me to choke on. She's left me out here. Kicked me out. Abandoned. Exiled. That's what "out" means.

The ranch can't be more than ten miles, less if I make a beeline for it rather than following the roads. I could probably make that, prove to Rodriguez that I'm tougher than she thinks. A giant mirage, salt twinkling like water across 200 square miles. I know it's roughly five miles across between the mountains, but also that I won't find any shade or water if I make it there. My head is throbbing, and the glare off the salt only makes the sun beating down overhead feel that much worse, even with sunglasses. There are signs about avoiding alcohol at almost every trailhead, but it's a little late for that. I didn't plan on going hiking. Warmth is seeping through the soles of my canvas shoes. I step off the road, into the vast stretches of salt.

The beeline should cut the distance down to seven or eight miles, but in this heat it will still feel like at least thirty. Sweat trickles from my temples, my armpits. I'm losing water fast. I started out thirsty, which means that I'm at least a quart low. I move slowly over the uneven mounds of earth, either stepping on top with a crunching and sinking, or attempting to maneuver my feet between them at an angle. Walking is only slightly easier than it would be to play golf. I feel woozy, and risk losing my footing with each step. It can't be much past ten a.m., which means that the sun is only going to get worse. I try not to think that the difficulty comes from the tiredness that accompanies dehydration.

I can feel a heaviness in my legs, and my tongue already feels a little swollen. I can feel cracks when I rub my lips together. I tell myself that I'm imagining these symptoms. This denial is delirium setting in, another part of me insists. I smooth my fingers from my forehead down to the back of my neck. Like an idiot, I didn't wear a hat. My head is pounding, and my eyes sting from salt. The back of my cotton shirt is drenched, as well as the sides down under the armpits. Each step I take out into this uneven terrain, I'm losing more water. A breeze kicks up, hot. Almost a relief.

I've taken to skipping that Sunday phone call home, checking in every couple weeks instead, once a month more recently. How long would it be before anyone would know that I was missing? Each phone call home is a reminder of my violation of God's law, the sixth commandment—thou shalt not kill. So maybe it's appropriate that this is how things end up, being forced into the act I'd spent all those months contemplating. The reason I'd come out here in the first place. An eye for an eye. But as Rodriguez has pointed out a number of times, it's not the first commandment, or even the fifth. So how much of a trespass can it be really, in the grand scheme of things?

Heat radiates up from the road, from everything at a distance. Sunlight reflects off the chrome of a single car moving up from the ranch, then along in front of Artist's Drive and the hills with mineral splashes of blue and rose. It can't be more than two miles from here to the road. I have a much better chance of making that. A car has got to come along eventually, and I can hitch a ride back. I think about backtracking to the dirt road I left. Which brings to mind the story again, the part Rodriguez would be sure to tell me if she'd been here to witness my indecision.

“When the San Joaquin Company set out from Salt Lake City in October of 1849, Captain Jefferson Hunt made sure to wait for the slowest wagons so he could keep track of everyone,” Rodriguez would say. I can practically hear her voice, like she’s here saying it. “Which, as their paid guide was his job. But the wagons up front had enough of the slow wagons in back. So when this guy shows up with this sketchy hand-drawn map of a short cut, the majority of the wagon trains split off from Captain Hunt and the original party. Most of them end up running back with their tails tucked between their legs as soon as they run into trouble. That is, a huge canyon that isn’t on the map. And so, the original group, and the indecisive cowards that returned to it, they disappear from the story. I have no interest in people who can’t follow through, even on an initial bad decision.”

She tells me that this is what I need to do with my guilt as well: continue past it. “What’s done is done. He’s dead, Eggy. You’re alive. It’s about your survival now.”

I continue across the salt formations, but I veer toward the main road. I don’t turn back to regain the dirt one, even though my progress along it would be easier.

“The twenty wagons that decided to keep going around the canyon, they continued through to Groom Lake, near the present-day Area 51, famous for its alien cover-up conspiracies,” Rodriguez always adds for Larry’s benefit. “Not more than 100 miles northeast from here, as the crow flies.” Then she points. “But here in the valley is where the party breaks in two after a disagreement about which way to continue. One wants to continue west as they’d planned, and the other wants to find water.”

I can't blame them for wanting to find water. How can you stick with a plan that seems to go against your chances of survival? Yet the party with the man who died was this very party. The party that stuck to its guns made it. The one that went in search of water got stuck. None of it turned out the way it seems it should have.

When I reach the main road, I'm dizzy. My heart is beating too hard. Rodriguez pulls up with the truck. "Get in." When she leans over to unlock the door, I get a glimpse of that garish heart she's got inked above her own is showing with its arteries and hues of pale blue and yellow like light emanating. I get in.

"So you do want to survive." She hands me my water bottle. "It's official, then." The water's hot enough for tea at this point, but I don't care. I drink it anyway.

"You know that both parties came down this same road," Rodriguez tells me, like nothing happened, as we head back down the two-lane highway to Furnace Creek.

She just picks me up and that's it? I don't expect an apology, not from Rodriguez, but I feel like I at least deserve an explanation.

"The one that decided to change the agreed upon route to look for water, and the one that was determined to stick to the plan—they came down this same road from Death Valley Junction, but at different times. They came around the same bend that we did not much more than an hour earlier, and past the Inn, and then they headed up past the ranch, just like we're about to. Past the spring-fed swimming pool and golf course, and the campgrounds, and the solar farm."

Rodriguez's voice is soothing as she tells the story, and my anger begins to feel childish. Nothing happened to me, really. I just walked a ways in the heat. And I did ask her what would happen if I chose out. So in a way, I brought it on myself.

“Anyway, if you get put on a shift tonight, keep your ears open. See what you can find out. We're going to have to act quickly.”

I manage to shower and change in time for lunch. King Louis puts me right on a dinner shift without any of the hassle I expected. During my shift, tourists are asking about communication. King Louis says to play it off like this happens all the time. I hear the other server laugh somewhat hysterically at a tourist's joke about an accountant who must've forgotten to pay the phone bill. By the end of my shift, I have more questions than answers.

When I get home, Rodriguez is sitting around drinking beer on the ugly plaid couch with her feet tucked under her. She's wearing her cut off shorts from earlier and a sports bra. A roll of stomach fat has an image caught up in it that I can't make out.

“So? What'd you find out?” she says.

I follow the barbed wire winding up from the cow skull on her wrist, around her forearm until it forms a band around her bicep. A fetus is stuck in the barbed wire, a liver, a man's disembodied head. The head has dark hair and grey skin, X's for eyes, and a tongue lolling to the side. Spirits take up the empty space. None of them look happy.

Rodriguez sees me looking. She says, “The difference between you and me, Eggy, is you killed a man on accident, years ago, and still feel guilty about it. It was

raining, decreased visibility. You're off the hook right there. And he was old, couldn't have had many years left, especially if he made a habit of darting around in front of cars."

I get what she's implying. "They wouldn't have hired you if you killed anybody."

"Probably not." She winks. "If I'd been caught. How about some golf?"

She puts in this tape she must have gotten as part of Vicky's Company Store conspiracy. She knows I hate golf. Whatever. It's her television. "Whatever," I say.

"With that attitude, you're not going to make it through what's coming. If you crush as easily as those damn wild flowers tourists get so excited about."

"I didn't find out anything," I say. "No one seems to know what's going on."

She pretends to be enthralled by some old guy's golf swing and doesn't say anything for a couple minutes. "If you want to survive, you have to be ready to slaughter some oxen and make jerky." She clears her throat. "As I'm sure you remember, somewhere after the borax monument that wasn't yet there, the two parties split off. The main party headed up to the sand dunes near Stovepipe Wells. This is the group who continued west, with the original plan. They burned their wagons near the sand dunes and slaughtered their oxen to make jerky, then continued up the road by foot past Panamint Springs, another thirty-some miles, and through a pass over the mountains. They made it because they understood the value of making sacrifices."

Of course, it also didn't hurt that they had winter temperatures on their side. What I say is, "I'm going to bed." I've had enough of Rodriguez in full-on survival mode for one day. In all likelihood, everything will be back to normal in the morning.

But when the sun comes up, there's still no link to the outside. "So it's settled," Rodriguez says. "We've got to head out and see what's going on for ourselves."

At breakfast everyone's trying to keep things light, but it isn't really working. It's me and Rodriguez, Cheeseboro and Larry, and a shift manager from the Steakhouse, where I usually wait tables.

"Probably just a crashed satellite," Cheeseboro Sam says.

"Probably a satellite that crashed into another satellite and then fell on the phone lines," Rodriguez suggests with a smirk.

"Has anybody checked out the signal tower to see if it's intact?" Larry says.

"But the satellite dishes and the phone lines," the shift manager says.

"Doesn't the park service have radios?" I suggest.

The shift manager shrugs. "Have you seen any rangers?"

Cheeseboro Sam says, "A ranger should take charge in an emergency situation."

"Strange that no one's seen any rangers," Rodriguez says. "Not a single one." She passes a weighty look around the table. I get goosebumps, even though, or maybe because I'm not entirely sure what she's getting at.

Rodriguez has her eyes trained on King Louis making his rounds, getting closer.

"Not one visitor has come into the park since we've been cut off," the shift manager says.

“That’s strange,” Rodriguez agrees. “It’s the slow season. Not the dead season.”

My mind flips through the scenarios, from terrorism to the military to the supernatural to natural or man-made disaster.

“We’ve got solar panels, all this water,” Cheeseboro Sam says, looking a little too bright-eyed. “Harmony Borax used this land to grow enough alfalfa for their twenty mules. We could farm enough food for however many people, no problem. We could totally survive out here if, you know, something catastrophic happened out there.”

“Where are we getting the seeds, Nature Boy?” Rodriguez says.

“We’ll just drive out to Beatty or something,” Cheeseboro Sam says, obviously not grasping the fact that we don’t know what’s out there: zombies, aliens, a toxic event.

Louis stops at our table, stands behind the empty chair with his clipboard.

“There’ll be no driving out anywhere. All hands on deck, as they say. Except for you, Meg, since you didn’t suit up. And Sarah, what are we going to do with you?”

Rodriguez hands King Louis the post card from the day before. “Picked this up for you,” Rodriguez says. “Although I don’t know how you’re going to mail it.”

“Do they have communication anywhere else?” The shift manager says.

“Stovepipe Wells or Panamint Springs? What about Scotty’s Castle?”

“I wouldn’t know about that,” he says. “And until the next fuel truck shows up, no one needs to bother with driving. We’ll want to hold on to what we’ve got, in case of an emergency. Everybody needs to keep to the ranch. Even the remaining guests.”

“Our communication’s cut off,” the shift manager says. “This is an emergency!”

King Louis says, “We’ve come to depend more than we realize on communication technology.” There’s no emotion in his words. “Even ten years ago nobody would have thought anything of losing communications for a couple days. In fact, they’d come out here to get away from it.”

“We think something of it now!” the shift manager says. “We need to know that supply trucks are coming in. Otherwise, we need to get out of here!”

“I don’t think that’s the best idea,” Louis says, “I spoke with the head of the company. He says that if you want to keep your jobs, you need to stay here.”

“How did you speak to the head of the company?” The shift manager says.

Louis tips his hat in farewell. He saunters over to the next table.

The shift manager’s face is red. “He’s an efficiency expert!” she sputters. “He should be more efficient in dealing with this!”

“Has anyone checked him out?” Rodriguez whispers. “I mean, he just walks in one morning and announces that he’s here to improve our efficiency, but do we know for sure that he’s actually working for the company?”

“It’s a little late to check his credentials now!” the shift manager points out.

“He didn't seem to know the name of the guy in charge,” I offer up. “He just called him ‘the head of the company.’”

“First he holds back shifts, and now he’s rationing supplies for himself,” Rodriguez says. She leans back with her arms across her chest, shaking her head.

After breakfast, we head out to the shooting range. Cheeseboro Sam and Larry decide to skip their shifts since it’s now obvious that much larger things are at issue than keeping our jobs. I wear a hat and carry a water bottle in each pocket. I’m prepared, this time, for whatever might happen.

We stop at the gas station first, but there’s already a lock on each of the two pumps. “He can’t do this!” Rodriguez yells. We get back in the truck, and she peels out, all of us headed as fast as that little truck can get going towards the shooting range.

“Maybe we should conserve the gas we have left,” I point out, even though Rodriguez doesn’t seem to be at her most rational.

“Fuck that guy,” she says.

Rodriguez pulls in at Zabriskie Point alongside an RV. There’s no one in sight. It’s early enough in the day that the occupants probably went for a quick hike. Rodriguez has a whole back and forth with Larry and Cheeseboro Sam. She holds out this hose she pulled from the glove compartment until they finally take it. She gets back in, cuts the engine, rolls down the windows. She says, “They’re going to siphon some gas.”

“And strand these people out here?” I say.

“You sound just like the boys. It isn’t that far of a walk back to the ranch.” Then she adds, “Anyway, you should be more concerned about our survival.”

I want to respond with something clever about how going out to shoot guns isn't exactly necessary for our survival, but maybe it is, so I keep quiet.

At the range, we talk conspiracy theories as usual, but now they're colored with possibility. "We've been overlooked," I say. "The name confused even God. He thought we were already dead."

Larry aims. "I don't believe in God." He fires and misses.

"We don't need God," Rodriguez says. "We've got each other."

Cheeseboro Sam tries to lighten the mood with plots from comic books. "We're being quarantined because we've been exposed to radioactivity. We're already developing superpowers!" He steps up to shoot, and his hair glows reddish in the sun.

Larry says, "I hope for something cool."

"Aaaaarghhee!" A horrible guttural sound at my ear. I recognize this as Rodriguez's zombie impression, a split second before I jump back.

"You're just lucky I didn't have a gun in my hand," I say, trying to play my growing panic.

"Is that right?" Rodriguez says.

Cheeseboro Sam fires. I jump again. One of the cans falls off the car. He fires twice to hit the other.

He sets the gun on top of the car, and Rodriguez picks it up. "If we can get our hands on a fuel supply, we've got a chance," Rodriguez says. "Otherwise we're sitting

ducks there at Furnace Creek, waiting for aliens, or whoever, or whatever, to just come along.” She fires. Two cans go spinning.

Larry cracks the push tab on a fresh can. “I’m in,” he says.

“We can all count on each other to do whatever is necessary for our collective survival, right?” Rodriguez says. “We’ve got to slaughter oxen, make jerky and get the fuck out of Furnace Creek!”

Cheeseboro Sam looks at me. I take a deep breath, gulp my beer.

“I’ve got a stockpile of shotgun shells and bullets buried out near Scotty’s Castle. Even a few automatic weapons. We’ll have to get King Louis out of the way if we expect to get enough gas. If things are bad out there, we’ll hole up somewhere here, but we’ve got to at least check it out.”

“What, exactly, do you mean by slaughtering oxen?” Cheeseboro Sam says.

“We’ve got to do whatever it takes to get the key to the gas pump,” Rodriguez says. She hands the gun to Larry.

I imagine headlines. Youths Shoot up Desert Resort, Flee to Hills. Psychopath Poses as ‘Efficiency Expert,’ Holds Resort Hostage. Or the possibility that even in this heat turns my blood cold: that there will be no headlines.

Larry says, “We can just keep siphoning gas.” He aims his pistol at one of the two cans Rodriguez set up. He fires and misses the first can. He fires again and hits it.

“It’ll take too long for us to get enough,” Rodriguez says. “Soon King Louis is going to be the only one with any gas in his tank,” Rodriguez says. “And he keeps it locked. Either way, we’ll need a key, and he isn’t just going to hand it over.”

“We could hold him up,” Larry says. He takes a third shot and misses.

“With that kind of aim, you pull a gun on someone and you’ve got a sixty-six percent chance of winding up dead,” Rodriguez says. “Who’s up? Eggy, it’s your turn.”

“One more day,” I say. “Let’s wait one more day, just to make sure.”

She stares at me like she can’t comprehend what I’ve just said. She says, “One more day becomes another. Remember what happened to the party that waited? They had to retreat to the valley floor while they sent those couple guys over the mountains to get supplies. The guys had to trek some 300 miles to the nearest mission and didn’t return until a month later. By this point only two families remained. And one member was just remains by the time those guys returned. Who wants to be the one who ends up dead? Not me. Eggy’s in, and the Bartender. What about you, Cheeseboro?”

Cheeseboro Sam takes a deep breath, exhales. “I’m in. Count me in.”

Rodriguez hands me the gun. “It’s all you, Eggy. Show them how it’s done.”

Rodriguez drops me off back at the ranch, by the Borax Museum. I’ve got the gun tucked just under the front of my t-shirt since I’m near enough the air-conditioned saloon that someone could pass by. Given the heat, this is unlikely. Everyone is indoors. The only sound is of the generators running, keeping the air conditioning going, the ice machines functioning, the indoor lighting on. It’s high noon, like they say in Westerns,

and hot as Hades—the kind of thing we make fun of tourists for saying. It's hot as Hades, kids! Look out! Hot as Hades!

“Don't crack on me now, Eggy.” Rodriguez's voice is inside my head, or maybe all around me like the mechanized hum.

I hear an engine start up, and I know the white truck is making its way from the visitor's parking lot to the cabin. The target cabin. Rodriguez says to think of it like one of the scenarios out at the range.

An air conditioning unit starts up, startling me as I creep along a row of unoccupied guest cabins. Everyone is inside somewhere with the blinds drawn. I pull the gun out from under my shirt, put both hands around it, like Rodriguez taught me. First one hand, then the other, below the muzzle in the back. My trigger finger is still pointing forward. Once the finger bends to press the trigger, that's it. Rodriguez's rule. I drop my hand, let the gun fall against my side. The air is sweltering, still.

So Long, Death Valley, I think to myself as I creep along. This is what the final, remaining party said when they finally made it out. Only one man died over the course of all that splitting off and regrouping and getting completely lost. So like Rodriguez says, naming the valley “Death Valley” after a single death, over a hundred and fifty years ago, was really blowing things out of proportion. They actually made out pretty good, considering.

A black bird hops down on the fence near me with its beak open. The bird tilts its head and moves its throat like it wants to say something. Only it can't. It doesn't have the words. But what would it say if it did? It hops along the fence after me, its open

beak a sign of desperation. Pleading with me to listen. What if the story actually highlights the value of each and every life? But it was the party that stuck to its guns and was able to make appropriate sacrifices that made it. Not the one that changed plans in the middle. And King Louis is telling us to stay put, like the unsuccessful party. He wants to keep us here, trapped.

The compensation truck's engine falls silent in the nearing distance, just around the next bunch of cabins, just before the ranch gives way to open desert. I move along the line of overgrown brush fed by the spring. It's either me or him. This is all I need to remember. Death is the inevitable consequence. In order to make jerky, we have to slaughter something first. We have to make a sacrifice. I do. I have to make this sacrifice. It's up to me. I've arrived. I stare hard at the grill of the target's truck, making tinkling sounds. It's so big it must take up both lanes on a narrow road. We can't stay here, not with him.

I consider the best angle of approach. I slide the fingers of my left hand over the right, with my thumb below the muzzle in the back so it doesn't nip through that webbing of skin when the back of the gun slides out to eject the spent bullet. Although, if the target is prepared with a gun of his own, if he's a good shot, then it's out of my hands. And he just might be prepared, because if I've learned anything it's that these stories never end up how it seems they should. The shortcut ends up taking longer, the search for water proves fatal, the destruction of their wagons and beasts of burden saves them in the end. And this solution seems too easy.

"You'll find the experience liberating, Eggy." Rodriguez's voice is smooth.

The sky is blue and cloudless. There's no mushroom explosion or tendrils of smoke reaching above the mountains. No smell of chemicals in the air. None of Larry's mother ships hovering. But also no cars out on the road.

Rodriguez growls, "Remember, you're either in or out."

I imagine the vast stretches of cracked earth, the open expanse of salt and sun, the mountains with more wilderness beyond, and nothing but dust and gravel as the temperatures rise and the plant life shrivels and my trigger finger bends of its own accord. No turning back. Rodriguez's rule. But there's no rule against moving forward. No rule about just walking right out into it. Into the open, endless, sun-baked space.

These stories never end up how you think, anyway.

The Hole Card

The Secret Gold Mine

Walter E. Scott, better known as Death Valley Scotty, was also known as “the Croesus of the Desert” by the press because of all the money he waved around. He ripped up large bills to make change, or set them ablaze to light his cigar, as one account depicts him doing. But he didn’t give handouts, except for in the case of a woman who named her baby after him. To this woman, he presented a one hundred dollar bill. A novelist of the time called him the Sphinx of the American Desert. He was a riddle, a mysterious character. If it weren’t for that gold nugget he’d been seen flashing, the secret goldmine he credited with his riches might seem too fanciful to be true.

The mine was rumored to be located in such a treacherous part of Death Valley that Scotty could stand the extreme conditions for mere hours at a time before he had to retreat to his famous hideout on a ledge beneath a ledge, equipped with a spare mattress, whiskey and champagne, cured meats and tins of caviar, and a rattle snake well-disposed enough not to bite if you didn’t bite her first. Guarding the mine were special service types, armed with long distance rifles and optical technology. They could pick off intruders miles away. Scotty outfitted his mules with special contraptions on their hind legs that swept away the hoof prints made by the front; this way he couldn’t be followed.

When Scotty’s castle began to rise from the desert, he had solid construction to back his claims. But more than that, he had a backer for whom he’d become the attention-loving front man. What is known even today as Scotty’s Castle was known as Death Valley Ranch by Albert and Bessie Johnson, who paid for its construction. It was

Johnson who in 1915 began purchasing this land in Grapevine Canyon that formerly belonged to Jacob Staininger, the Hermit of Death Valley. At least, this is the land Johnson believed he had title to when he began construction on his desert refuge.

The Wishing Well

The wishing well is located just outside the castle's front gate. Those waiting for a tour of the castle often assemble here. The covering of the well is comprised of two kidney-shaped hemispheres, tiled in the Spanish style with a design of flame-like red flowers and green against yellow at the base, moving into terra cotta above, with a deep, vibrant blue rimming the top. Three steps lead up to the hole at the center. The hole is framed with ornate ironwork to ensure that a child could lean forward to drop down a coin in payment for a wish, with no danger of falling in. Plenty of children visit Death Valley Ranch now, but the Johnsons themselves did not have any.

The Stable

While waiting for a tour, visitors may decide to explore the castle grounds. Those who find themselves out beyond the unfinished swimming pool may come across a sign with two arrows pointing in opposite directions: either follow the arrow out to Windy Point, or turn back and follow the arrow pointing to the stable. *There goes Mable, back to the stable!* As Death Valley Scotty used to tease his benefactress, calling her Mable after a female stunt rider he'd once known during the decade he worked in Buffalo Bill

Cody's Wild West show. And on a particularly hot or otherwise unpleasant day, one on which "windy" only brings dust to mind and "point" most likely makes visitors wince, one will likely make the decision to turn back.

At the stables, visitors will find no horses, or any of the mules memorialized with Scotty on one of the castle's two weather vanes. Instead they will find a 1925 Graham Brother's pick-up once used for hauling building supplies up from the nearest railroad depot. There also rests Scotty's beat-up Dodge sedan with its off kilter windshield frame, unruly grill, and cracked fender. This is the car he would drive five miles down the hill to his own ranch after putting himself to bed in his cowboy themed pajamas, in his cowboy themed room, for the benefit of any houseguests, then slipping out the back door. One sign hanging on the ropes in front of the cars cautions NO SMOKING. Another advises DO NOT ENTER AREA ALARMED. The 1914 Packard on display here is RARE COVERED FOR ITS PROTECTION, and valuable. It is not thought to be one of the possible vehicles of Bessie Johnson's death.

Windy Point

Those who continue forward on the long dusty walk up to Windy Point, who take the sign up on its suggestion to FOLLOW ROAD TO SCOTTY'S GRAVE, end up, as advertised, at the grave of Walter E. Scott. Here, they'll find his tombstone marked with the numbers 1872-1954, indicating that he outlived both Johnsons. Above the grave is a large, wooden cross. To the right of the grave, Scotty's face emerges almost lifelike from a bronze plaque on top of a cemented cairn. His dimpled chin, his eyes forever squinting

into the desert sun. His nose is shinier than the rest of the plaque because visitors rub it, occasionally for luck, but more often their hands are attracted to the shininess in the same way Scotty's soft touches had been to the promise of gold.

Once Scotty had the money, he'd write to his investors of 140 degree temperatures in the shade, alkali water not fit for jackasses, flash floods sweeping through canyons—it was in the interest of their *safety* not to come out to view the mine. And Scotty couldn't very well trust them with the location! That is, one of the unscrupulous, scurvy outlaws holed up in the hills might follow them right to it! He even went so far as to stage an ambush to scare off a particularly persistent investor, which might have been successful had his brother not got shot in the groin and Scotty hadn't then had to call things off right in the middle. Assuming that he must have been the intended target for the bullet, the investor pressed charges.

Beneath Scotty's bronzed likeness is a quote: "I got four things to live by. Don't say nothing that will hurt anybody. Don't give advice—nobody will take it anyway. Don't complain. Don't explain." Visitors can contemplate Scotty's final words of wisdom while sitting on the bench overlooking the castle compound. From here, one can see the buildings' red tile roofs and stucco exteriors, where one walkway leads to another. From here, one might even see the mostly-decayed remains of the original fencing done by the Paiute and Panamint Shoshone Indians that Johnson hired to do only the most manual jobs, and always under supervision. From this vantage point, one gets an overview.

The Courtyard

Tours of the inside begin just outside the red wooden gate with the grid pattern, its spaces filled with metalwork. Joshua trees grow on either side. The most castle-like part of the Hacienda-style structure is the tower to the right, with its single slit of a window to illuminate the winding staircase. This leads to Bessie's music room.

When the tour guide appears, dressed in an appropriate 1930's manner—perhaps a dress with heels, a hat and gloves—she opens the gate, ushers in the members of the group to arrange themselves in a shaded alcove off the courtyard, next to the roped off 1933 Packard. The black car's right side wall is scuffed as evidence of Mr. Johnson's notoriously bad driving. He'd handed this car down to a relative but reclaimed it when she went on to marry a man of whom he did not approve. The tour guide will not share this anecdote. She will also refrain from mentioning that no one is sure if Bessie's fatal accident occurred in this car, or in the LaSalle as witnesses reported years later, or the 110 with its dented hubcap. She won't mention that more than a few suspect Bessie's death was brought about by her husband's hand afterwards. Since the CHP reports were destroyed sixty-seven years ago, such suspicion can only linger. And suspicions have no place on this historical tour.

Just as the tour group focuses on the tiny hat that more perches than sits on their guide's head, on the feathers that bounce as she moves her head, the tour guide focuses on the architectural flourishes of this edifice these people came to see. The metal mountain goat at one corner of the gate, the mosaic sundial pressed into the stucco just beyond. And Scotty's fictional flourishes, of course.

What she will be sure to tell her group is that Death Valley Scotty, as he was known thanks to a young sports reporter, joined up with Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West Show as a stunt rider and performer of skits before he left off to pursue a more lucrative type of performance: that of persuading wealthy investors to sink money into his fictitious gold mine. And who was one of these investors? That's right, none other than Albert Mussey Johnson, responsible for building everything that you see here! In 1904, an associate of Scotty's approached Johnson, as one of a number of wealthy men, who agreed to the investment. Now, once Scotty got his hands on the grubstake, he invented all kinds of ways to throw investors off track, from staged ambushes to claims of stagecoach robbers stealing the sack of gold he'd been on his way to deliver. He took a similar tack with Johnson, who thought at first that he'd managed to strike a good deal.

After their initial dealings, Scotty went on to make a public name for himself. In 1905, he paid \$5,500 to the Santa Fe Railroad for his Death Valley Coyote stunt, in which he broke the current train speed record from Los Angeles to Chicago, as well as, he claimed, all of the glass and most of the windows of the train. Scotty was such a notorious figure by 1906 that they put on a play about him in Seattle, in which he played himself. Johnson eventually recognized the gold mine to be a sham, but refused to let Scotty off the hook that easy. He made a number of trips out to the desert and came to enjoy the time he spent out there while Scotty tried to divert him from the supposed mine. The climate proved therapeutic for Johnson's physical ailments.

The Johnsons were looking for a hideaway, and what better place to get away from the business world of Chicago than the middle of Death Valley. Like her husband, Bessie appreciated the isolation the location provided. She understood for the first time

the true importance of an element she'd previously taken for granted—water— as well as the fact that a lack of it anywhere else nearby meant that they would never have neighbors. Initial construction on the building began because Bessie wanted a structure to keep the rattlesnakes out during what had become their annual spring retreat. The first structures were functional—the basics of the main house, a storage house/garage, a cookhouse, and the stables. The Johnsons soon came to want something more aesthetically pleasing. And they had the resources at their disposal to do this.

The Living Hall

In 1923, Johnson retained the architectural services of Frank Lloyd Wright, but decided against using his designs. Wright thought the designs were likely too daring and different for Johnson's conservative taste. Johnson said that the designs were geared towards something more in line with an adobe Indian village when what Johnson wanted was a Spanish hacienda. In 1926 Johnson contracted a professional designer to make the basics of the structure over in Spanish revival fashion.

The tour guide will be sure to point to the rafters in the two-story ceiling of the main entry and living hall. She'll point out how the timber was burned to give an appearance of age, like everything else about the desert mansion. She'll point out the massive fireplace and over-stuffed leather couches where Scotty would entertain the Johnsons and any guests with stories in the evenings. *Did you hear about the puppy I brought along on the Death Valley Coyote run? Outfitted him with a diamond collar so everyone'd know my heart was in the right place. Paid for those very diamonds myself*

with the profits from my mine, and boy, wasn't that the proudest puppy anyone ever saw, especially once the windows were knocked out at those high speeds and he could put his head out into the wind. Say, listen? Can't you hear the miners hard at work now? Someone's always down there, hard at work, twenty-four hours, around the clock! Scotty would pay someone on staff to move around chairs in the tunnels built beneath the house so they he could pull off one of his favorite tall tales.

The tour guide will direct the visitors' attention to the indoor waterfall over jasper that functions as air conditioning. She'll point out the heavy leather curtains to block the sun, how Bessie boasted that the house never got about ninety-five degrees in the summer months, which although the castle is at a higher elevation and doesn't get as hot as the lower portions of the valley, is still worthy of boasting. She will tell the group about how all the materials were brought in by train and hauled in over dirt roads from over twenty miles away using trucks like the ones out in the stables. The tiles were all made by artisans in Los Angeles—those in terra cotta and blue along the waterfall and lining the second story railing, as well as the larger ones that made up the floor. Any work that wasn't done perfectly was pulled up and done again. The Johnsons were responsible for providing plenty of construction jobs, 100 at any given time. But the Johnsons were perfectionists. Albert kept a perpetual eye out for the weakest link in the work chain and would periodically fire him. Because of this, Scotty used to say that it took three crews to get anything done: one coming, one going, and one working.

She'll point out how the giant iron chandelier suspended in the middle of the room was fashioned with lights that resemble candles to appeal to a rustic charm. In this very room, the friendship between Scotty and the Johnsons continued to grow. Perhaps

they reminisced about their younger days as they grew older, even coming to joke over how running an Insurance company and a gold mining scam aren't that different, both predicated as they are on investors.

Scotty's Room

Scotty's designated place in the castle consisted of a twin bed with a bear and mountain goat carved into the headboard, a framed picture of Buffalo Bill Cody, as well as a number of his signature variety of hat and red neckties hanging from hooks like Boy Scout uniforms. Everything was so orderly, so clean and genteel. After putting himself to bed in his cowboy pajamas for the benefit of any house guest left to wonder that this former actor/stunt rider, now well into his fifties, sixties, seventies—might in this way retire. This performance was but one in a lifetime of pranks. But it also provided a perk, the tour guide will tell them—since his house didn't have the luxury of electricity or running water, in the morning he could just drive back up to the castle, slip back in the back door, and leave his dirty clothes on the floor for the housekeeping staff to wash. He could slip on a fresh cowboy hat, one of his signature ties, and a clean pair of baggy pants. He may have quit the Wild West Show to follow a more glitzy performance as a gold mine proprietor, but his performance here at the castle was even more lucrative, and the work, steady rather than seasonal.

Here, the tour guide might tell one of the stories Bessie recorded. Like the one Scotty claimed to have told a group of rotary women he considered particularly obnoxious. When they asked him about the kindest thing he'd ever done, he told them

about coming upon an old couple out in the desert, at least 100 miles from any outpost, who'd lost their horses and were out of food. After making them dinner he thought on their situation and what to do for them, and rather than leave them out there to die, he did the kindness of shooting them. The story was likely a fabrication to get a rise out of Bessie. But one never really knew with Scotty—he might have told the women this story!

Or she might tell the story of how Scotty once claimed to have put a New York dog and cat show on the map with an alley cat he named Irene Watkins. He had Irene done up by a beautician who polished its nails and specially fluffed its fur. He convinced a jeweler to let Irene Watkins borrow a bracelet and large diamond solitaire. He then rubbed catnip on the bottom of Irene Watkins' paw so she kept licking it and flashing the solitaire around. The show had to hire a guard, of course. When Irene Watkins won the show (how else could such a story possibly turn out?), he had to give the prize money back. The audience felt cheated once they discovered that Irene Watkins was really some tom he'd found in a back alley.

The tour guide will usher her group through the back door, the same one through which Scotty would make his escape. She'll likely point toward the water source that allowed the castle to be built here in the first place, and explain about the Pelton wheel that powers the electricity. She'll direct the group's attention to a metal plaque nailed onto the outside of the wall with an opening leading to the inside of the room. She'll ask the visitors to guess what it's for, and none of them will be able to. She'll then tell them that this was Scotty's bullet splitter. If outlaws were out to get him, and one was waiting by the back door, and another by the window, then he claimed that he could shoot the gun

from the hole on the inside and the bullet would split in two, the pieces flying out on either side to hit both men. She might point out that given all the money Johnson has put into his house, the fact that he let Scotty nail this ridiculous thing to the wall, just so that he could tell this story, well, this shows what Scotty's friendship meant to him.

The Dining Room

The tour guide will point out the dishes specially made in keeping with the Spanish style of the castle. She'll tell them about how when they had guests for dinner, Scotty liked to sit next to the youngest and most attractive of the women and make disgusting sounds throughout the meal. He then pretended they were coming from her. He might tell stories of riding the broncos in Buffalo Bill's show, and how after he'd quit Buffalo Bill he became so famous that Bill had to hire an impersonator. Or about how at one point, before he started putting his money into the castle, he was jailed after a Wells Fargo express messenger had been robbed and killed. With all that money on him, authorities thought he must have done it! Is that really true, more than one guest must have asked after such a tale. And Scotty, who once said he believed in holding on to his hole card, the last card each player turns over in stud poker to reveal who has actually won the hand—he'd say with a wink, *of course it's true. Don't let anyone tell you different! See that carved in the beam yonder? Ah! Que Dicha! That's Spanish for, "what he said."*

The Kitchen

The tour guide will show her group the freezer stashed out of site, and the refrigerator hidden in a cupboard to give the kitchen the appearance of a previous era. She will likely draw attention to the tile work, the bulls and scenes of hunting above the sink. What she probably won't tell them is that when the Johnsons were away, Scotty often slept here on a cot rather than driving down the hill to his ranch. And if this was as uncomfortable as he felt at the castle, then it only made sense that he didn't have his wife and son stay there with him. He called Ella, his estranged wife, "Jack," much in the same way that he called Bessie, "Mable." This renaming was a way of his. He called his wife "Jack," as he also did a favorite Indian guide and his donkeys, although he preferred them much less to his precious mules. Johnson took it upon himself to send Ella monthly alimony on Scotty's behalf. At one point, believing the rumors about the castle being Scotty's, she attempted to sue for more.

Separate Bedrooms

Bessie's bed was shorter, smaller for a woman of her slight stature. Johnson's bed was much longer. Albert often had trouble sleeping due to his back pain, so separate bedrooms allowed them both to rest easier.

The pain was the result of a train accident within a couple years of their wedding. Albert had invested in a lead-zinc mine in Missouri that had proved profitable, so he encouraged his father, from whom he'd borrowed the investment money, to accompany him on a trip out west to explore more investment opportunities. His father was killed when another train struck theirs from the rear. Albert Johnson's back was broken, and he

was never expected to recover use of his legs. However, over the course of a good year and a half he regained the ability to walk. For the rest of his life, he moved with a limp. Rumor had it that he may have had difficulty regulating bodily functions and had to carry a colostomy bag. (A messy little detail the tour guide will likely leave out.) After his recovery, Albert Johnson went into business with his father's former partner and purchased the National Life Insurance Company. It was a few years after this that Scotty first approached Johnson about his mine.

The Upper Music Room

Scotty was the only one at the castle not required to attend Bessie's mandatory services she held every Sunday she was at the ranch. She was always the one to give the sermon, even though Albert was developing a reputation as a preacher. The services were held at various locations around the ranch, but her pipe organ was located in the upper music room. Beyond the organ, a door leads to the castle's main tower.

Bessie was said to have brought prostitutes into their Chicago home for the moral rehabilitation she hoped would come from them being exposed to genteel culture. Perhaps she hoped her sermons would have a similar effect on the workmen. One of these workmen was M. Roy Thompson, who Johnson hired to oversee construction. Thompson was Bessie's fiancé, but the engagement was called off because his family's finances collapsed and he was forced to leave Stanford, where they both attended college. Bessie then transferred to Cornell, where she met Albert. The gesture Johnson made by seeking out and hiring Thompson was likely one of Christian generosity. Thompson

signed on for a year, but ended up staying on for quite a few more, long enough that his relationship with his wife ended in divorce.

The First Tour Guides

The tour guide will tell her group how if she'd been a tour guide when they first started giving tours at the castle to help pay for its upkeep, almost eighty years ago, she would have worked six days a week, with Sundays off to attend Bessie's services. She'll end with Bessie's accidental death, then Albert's from cancer, and how Scotty got to live on in the castle until he passed away six years later. The park service eventually came to purchase the property that Albert had to scramble to purchase once he realized that, due to a survey error, the boundary of the land he bought ended a good mile or so over from where he'd built.

Bessie crafted the narrative those first tour guides told. She shaped and reshaped the story that was printed and distributed in rather extensive pamphlets, so that like the castle it had the appropriate appearance, the perfect placement of tile across the floor so that not a single one had to be broken. As the pamphlet states, construction was never completely finished, most noticeably with the swimming pool. Scotty's words—that the castle had no beginning and would have no end—can now be seen as prescient, as long as people continue to visit, continue to keep telling and retelling the stories of this place.

