

TAKE US TO A BETTER PLACE *STORIES*



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FEATURING

Madeline Ashby

Hannah Lillith Assadi

Calvin Baker

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

FOREWORD

Roxane Gay



In many ways, I take my health and my right to good health for granted. I am relatively healthy and able-bodied. I work out five or six days a week, often with a personal trainer. I have a home gym, and before that I had a gym membership. I use a range of apps to track how many steps I take each day, what I eat, and the composition of my workouts, even though I never really do anything with the data. Sometimes I wear a Fitbit and feel just a bit more virtuous. I have robust health insurance, though as a fat woman I am reluctant to visit the doctor given the persistent anti-fat biases of most medical practitioners. I have access to healthy foods. I go to Whole Foods and joke, like most people who shop there, about how it should be called “Whole Paycheck.” And still, I marvel at the produce, always arranged so neatly, artistically. I partake of the olive bar and get exotic cured meats to make charcuterie. I browse various juices and elixirs. I talk to the butcher about the provenance of the meat I buy, and trust that nearly everything I buy from the store is “organic,” however vague and broad a distinction that is. Nearly everything in the store promotes the idea of wellness, as if by engaging in consumerism within the confines of Whole Foods, our lives will necessarily improve.

There is a lot of money to be made in promoting the idea of a culture of health, and companies that claim to care about wellness recognize this. There are all kinds of commercials touting diets and fitness clothing and fancy gyms and juices and vitamin regimens that will help us become our best, most well selves. The constant refrain of this health-conscious consumerism is that with the right combination of products and discipline, we will all be healthy. These entreaties are predicated upon the notion that health and wellness are within everyone’s reach. It’s an absurd fantasy, the kind of fantasy that can be actively nurtured only by people who can afford to buy into such a flight of fancy.

I take my health and my right to good health for granted because I can afford to. It’s a blessing, but it is also galling because good health should be an inalienable right, something everyone has access to regardless of who they are, what kind of body they live in, and their economic status. There was a moment, during the presidency of Barack Obama, when it felt like we, in the United States, were getting closer to the possibility of a more robust culture of health. The economy had improved. Obamacare became law, and suddenly millions of people who previously had no access to adequate health care were able to benefit from the expertise of medical professionals. They could better care for themselves and their loved ones.

This is not to say that adequate medical care is the singular hallmark of a culture of health, but universal health care would certainly be a step in the right direction. Unfortunately, we do not yet have universal health care in the United States. People’s access to health care remains political and comes and goes with the will of those in power. And for those without means, it’s far more than access to health care that makes a culture of health a distant, absurd fantasy. There are regions where even if people have health insurance there are not enough medical professionals to serve their community. Those in rural areas are particularly hard hit by doctor shortages. In Flint, Michigan,

residents still don't have access to clean water. In San Francisco, life came to a halt when the air quality was so dire, schools closed and residents were warned to stay in their homes and wear air masks should they absolutely need to leave their homes. From the East Coast to the West, shorelines are eroding as the oceans rise. In cities all across the country, there are barren food deserts where people have little access to grocery stores and affordable fresh produce. When your life is constrained by enduring systemic oppression, it's hard to expect that people are going to care about health and wellness.

But what if this world were different? What if we started taking better care of our planet, our communities' infrastructures, and ourselves? What if we had the financial and emotional means to do so? What if a culture of health was more than a fantasy? In this anthology, writers imagine what a culture of health might look like. They imagine the dire consequences for humanity if we don't start building a true, widely accessible culture of health. They imagine what the world might look like if we misinterpret what a culture of health should actually be. They imagine how we might all thrive if we all had the inalienable right to participate in a culture of health that was actively supported economically, societally, politically.

Two old friends, Bobby and Kyle, reconnect in Atlanta after years of distance in "The Flotilla at Bird Island," by Mike McClelland. The world is different from the one we know, the ravages of global warming clear and present, the ozone layer depleted, the air thick with pollution. Health is but a memory of what once was, but there is hope for a healthier way of life and, ultimately, a healthier world. In Frank Bill's "The Masculine and the Dead," Guy, a widower veteran, is a man who values self-sufficiency, taking care of his body, his home, and his community in simple but effective ways, and slowly he mentors a neglected

young boy in a different way of life. Wellness is a cultural mandate in Yoon Ha Lee's "The Erasure Game," where people must assiduously track their exercise, food intake, civic participation, and other markers of well-being. Households are incentivized to live healthy lives. As the story unfolds, we see that a culture of health is only a social good if participation is voluntary.

In Hannah Lillith Assadi's "Paradise," we are reminded that none of us are healthy if we remain indifferent to the suffering of others. Rita, a young Syrian teenager, lives with her brother, Hussein, and their father in Arizona, recently resettled immigrants. She is mourning her mother and trying to take care of her father and brother, both of whom need surgery for untreated gunshot wounds. The family receives an invitation from Dr. Jean al-Hadid, a local Syrian surgeon who welcomes new immigrants to the community. With the invitation comes the family's hope that they might receive the care they so desperately need. Theirs is a painful hope, because this suffering family does not yet understand that the American dream does not offer anyone the true rights they deserve.

These collected stories offer thoughtful, compelling, unique responses to imagining today a culture of health tomorrow. They are hopeful and cautionary tales. They are, above all, a call to action, offering all of us the opportunity to rise to the occasion of contributing, in the ways we can, to a world where a healthier life is possible to all, where a healthier life is something we can all rightfully take for granted.

Roxane Gay's writing appears in *Best American Non-required Reading 2018*, *Best American Mystery Stories 2014*, *Best American Short Stories 2012*, *Best Sex Writing 2012*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *A Public Space*, *McSweeney's*, *Tin House*, *Oxford American*, *American Short Fiction*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, and many others. She is a contributing opinion writer for *The New York Times*. She is the author of the books *Ayiti*, *An Untamed State*, the *New York Times* best-selling *Bad Feminist*, the nationally best-selling *Difficult Women*, and the *New York Times* best-selling *Hunger: A Memoir of My Body*. She is also the author of *World of Wakanda* for Marvel and the editor of *Best American Short Stories 2018*. She is currently at work on film and television projects, a book of writing advice, an essay collection about television and culture, and a YA novel entitled *The Year I Learned Everything*. In 2018, she won a Guggenheim fellowship.

INTRODUCTION

Pam Belluck



Don't just sit there. Do something. Well, read this book first—and then do something.

You'll be motivated, I promise. Because you are about to encounter a collection of stories that will nudge your neurons and home in on your heart.

These are not airbrushed, sanitized stories. They are flush with open-eyed realism—engaging with the world's problems even if some are potentially painful, even if we may never have anything close to a perfect solution. They challenge us to face—within the world and within ourselves—the complex, difficult, intricate, sometimes internally contradictory truth.

This book is a collection of health-related fiction, but its definition of health is broad: physical and mental and emotional, social and spiritual. Health, after all, is rarely just a single, simple thing. It includes the gamut of how we feel about and toward ourselves, and about and toward each other.

Our world today is remarkable and terrifying. Scientific and medical advances unspool at a dizzying pace. We can edit genes in human embryos, grow miniature models of hearts and brains from stem cells, sift through gigantic haystacks of digital data to find the needle that identifies a hitherto unknown virus. We can keep people who previously would have died alive—whether they are tiny premature babies or melanoma patients who are candidates for immunotherapy. We can implant electrodes into the brain to reduce the tremors of Parkinson's or allow some people with blindness to experience a semblance of sight or make it possible for quadriplegics to move an arm or a leg.

But such phenomenal progress hasn't solved some of our most longstanding public health problems. And some of them are so widespread and basic that they don't require technological genius—they mostly require will and attention and resources. Poverty, isolation, prejudice, child abuse, conspiracy theories, war, displacement, discrimination, disenfranchisement, distrust. These are the forces that undergird public and private health, and many of the stories in this collection address them directly or indirectly.

In "Paradise," Hannah Lillith Assadi writes of Rita and her Syrian refugee family, faced with eking out a new life in Arizona, where even the desert bears scant resemblance to the desert they were forced to flee. What they carried with them are memories—and wounds that scar, traumatize, and almost paralyze them as they strive within the limits of a society that welcomes them on paper but makes asylum hard in practice.

As refugees, public assistance is available for some of their medical care, but not for "cosmetic" problems, like the bullet-mangled hand of Rita's brother, Hussein. Her father, who won't accept financial help for his bullet-mangled spine unless his son's injury can be fixed too, has retreated to protect his sanity and dignity, watching the Weather Channel and letting Rita's after-school pizzeria job provide income and interaction with the workaday world. When they are not being

bullied, their physical and psychological scars are ignored, even by a Syrian-American doctor who has long ago become so acculturated he cannot understand Arabic. America provides a lifeline to the refugees it accepts but does little to help them heal.

But if society falls short, individuals can make a difference, several of the stories suggest. They can do so in ways that deploy their special skills and, in the process, repair some of their own emotional cracks.

In “Viral Content,” a journalist who has been through her share of emotional losses persists on a story, even though the editor of the media platform she works for doesn’t seem to care about journalism that performs a public service. Ultimately, she roots out the reason for the death of a promising high school football player and, though it’s too late for some of his teammates, she helps keep others from dying of the same cause.

In “The Masculine and the Dead,” we enter the post-and-present traumatic world of an American combat veteran whose volunteer deployments in Afghanistan caused him to miss the death of his wife from cancer and ruptured his relationship with his son. He uses his experience in ground-level diplomacy to help his community reinvent itself into a prospering economic cooperative, and then confronts the pernicious situation of a boy who is mercilessly abused by his father. But although with the horrifying victimization of the boy there is no moral ambiguity about who is on the angels’ side, there is a complicated quandary underneath: When is it possible to rescue the innocent and the oppressed? Can we do it victim by victim, community by community? What are the limits of that approach—and might it ever backfire?

“The Erasure Game” shows, disturbingly, that good intentions can go too far, that the right thing to do might not always be the best thing to do. Or at least that the goal isn’t everything—the means must be justified, not just the ends. In the story, Yoon

Ha Lee creates a health-obsessed police state wherein how well we work on wellness is watched: Orwell meets organically grown. People earn points for eating right, exercising right, helping out in their communities—what could possibly be wrong with that? Only that people must sacrifice freedom and individuality for a plain vanilla cookie-cutter world where a chocolate bar is a subversive curse.

A different sort of dystopia, an uncomfortably realistic one, confronts us in Karen Lord’s “The Plague Doctors.” It is only 60 years from now, and the earth is being wracked by a deadly infectious disease, with bodies from the mainland washing up on an island where Dr. Audra Lee is desperate to find an answer in time to save her pox-exposed six-year-old niece. It’s the kind of global pandemic that should prompt all-hands-on-deck cooperation, but Dr. Lee finds herself working not only against a disease but against a veil of secrecy and selfishness erected by wealthy elites who want to prioritize a cure for themselves. Will she be tempted to cross the line of scientific ethics to relieve her own family’s suffering?

Speaking of ethical sins, how can we atone for the public health crimes of our ancestors—those whose businesses made money off of raping the earth’s resources, dumping toxic waste, destroying habitats, polluting the atmosphere? It’s one of the many trenchant thought experiments that emerge in “The Flotilla at Bird Island,” which takes place when climate change has already destroyed New York and is wreaking devastation on Atlanta and much of the rest of the Atlantic seaboard. The burning atmosphere and drowning coastline are making all still-living things sick. Everyone suffers, but everyone doesn’t suffer equally. The lines for vaccines are longest, for example, where the poorest people of color live.

In Mike McClelland’s telling, the climate catastrophe is (and certainly will be) vast and unsparing. But then McClelland leads us on a journey through a gradually blooming wellspring of hope until we, like his character Kyle, are allowed to enter a secret utopia created by Kyle’s

rich and mysterious old friend Bobby as a way of making amends for the environmental transgressions of his grandfather. It is an amazing community where people from all walks and whereabouts are living happily engaged, healthily individualized lives. But there are unanswered questions too. Can the world be saved in this way, or just bits and pieces of it? And are there sacrifices society would be unwilling to make in return for this kind of salvation?

The sacrifices of salvation make for an eerie, unearthly undercurrent in Martha Wells's murder mystery, "Obsolescence," which is literally about the unearthly: a space-station world in a time long after earthlings colonized Mars. As they age and life knocks them around, folks in this world become fixer-uppers—retrofitted with "augments," prosthetic parts that refurbish their arms, legs, hearts. But there's a dark side. (Of course! It's science fiction.) All those who are augmented are not augmented equally—or treated equally. So one person's salvation hardware can turn into someone else's salvaged spare parts.

Health isn't just about medicine, of course, and it isn't just about physical, psychological, or sociological ills. Health can be about the mind and heart in ways that are largely personal and intimate, the interior pushing against the exterior, the inside struggle to live within what's outside.

That struggle rings through in "The Sweet Spot," a story that is fundamentally about how we cope with changing relationships, and about how our well-being affects people close to us and how people close to us affect our well-being. When we have trouble hearing the ones we love—literally in "The Sweet Spot," as Isa drifts closer to deafness—we need to examine why. And the answer may be telling us to accept a seismic shift in our relationships.

The reverberations of listening and hearing also play a key role in "Brief Exercises in Mindfulness," its title suggesting the kind of self-help volume you might ignore on the bookstore

shelves because a flashier title beckons. In the piece, Calvin Baker deconstructs the subtle within the seismic—or perhaps the seismic within the subtle. Two roommates, Harry and Dean, confronting the real world after college, jump to superficial conclusions about others and each other, even as Harry tries to remind Dean and himself to "really listen to the stories of others" because all the dead religions and dead saints said such listening "would trigger the most profound sense of empathy."

But empathy can be an ethereal element, camouflaged by the day-to-day of dealing with one's job, friends, lovers, and hoped-for lovers. These roommates who are carpetbaggers in a gentrifying neighborhood, where their presence has displaced the folks who couldn't afford to stay, come dangerously close to losing their own sense of place. "If it's that simple," says Dean about Harry's empathy recipe, "why doesn't everyone just goddamn listen and trigger this allegedly profound cure to all our goddamned problems?"

"Reclamation" invites us not so much to listen as to look. This visual story is, on one level, a straightforward tale about a Dakota Indian boy who has become depressed and self-injurious because his neglectful parents spend their time drinking. After stumbling upon a tribal elder, and a deeply intuitive horse, he is able to draw on tribal heritage to defeat his own demons and go on to help others overcome theirs.

The value of the visual, though, goes beyond the narrative. In "Reclamation" and in the vivid illustrations for all the pieces in this collection, the creations by visual artists add dimension, color, light, shadow, motion, drama, imagination. They enhance the humanity of the stories, and enhancing humanity is central to every aspect of health.

Implicitly, there is another message threaded through this vibrant collection. A challenge to offer more than a commitment to integrity and values, more than a recognition that many of these problems aren't easy. None of us can afford to be passive—certainly not in these times.

What can each of us bring to the table? How can we use our specific talents and skills to make things better? We all need to contribute to finding solutions that are as honorable and equitable and effective as possible. These stories inspire us not just to think, not just to feel, but to do.

Pam Belluck is an award-winning health and science writer for *The New York Times* whose recent honors include sharing a Pulitzer Prize and other national awards for coverage of Ebola. She is author of the acclaimed book *Island Practice*. She received a Fulbright Scholarship and a Knight Journalism Fellowship, was selected as a Ferris Professor of Journalism at Princeton University, sits on the TEDMED Editorial Advisory Board, and served on a journalism advisory committee for the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Her work has been chosen for *The Best American Science Writing* and *The Best American Sports Writing*.



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STORY 1

THE FLOTILLA AT BIRD ISLAND

MIKE McCLELLAND

ILLUSTRATIONS BY SYLVIA LIU

It had been years since I'd last seen Bobby, but we hadn't lost touch. I'd always known, of course, that we would reconnect. He texted to see if I wanted to meet him for lunch the following day. An uncharacteristically informal reunion. So casual. I thought perhaps it was a prank, as Bobby wasn't the casual type. With Bobby, everything was *worth the effort* (the effort was usually significant) and *justifiably expensive* (with Bobby it was almost always expensive) and, most often, *absolutely essential*. In college, we'd had *absolutely essential* martinis on a rooftop bar in Saigon, embarked on an *absolutely essential* hike to a hidden waterfall in Argentina, and we'd flown to Cape Cod to see an *absolutely essential* screening of Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* at the nation's last drive-in movie theater. Even the concept of lunch felt comically pedestrian for Bobby. Still, I replied, "Of course!"

That night I dreamed for the first time in a while. Ours was not a time of dreaming. And such were these times that even the rarest, lightest dreams were filled with shadows.



The sea is alien and endless. I'm alone on the water, surrounded by an assortment of unmanned vessels. It feels as if I've been sailing for an age, and I wonder if I really have lost everything when we crest over a mountainous wave and I see a fire in the distance. We drop, then rise again, and I see that the fire is—in fact—a lighthouse, towering over the great black sea. And beneath it, hundreds of boats are scattered, as if the lighthouse were a sycamore and they its shiny silver fruit.

I see then that I'm not alone; other ships, boats, and submarines are making this voyage, too. I'm thrown off course by another wave, but then I watch the lighthouse light shift sharply left. I follow it. Though this path makes very little sense—inches north, meters south, nearly a mile west, followed by a quick turn due east—it eventually leads me and my flotilla to a safe rest beneath the mighty lighthouse.

Now landed on black rocked shores, my legs buckle as I leap out onto the hard ground. Still, I run, flip-flopping on wet stone. I reach toward the lighthouse's massive stone door, but it has no handle, no knob, no wheel. I despair, throw myself against the door, and pound my fists against its surface, fearing that I will—in fact—be alone for eternity.

Then the door rumbles open and I smell salty air and hot, burnt pine. Warm light sneaks out, and I throw myself inside, hoping against hope. I run straight into a sturdy man, bathed in light, lines marking his face. I look up into this lighthouse keeper's face, years of isolation apparent in his tired expression, and watch it spark to life as astonishment fills violet eyes.



The next day I met Bobby at a quiet, sullen, twenty-four-hour diner perched awkwardly on Ponce de Leon, the barrier between Atlanta's Midtown and Downtown neighborhoods.

It was late May, the city slowed by the arrival of the hot summer sun, which had gone from oppressive to dangerous in recent years. The sidewalks released ripples of heat, and the streets smelled of burning asphalt, lined by the carcasses of long-dead trees. As I crossed Ponce de Leon, I saw a woman lift her dappled dachshund to spare the poor creature's burning paws. I kept away; I'd forgone my surgical mask, choosing instead to stay out of breathing distance of others.

Perspiration trickled down my back, and my pale blue Oxford shirt began to stick to my skin. I willed myself to walk slowly to avoid showing up at lunch covered with embarrassing sweat marks. I'd forgone the easier, more popular fashions of the New Coast—breathable, flowing jumpsuits and tunics with built-in UV protection; I wanted Bobby to see me as I had been, not diminished or changed by circumstance. Perhaps because we'd been pushed unwillingly into this new existence, society had yet to grapple with the embarrassments of the past that were now inevitabilities in the present. Though surely he'd be expecting a sweaty, seething Atlanta, it was hard to let go of past decorum, particularly in front of Bobby, who was not only pristine in appearance but who I knew valued polish in others.

When I reached the diner, I took a quick puff of my inhaler—hoping to avoid a coughing fit during lunch—then shoved it back in my pocket. A beggar, sitting under an umbrella in the corner of the diner's parking lot, must have heard the inhaler hit the change in my pocket and croaked out a muffled, wet “got any to spare?” just as I grabbed the door handle.

I glanced over at him, saw that his body was ravaged by the sun and by one of the many diseases that had appeared and flourished due to the rise of both ocean levels and temperatures. I could hear it in his labored breathing under his dirt-crusting surgical mask, see it in the tell-tale blistering around his eyes, nose, and mouth. I reached into my pocket, grabbed a few one-dollar coins, and tossed them his way. I didn't want to get close enough to share any air with him, but I empathized with his situation.

I opened the door of the diner, slid off my gloves and pocketed them, then searched the room for Bobby. I saw his back—his confident but relaxed posture, his rusty hair, his oddly elegant neck. I slid into the booth across from him and caught his distinct, heavy-lidded gaze with mine. I was taken back, rather suddenly, to our first meeting.

I'd been sitting in the sun on the big lawn in the center of campus, studying for an exam of some sort. Music theory, I think. The lawn was crowded, but quiet. I didn't see him arrive, but I heard him speak. His voice was unique, formal to an extent that would have been irritating on someone less vivid.

“Excuse me, fellow students. I've just discovered something, and it is *absolutely essential* that I show it to another person immediately,” he'd announced to the lawn.

Everyone was looking up, but no one immediately volunteered. Bobby's eyes—striking but distant, hazy almost—found mine, and I raised an eyebrow. He raised one in return. I smiled and got up, leaving my bag behind. I knew I wanted to be his friend.

“It's a bit of a slog, but I promise it will be *worth the effort*,” he said, taking off at a brisk pace as soon as I joined him.

Ours wasn't a huge campus, but it was hilly. I struggled to keep up with Bobby, who walked quickly but softly, as if he were floating an inch or two above the ground. Soon we reached a small, immaculately maintained garden. Presumably it was one of the places where the ecology students practiced their trade or that had been donated in the honor of a long-dead alumnus.

Bobby pointed to the other side of the garden.

“Tell me, friend, do you see that?”

I looked to where he was pointing and, sure enough, there was an odd sight waiting. Then I looked back to him, saw his distinct face and how hopeful it was. If nothing had been there, I would have lied, just to please him.

“Are you seeing a pack of goats?” I asked, and then spotted something even stranger. “With purple...beards?”

“Yes!” he responded, and sounded relieved. “Also, goats don't travel in packs. They travel in tribes, trips, flocks, droves, or—most commonly—in a herd.”

“I'm sure that will come in handy someday,” I deadpanned.

Searching for sarcasm, Bobby caught my eye, smiled, and clapped me on the shoulder.

“We’re going to be great friends,” he said.

The story behind the goats was a relatively simple one. Apparently, the zoology, biology, ecology, and animal husbandry departments at the university had banded together with the school’s landscapers and purchased a pack of “campus goats” that had been tasked with chomping invasive plants on campus. One such plant was the summer lilac, a lovely but overbearing plant that had been encroaching on the school’s expensive memorial gardens. The purple beards had merely been stray lilacs caught in their little goat beards.

Bobby was older now, but no less striking. But his eyes were focused, a look I’d rarely seen on him. When he saw me, he smiled gently.

“You look good, Kyle,” he said.

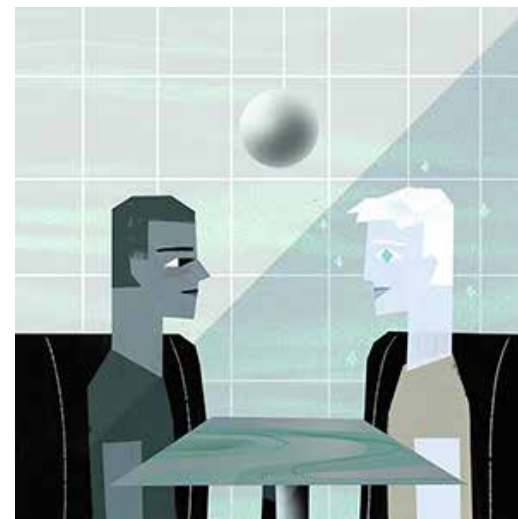
“So do you, Bobby.”

His smile remained, and his eyes were still present and linked to mine. I felt a sense of slightly curdled excitement: joy to be with him and grim anticipation of how awful I would feel when it was over. Bobby and I had had our share of adventures together. When we’d first become friends, he’d said that my *mystery* had appealed to him. Then, shortly after that first, goat-hunting encounter, he’d invited me to one of the themed parties he held in the old Victorian he lived in off-campus. The theme was “Guy de Maupassant’s short fiction,” which might as well have been Martian geography to me, but after some research I’d arrived wearing a giant necklace I’d found at a second-hand store. Upon entering his candlelit dining room, labeled the Jupiter Drawing Room for the party’s purposes, I noticed that each guest had a different skin tone and accent than the next, all of them somewhat “exotic” for our university—aside from Margot St. John, who was white as a sheet and whose voice had a flat, Pennsylvanian timbre. But Margot had only one leg. Bobby didn’t like to have any two of the same sort of friend, and I’d wondered if

he changed himself to match each of us or if he remained constant throughout each encounter?

At first, I’d accused Bobby of collecting me like the rest of his international assortment of friends, lovers, and confidants. But Bobby’s attention was intoxicating. Like any intoxicant, though, it was suffocating, all-consuming, and occasionally terrifying. So many times, I wondered if I’d imagined his interest, only for him to pop the bottle and make me drunk all over again.

Sitting in the vinyl booth and staring into pale eyes, I felt unsure of him but also bewitched. His appearance was magnetic, but extreme. He had rust-red hair that fell messily over his pale skin in sharp contrast to the severe planes of his face. He was lithe and long, and his severe, confident posture belied his dizzily unfocused personality. All of this was the same as it had always been. However, there was something new about Bobby, and this was the most marked characteristic: He appeared truly, vibrantly *alive*. There



was a shimmer to his skin, and his hair was unstyled and textured, like a Labrador’s summer coat. I wondered if Bobby merely seemed so vital to me because of the declining state of so many in my direct circle. Surely, I too had begun to fade in the harsh sun and dirty air. Were my insides speckled and discolored from waterborne disease? Nearly everyone I encountered in Atlanta had suffered some sort of serious ailment recently. Pneumonia, unhealing sores, tumors,

and worse seemed as common as colds had been in the old days. It was simply a fact of our times. Super-strains of bacterial diseases like cholera were flourishing in our hotter, wetter world, as were mosquitos and their accompanying viruses. At least in Atlanta we had the Centers for Disease Control, which developed a monthly cocktail of vaccines, vitamins, and other treatments to test on the populace, but which also led to overcrowding, which had, in turn, led to more disease.

But the robustness of Bobby was more than a lack of illness. He was, somehow, an enhanced version of the Bobby I'd known before.

My gaze met his once again—perhaps his newfound focus, the clarity in his eyes, was a by-product of whatever it was that was giving the rest of him such vigor?—and I smiled, embarrassed and pleased all at once. What a pleasure it was to once again be in the company of such a great friend, and to find him looking so well! How many friends had I reunited with recently, only to find them diminished: graying, coughing, apologizing for deficiencies they weren't at all responsible for.

His attire was impeccable, as always, and his modern, tailored, navy-blue suit looked out of place in this corner of Atlanta. His pastel shirt matched his eyes. He'd dressed this way in our younger years as well, always above the rest of us, a blazing celestial object where the rest of us were just careening pieces of rock.

Before, I'd been a moon to his planet, exerting the slightest of gravitational pulls, while still utterly in his thrall. I was boisterous by nature, but with Bobby I was quiet and measured, happy to cede the spotlight. His mere presence—in a classroom, at a party, or even in a dingy restaurant such as the one in which we sat—made those around him feel lucky.

His mother had been a popular Swedish-American model who, along with his father, a New York gallery owner, had been killed in a train accident when Bobby had been just a boy. He'd inherited his looks from his mother, his appreciation for art from his father, and his money from both. In our younger years, he'd mentioned his past in

much the same way most of us did, but his included frequent mentions of fabulous friends and acquaintances and voyages to far-off lands. Such details would have been intimidating in others, but Bobby told—and *lived*—such tales of adventure in a way where all the extravagant details simply seemed to fit. In the years I'd known him, he'd been the subject of a David Hockney painting that had sold to a Russian oligarch for more than \$10 million; he'd rented the last above-water square meter of the former Maldives for a picnic lunch; and together we had once found a colony of thousands of escaped parakeets while hiking the Appalachian trail. And Bobby's unique skill in describing these events, at least to me, was that he refused to be encumbered by either humility or pomposity. His tales were thrilling, and their effect on me almost always spurred me onto my own adventures, either with Bobby or by myself. Our friendship had been one of complementary energy, where I derived pleasure simply from his company, even when in the presence of others.

While I didn't have Bobby's financial resources, I had pursued my own dreams, carving out a place for myself in Atlanta's vital music scene. When I'd met Bobby, I'd set my sights on the practical pursuit of becoming a music teacher. Now, I was a professional performer, living my own dream, though recently I'd been feeling unsettled once again, and I wondered if Bobby's appearance might help push me toward whatever it was my subconscious was seeking.

"I can see you haven't stopped thinking everything to death, my friend," Bobby laughed. I noted how deep his voice had become. It had always had a dark timbre, but it resonated now, his laugh echoing off the walls of the diner. The waitress, a visibly fatigued young woman in a light blue dress and matching surgical mask, walked up and spoke directly to Bobby, not even flicking a glance my way. I wasn't offended. Though her mask concealed her mouth, I could see her smile in the scrunch of the deep lines around her eyes. He ordered two German Hefeweizens that certainly weren't on the menu. I didn't even think

the diner served alcohol, but the waitress returned with two warm but abundant steins filled to the brim and clunked them down in front of Bobby with a wink. Bobby always did things like this, little ways of making everything just a tiny bit more special. No doubt he'd arrived early with a case of this beer and either tipped or sweet-talked the waitress into keeping it in the wings.

"You've got to try this beer, Kyle. It's *absolutely essential*."

I smirked at him as he passed a beer over. Then he raised his in the air, the foam slipping over the edge.

"To back then and what lies ahead," he said, and I clunked my beer against his with a smile.

"So, how have you been, Kyle? Really?" Bobby asked after the waitress had delivered watery, beige chicken salads to accompany the lovely light beer.

I forked a wan, yellow-brown tomato and replied, "I'm doing well. I never thought I'd live in Atlanta, but it's a wonderful city. So many different people from all stations of life. And the music scene here—it's killer. I've been working nonstop, getting my name out there."

"I've been following your work," Bobby said, and I was touched, if only because I knew that Bobby usually only listened to symphonies and operas by long-dead musicians. Then he added, "Atlanta seems to suit you," but something—perhaps disappointment—clouded his expression.

It did. But the thing about music, about art in general, is that it is a comfort. Sure, it pushes the envelope, breaks ground, and inspires. All of that. But people in desperate situations turned to music to ease the pain, to distract, and even to provide some hint of what could come next. Transcendence. And that was increasingly my experience of Atlanta, which was the same—I'm sure—as the experience of friends in New York before the Atlantic rose up and swallowed them whole. As such, the opportunities were all here, right on the edge. There was no paying work in Nashville, Austin, or Pittsburgh. It was all here, on the New Coast. Though I'm sure the work would appear

in those places next, once Atlanta joined New York and so many others in the sea.

I shook my head. I wasn't going to tell him that side of it.

"What about you?" I asked, deflecting. "You're looking so well."

His eyes remained soft. The heavy lids of his eyes made it look as if he was in a constant afterglow, like he was savoring a cigarette after a particularly satisfying romp.

"Do you have a few hours free?" he asked, pushing his salad away, making the hormone-stuffed chicken jiggle. I'd suggested this diner because it was one of the few places in the area that still had real meat on the menu, and I knew Bobby to be quite the carnivore. But I couldn't blame him for abandoning the meal.

"For you? Anything," I said.

"Come then. It will be *worth the effort*," he said with a wink. He tossed a few bills onto the table and headed for the door. The early afternoon air smelled burnt. Midtown was hazy this time of day, a mixture of smog and the experimental cocktail of chemicals the CDC pumped into the air to cut down on disease. I found myself wishing I'd suggested a more attractive part of town, not that there were many left.

Bobby led me across Ponce de Leon to a shiny silver car, one so extravagant that I didn't even know the make or model.

"Is this yours?" I asked, gaping at him.

"No, just a rental. I flew in," he said.

We sat in comfortable silence as Bobby drove onto the busy interstate and headed south. The highway rolled through several sections of the city that were suffering most. In other areas, pop-up clinics had helped contain disease, or at least slow the spread of it. Volunteers handed out sunscreen and erected tents in vacant lots to provide shade for those who needed to go out on foot. But down here there were too many people and too few resources. At least that was the excuse. Isn't that always the excuse?

“What is that?” Bobby asked, gesturing to a mile-long line of people on a road below the highway.

“Vaccination line,” I replied. “The government says it distributes to every area at the same time, but they always seem to get to South Atlanta last.”

“It’s terrible. Those poor souls,” Bobby said, sounding genuinely affected.

I felt a little embarrassed, even irritated. *What was Bobby doing to help out? What did he know about being black in Atlanta?*

Any frustration was hypocritical, of course. If I was so concerned, I would be down here helping rather than playing around on my keyboard up in Midtown. Some days I felt like I was balancing survival with doing my human duty, but this was not one of them, not as I streaked through in a shiny rental car with my rich friend.

I calmed myself. The truth was, I had no idea what Bobby was doing. The last time I’d seen him, he’d wanted company to an auction in Detroit. Works by one of his father’s favorite artists, a Dutch woman named Geertruydt Roghman, were on display. So he’d bought me a first-class ticket to Detroit (which had been a nightmare, but that’s another story), taken me out for wine and lobster, and even purchased me a vintage croquet set I’d drunkenly taken a fancy to. We’d talked about old friends, about goals and dreams, but barely touched on all the death and sadness around us. We’d talked about my music—I’d been languishing in Memphis at the time—and about his travels, but we hadn’t touched upon his work.

Bobby didn’t ask any more questions. Presumably the state of things was the same across the country, though Atlanta was struck harder because of its status as a travel hub and its proximity to the New Coast, which made it particularly susceptible to the constant wave of waterborne illnesses assailing the nation.

We sat silently for a few moments, but curiosity trumped guilt and frustration as I asked, “Where are we going?”

“You’ll see,” he said, and I feigned a sigh. Bobby liked to surprise and delight, and I liked indulging him.

A few minutes later, Bobby exited the highway at the airport. I raised an eyebrow.

“Don’t worry. I learned my lesson last time.”

Last time had involved the airline disputing my first-class ticket. Since the person who had purchased it wasn’t present, they’d had to call Bobby while I died of embarrassment. Then, when I finally got onto the plane, it had been filled with coughing and wheezing. The flight attendant had assured us that she would close the curtain to coach, as if it was a class issue, but we were all sharing the same air. I hadn’t brought any luggage, and thank goodness, because overhead bins had been eliminated to prevent head injuries. While I’d read about increased high-altitude winds, it wasn’t until I saw the in-flight video, which explained the dangers of “increased bumps, dips, and twists” that I regretted the decision to accept Bobby’s invitation. I’d brought a mask to combat the air, but then the turbulence had been so awful that I’d had to take it off to throw up.

“They had an opening, so I rented some space in their hangar for my own plane.”

“Your own plane?” I asked incredulously.

“Yes. A *justifiable expense*. And we’ll only be in the air for about forty-five minutes.”

Bobby pulled the car into Spaulding Aircraft, a chartering company. I was a bit dazed, but managed to follow Bobby to a small, sleek, dual-propeller plane. Along the way he spoke to staff and signed forms; I didn’t even need to offer so much as a driver’s license. I heard him say the letters “MYR,” but that meant nothing to me. Inside, the small plane was outfitted in soft beige leather. I sat across from Bobby in a seat that felt more like a La-Z-Boy than the commercial airplane furniture I was used to.

“It’s a quick trip. And *worth the effort*, I swear. I’ve got something to

show you,” he said, and I thought he’d smile or wink. But he didn’t. Instead, he turned and stared out the window. Bobby almost always smiled or winked—or appreciated being smiled or winked at—when he used one of his “catchphrases.” But he’d quite suddenly retreated within himself, which wasn’t a Bobby that I was used to. Perhaps these times had gotten to him after all.



Take-off was quick and relatively smooth, and soon we were climbing. I’d never been in such a small aircraft, and though the occasional bumps and jumps were more noticeable than they would have been in a bigger plane, I found myself relishing the peace and quiet, the filtered air, and

Bobby’s presence. He seemed to dominate the small plane, and once again I felt like some sort of small object hitching a ride through space, caught in his orbit.

“So, can I ask where we are headed?” I asked.

“North Carolina,” he said, his face giving nothing away.

“Really?” I asked. I had imagined our destination to be somewhere a bit livelier. Much of North Carolina had been abandoned due to rising tides and swarms of insects, and the few populated, mountainous parts were home to fringe militias and religious communities.

“It doesn’t sound that picturesque, I know, but our specific destination is actually quite lovely,” Bobby laughed, as if reading my thoughts. The laugh didn’t reach his eyes, however. “At least, I hope you’ll like it.”

Bobby squeezed my knee. He could have been taking me to an iron mine in North Dakota and I’d have followed him to the very bottom.

Below us, the brown-green of Georgia turned abruptly to sand and then light, shallow ocean.

“I’ve always loved the ocean,” Bobby said, staring out his window.

“I didn’t know that about you,” I said. With a chill, my dream came back: a giant, cold ocean, and me alone on it.

“I guess you wouldn’t. Why didn’t you come to the Maldives for that picnic? I wrote a whole speech about it. Had some great quotes from *The Tempest* in it. Margot quite enjoyed it, though not the trip itself. She was testing one of those running blades out for her leg, and it didn’t really work in the sand.”

I blushed. “I couldn’t afford a trip to the Maldives *before* they sank!”

Bobby looked at me, surprised.

“I offered to pay for you!”

“It’s one thing to pay for a trip to Detroit, Bobby. But I’m not going to let you fly me the entire way around the world when so many people are...”

I stopped myself. I didn’t want to tell Bobby how to spend his money. If he wanted to help people, good for him. If he didn’t, that was his choice. But I wouldn’t have him fly me to the Maldives or wherever when so many people were dying right outside my front door.

I did, however, still have that damned croquet set, which made me feel like a big hypocrite.

“When so many people are what, Kyle? Dying? Starving? Boiling? The list goes on and on these days, doesn’t it?”

I nodded. Bobby didn’t often get offended, but I expected that he, that almost anyone, would be by what I’d insinuated.

But Bobby seemed strangely emboldened by it rather than offended. A slight smile formed on his face, and his eyes focused once again. I could almost feel his energy increase. He looked like he was about to say something, but then turned to look at the ocean once again.

I would have pressed, or at least questioned the strangeness of the entire scenario, but I was happy to have seemingly avoided conflict, and I was savoring the closeness to Bobby after we'd spent so long apart. I leaned against him. I wanted to ask if we could just fly a bit farther, in this space in between.

The landing was smooth. We exited the plane directly onto the runway. It was raised a few feet above the swampy ground and appeared to be new, built atop reclaimed or artificial land. I could smell that we were close to the ocean. There was a sloppy, vine-covered fence encasing the runway. Beyond it, abandoned gas stations and motels rose out of the water like the bones of long-dead, metallic pachyderms. One of the still-standing signs read "Myrtle Beach Motor Hotel," and it dawned on me that "MYR" stood for Myrtle Beach, which had been evacuated several years ago.

The air here was humid but fresh, and I could feel the sun on my skin without the gauze of smog, which made me feel strangely exposed, a prisoner released into society with little idea of how to adjust to life there. Bobby grabbed my arm.

"Kyle, I'm not going to force you into any sort of agreement you don't want to be a part of. But I would greatly appreciate it if you kept an open mind and didn't mention anything about what you see over the next few hours to anyone."

"Oh, you know me and my closed mind. Once, I nearly refused to let a man talk me into taking a mysterious plane ride to an abandoned swamp," I said, trying to keep a straight face.

Bobby's face remained serious, which was unusual when there was anything to laugh at, particularly sarcasm.

"You know you can trust me," I added.

Nodding, Bobby led me to a small hovercraft, hurriedly fumbling for keys in his pocket. But once he found them and started up the craft, he slowly steered out of the boathouse and then began to meander eastward in gently looping arcs.

Bobby navigated the waters as though he grew up on them, yet he didn't point out any landmarks. I wouldn't have thought Bobby, who moved with a sort of elegance, would look so comfortable behind any boat-type thing, but he was a natural. We wove in and out of small pockets of a swamp that had formerly been Myrtle Beach and its surrounding towns.

After a pleasant period of gliding over the water, Bobby turned to me. "Look into the water," he said.

I turned my eyes from his profile to see that we'd moved beyond Myrtle Beach and up into what had once been a more casual vacation destination. Abandoned wooden beach houses rotted into the water at a variety of angles, giving the horizon a geometric texture. Up ahead loomed a huge bridge, one of the many fossils of the old brand of American coastal life.

I looked into the water and gasped. It was suddenly apparent as to why Bobby had been making loping, looping patterns in the water as the hovercraft hissed along.

Manatees.

But these weren't just any manatees. Long and round, they floated beneath our hovercraft with no apparent destination, floating and occasionally bumping like fat space rocks. These manatees lacked scars. I'd never seen, nor even heard of, a modern manatee without wicked propeller scars lining its back like the lashes of an angry whip.

"How are they here?" I asked, looking back and smiling like a kid.

"They come for the food," Bobby said, smirking. "Check it out."

He reached over the edge of the hovercraft, which was just sunken enough for his long arm to graze the surface of the water. Bobby pulled out a handful of what appeared to be seaweed, which he lifted to his mouth, and took an exaggerated, indulgent bite, his eyes watching me as he closed his mouth around the slimy plant.

I laughed; I couldn't help it. Bobby laughed too. Globbs of seaweed flew out of his mouth; his perfect teeth were stained green.

“You try,” he said, holding it out to me.

I wanted to say no, but this was a dare, and Bobby knew I couldn’t resist a dare. I took a pinch from his hand.

The flavor was extraordinary. Memories of my childhood: fresh broccoli and tender tall asparagus. A different time. Naturally salted by the brackish water, the seaweed was seasoned and shockingly, implausibly *fresh*.

I looked back to the manatees as they continued to float brazenly beneath us and wondered how anything could be so carefree in this world of ours. Then I glanced back to Bobby and wondered the same thing about him.

The water beneath us was increasingly clogged with a variety of aquatic plants of shifting hues: green, purple, deep red, and light pink. The manatees moved through the silken plant life with ease, as did other creatures.

“Wait. Are there otters here?” I asked Bobby after I saw a brown, feline-looking thing twirl past.

“Otters, dolphins, seals. Lots of fish, even some weird tropical ones that must have made it up from the Caribbean. One of the scouts even said he saw some kind of whale.”

I hadn’t seen wildlife in years. I’d been to the New Coast a few times, but most coastal wildlife, in the U.S. at least, had either died off or migrated toward cleaner, cooler water.

Above us, the large bridge I’d spotted from a distance loomed, a green net hanging beneath it. Thousands of baskets hung from the underside, with a variety of black tubes—hoses, perhaps—running among them.

Bobby followed my eyes and smiled, though he returned his attention to steering.

“I knew very little about gardening before this, which I’m sure you find surprising,” Bobby said, laughing, “but apparently, there are a lot of vegetables that grow better in the shade.”



“How many people do you feed with these?” I asked, wondering if I’d read wrong, if perhaps Myrtle Beach had, in fact, survived.

“You’ll see,” Bobby said in a sing-song tone, clearly enjoying my reaction thus far.

Once we passed under the bridge, Bobby turned the

hovercraft and cut the engine, letting the current sweep us into a channel of water that flowed through the island on the far side of the bridge.

“This small tidal creek is called Mad Inlet, though the inlet part of it basically disappeared when the dunes crumbled.” He pointed left, toward some rotting houses sticking up out of the water. “And that was Sunset Beach.”

Then he pointed to the right, to a reedy, swaying area that didn’t look as if it contained any solid land. Instead, reeds and grasses billowed in the wind over warm, clear water.

“That’s Bird Island, which my family has owned for many years, though that’s a bit of a secret,” he said. Bobby explained that he’d become the sole owner of these two square miles of marshy oceanfront land when his parents had passed away.

“Years ago—before I met you, Kyle—I sold the surface of Bird Island to the state of North Carolina. The public assumed that meant that the state owned the entirety of Bird Island, but the truth is that I still owned everything underneath. I’ve been building ever since,

though I've only recently expanded to the surface. North Carolina technically still owns it, but no one comes here."

The grass was so tall that it bent over us, blacking out the sun, and I became disoriented. I looked to Bobby, who appeared confident in our direction, and I was reminded of adventure tales, mythic ones, like Jason leading his Argonauts to the Golden Fleece. But then the grass grew even denser, and Bobby hunched, and I recalled Chiron and the River Styx. I hoped that whatever lay at the end of the boat ride was more magic fleece and less Hades.

The air around us grew thicker, but the water got shallower, allowing for glimpses of the sandy floor every now and again. We were, presumably, entering the area known as Bird Island. There was a tropical feel to the air and, beneath that, a sort of sublime mystery, an indescribable feeling that intensified as we moved along Mad Inlet.

As I peered through the seagrass, I noticed small anomalies breaking the regular pattern of reeds and grass. I looked more closely and spotted an artichoke plant, its fruit as big as an old-time pear, ready to pluck. Next, a tomato, a red tomato, more vibrant than I'd ever seen. As I began to consciously seek them out, I noticed tens, then hundreds, then thousands of seemingly disparate plantings—a solitary squash here, a watermelon there, all either ingrained in a small piece of land surfacing from under the water or in a floating soil-stuffed planter.

"How are you getting all of this to grow?"

"I'm simplifying here, but we've relied heavily on hydroponics to grow plants here, which has resulted in some remarkable side effects, like healthy water and delicious seaweed."

"And why is it all mixed in with the grass, rather than in rows?"

Bobby laughed. "Edible landscaping," he said. "First of all, it doesn't look like farmland from above, which helps us avoid detection. But it also keeps the wildlife from eating up all our crops at once. We want them to get something to eat, but we prefer to keep most of the produce for ourselves. And we've slowly started to learn that some

plants grow even better with others than they do with their own kind. Kind of like people."

I groaned. He laughed.

Eventually we came to where the grass parted, and a narrow sandy path rose gently out of the water, cutting into some dunes. Bobby hopped out of the hovercraft and leaned over to take off his shoes; I did the same, savoring the feel of sand beneath my feet.

It had been so long. Too long.

I followed Bobby along the path. He'd grown distant again, and I could only guess that it was this thing—place? person?—he was taking me to that was causing him to vacillate between focus and distraction. We were between two rather steep dunes and as such could no longer see the water nor any of the abundant grasses and produce, but I could hear the roar of the heavy waves off to our left as they crashed against something, presumably Bird Island's remaining shoreline. The sound, coupled with the gray, undulating sky, closed Bobby and me in. We were alone on our own planet.

He turned, a surprised expression on his face, and held a finger over his lips, as if I'd been talking. *Had I been talking?* I pulled myself forward, looking over his shoulder to see what had surprised him.

At first it appeared to be nothing more than a shallow hole in the ground, like a pothole at the base of the dune. Then I noticed some dots in the sand leading out of the hole and up the side of the dune. I followed the dots and then saw what had surprised Bobby. Baby turtles, climbing their way toward the ocean.

"They're loggerheads," Bobby said. "We thought they'd gone extinct when the majority of the dunes collapsed, but it looks as if some survived."

"Can we help them?" I asked, unable to hide my concern as another brave little turtle emerged from the hole.

"They'll make it." Then his eyes brightened. "In fact, there aren't many birds left around here. All of the migration patterns went crazy

when the temperatures increased. So these little guys have a better chance than their ancestors did.”

Now I caught on to his excitement.

“So, all of this shit we’ve been going through has actually helped them?” I asked, watching the impossibly cute little critters with appreciation.

“Who knows, there could be turtles everywhere in a few years,” Bobby said.

After watching a few more turtles begin their ascent, Bobby led us to where the pathway ran straight into a large, beach grass-crust dune and forked around it into two separate paths. I wondered why I hadn’t been able to see the dunes from a distance, then I realized that we were at a lower elevation. The dunes weren’t dunes at all, or if they were, they were also dikes, holding the water back and allowing these pathways to exist slightly below sea level. From the sky, it would simply look like a small section of surviving land, and from the sides it was concealed by cleverly planted ocean grass.

Bobby hooked to the right, and I assumed we would be continuing, though I was still completely in the dark as to our destination. Instead of pressing on, however, Bobby turned toward the large dune and quickly adjusted his steps. It was disconcerting to see Bobby, who walked through life as if in a dream, display such quick, sharp movements, but he was defying many of the things I had come to know about him.

Moving his feet until he was settled into the position he’d been searching for, Bobby punched forward, into the dune.

After a moment, the sand around his hand fell away. It crumbled inward, pouring in the familiar way that sand whisks through an hourglass, into a dark opening. Within moments, a door-sized hole appeared in the side of the dune. Bobby casually motioned for me to follow him and then turned and descended into the hole, which appeared to lead directly onto a downward staircase.

I followed Bobby down the dark stairs. Blue-green floor lights

illuminated the way. While they were dim, they at least allowed me to follow Bobby down the stairs without falling and breaking a bone.

Our footsteps clunked but didn’t echo. The staircase was tunnel-like, the ceiling only about a foot overhead. Soon, we reached a metal doorway with an illuminated panel. I expected the panel to be a number pad for the entering of some sort of security code. But when I regarded it more closely, I saw that its buttons were symbols rather than numbers. From my vantage point I could make out only a few: a boat, a sun, a volcano, a flower, and a medieval dragon.

“What are those symbols?” I asked in a whisper.

“You don’t need to whisper, Kyle; we’re not breaking in,” Bobby said, smiling, but didn’t answer my question.

Bobby casually reached down and began to press the symbols. I tried to follow along at first; I saw him hit the sun three times, then the dove, then the flower twice, then the dragon, then either the volcano or the flower, and then I lost track as his fingers flew up and down on the pad with increasing speed.

After what must have been thirty button presses, the pad beeped twice and the door made a light popping sound, like the opening of a bottle of soda. Bobby placed his hand in the center of the door and pushed. It went forward and up, hovering overhead until Bobby and I had both walked through, at which point it gently swung back down and hissed into place.

We were in a massive cavern, brimming with life. To go from meandering along, just the two of us, to this, was like being awakened from sleep with a bucket of cold water.

I looked at Bobby, who looked a lot less relaxed than usual, and then back to the room. No, to call the space itself a room would be too restrictive of a description. It reminded me of a covered football stadium. However, it had to be even larger than that. And in that space, thousands of people walked around, some leading animals like cows

and goats, others selling their wares from stalls. The walls were covered with huge trellises that contained an abundance of vined flora: grapes, roses, even peppers coated the massive walls. Songbirds fluttered among plants, their warbles combining with the hanging greenery to give the entire space the feel of a hidden forest oasis. The ground was covered in something sand-colored but more textured, crushed seashells, perhaps. Conversation filled the area in a low, pleasing hum, and I could hear music, too, from multiple sources. I spotted a few familiar



signs in the hustle and bustle, such as a bright gold caduceus on a purple background hanging above one distant area and a red, blue, and white barber's pole sticking out from a purple-counterstall. Though there was an obvious focus on nature—between livestock and the various stalls of vegetables, fruits, and even

flowers, more exotic breeds than what grew on the walls—there was also technology. People used smartphones, children toyed around on handheld gaming devices, and several of the stalls had conveyor belts. One even had a hologram, a puppy wagging its tale at those who stopped to say hello.

We were still slightly elevated, as the door led onto a staircase, but it appeared that the space was entirely flat except for stacks of glass rooms—greenhouses, perhaps—in the far corners.

"Welcome to Bird Island," Bobby said, watching my face closely.

I had so many questions, and I wanted to explore, to interact,

to live among these people. I was struck by how international the populace appeared: No one race or ethnicity was predominant. I thought back to college, about how Bobby had seemed to collect "different" friends, yet when I looked out on this group, I didn't see hand-plucked exoticism or curated diversity. I saw real humanity, and I realized that Bobby had evolved.

The one thing that truly linked them all was that, like Bobby, every person I could see was abundantly, almost unbelievably, *alive*.

"How is everyone so...?" I started, but I couldn't think of how to phrase it. If I'd built what appeared to be an underground Utopian society, I'd want to be asked detailed questions.

But Bobby smiled deeply. Apparently, he understood.

"*Alive?*" The people. They look like people used to look. Better, even. There are full, colorful faces, bodies of different heights, shapes, and sizes. They smile. Even in this world, our flooding, burning world, everyone can still live, or at least have the *chance* to live fully. Every person who comes to Bird Island receives an individually tailored wellness plan. The medicine they need, the exercise they need, the diet they need, and the technological assistance they need."

When he said, "Every person who comes to Bird Island," I suddenly grew a bit uneasy. *Did he mean me?* How long was I expected to stay? Could I leave?

I looked up at him and caught his eyes, which were now violently bright. I trusted him.

"Unfortunately," he said, "we don't have much time."

"What do you mean?" I asked. "Is there a problem?"

"You've seen the outside world, Kyle."

I looked at the people walking through the Bird Island marketplace. They all glowed in comparison to me. And the smiles! I hadn't seen this many smiles outside of a film. Some of them glanced at me, and I expected them to lose their smiles, to grimace, to see an outsider spoil whatever it was that was going on here, but they didn't. There was a

confidence to the people here, and that confidence bred openness.

Bobby led me around the edges of the marketplace. Everyone seemed to know Bobby, but no one bowed or cried and screamed. He didn't *seem* like a cult leader: a good sign. Each person acknowledged me too, but I was used to this. People had always been nicer to me when I was with Bobby.

He walked quickly, not stopping to speak to anyone, though he smiled and nodded cordially at everyone who crossed our path. Eventually we reached one of the stacks of glass rooms, which weren't rooms at all, but rather parts of a massive elevator shaft.

Another panel—much like the one that Bobby had used to get us into this place—was on the wall. He hit a stream of buttons, adorned with the same symbols I'd noticed before.

"What *are* those symbols, Bobby?" I asked.

"Oh! I didn't want to ruin the 'reveal' of the city by telling you about the alphabet," he said, then laughed.

"You made a freaking alphabet? And a city? Here I was telling you all about how well my music was going and you left out that you were busy with...what do you even call *this*?"

"We have a linguist who came up with a sort of hieroglyphic-based alphabet," he continued, ignoring me. "I must say, I'm not entirely sold on it, but given we're a very international group, it was *worth the effort* at the very least."

An elevator, presumably prompted by the button pressing, descended, and the large glass doors rolled open.

"After you," he said, and followed me into the large compartment.

"This goes up to the surface and down to the other levels, which contain everything from a hospital to a library to living quarters," Bobby said. "But I'm taking you all the way to the bottom."

The doors hissed shut, and we began to descend at a rapid pace. I watched Bobby as we were lowered further into the earth and felt even more distant than before. Fatigue appeared to be setting in, lines

suddenly visible around his eyes, a slight slump to his shoulders. It was a little bit of a relief to see that even this new and improved Bobby got tired like the rest of us.

As we descended, I thought back to the plane, when I'd implied that Bobby should be spending his money on helping people. He had brightened then, because that was what he was doing all along.

But is it good to build another world rather than save our own?

My thoughts were interrupted when the elevator stopped, and the doors opened revealing a space identical to the one that had housed the market, except that this space had no other people.

Instead, there were a dozen massive silver spheres—each the size of a large suburban home—evenly spaced throughout the room. Each was held in place by a small docking station on the floor.

I'd survived rising oceans and scorching skies. I had just done a pretty good job, in my own humble opinion, of processing my old friend's secret underground society. But this was approaching my limit.

"What *is* this?" I finally asked Bobby, who was standing back observing me.

He smiled, not a smile of happiness but rather one of relief. The bouts of silence, the distance: they were in anticipation of showing me these *things*.

"This is my flotilla."

I hadn't heard the term *flotilla* in years. I had a quick spike of memory, of a vintage game my dad showed me, of a character from outer space commanding a "flotilla" of ships after her home planet was destroyed. It was an anachronistic word, not a casual one.

"Bobby, it's time to tell me what the hell is going on." I turned and planted my feet, refusing to even look at the spheres. I needed him to be up front with me before I went any further down this rabbit hole.

Bobby nodded.

"I know we've spoken of spirituality in the past, but are you religious,

Kyle?” he asked quietly.

Uh-oh. Now it was Kool-Aid time.

“You know me, Bobby, I do a lot of yoga,” I said, feeling stupid for trying to lighten the mood while standing in the sub-basement of a secret society.

“Can I tell you a secret?” he whispered.

“Of course,” I said, and looked around for effect. “Duh.”

Bobby didn’t laugh.

“I’ve been having visions.”

He was waiting for a reaction, I think, but I did not know how to respond to this. Did I know Bobby well enough to know whether he was sane? I thought back to our first encounter when he’d asked about the goats. “*Tell me, friend, do you see that?*” He’d been relieved that I’d seen them, too. Had he been worried, even then, that he saw things that weren’t really there?

After a moment, he continued. “I don’t know if they are real or a symptom of my imagination caused by the data I’ve been reading day after day for years. Or if it’s simply a symptom of being raised in a dying world—but my visions, these recurring dreams, have always been of one event. A disaster: the world floods.”

I breathed deeply before responding, considering my words carefully.

“Bobby, the world has flooded.” I thought of the millions of homeless, the thousands dying every day from new, inescapable diseases.

“I know, Kyle, but it is going to get much worse before it gets better. I’m talking about a huge, world-ending flood, and my vision...” he seemed to be searching for the right words, “...my *dream* tells me I have the power and means to do something to save as many as I can.”

His words reminded me of a dream of my own. From the night before. Of a giant flood. Of being alone, surrounded by unmanned vessels. Had I really only just dreamed it the night before, or had I been dreaming it forever?

“So, I’ve created flood-proof vaults, time capsules and underground

zoos. Some of them will survive the cataclysm. But this flotilla, it is the most important.”

I thought again to our first encounter. About how I would have told him I’d seen whatever it was that he’d seen, no matter if it was there or not, just to make him happy.

“Okay. Show me.”

I followed him to the closest of the spheres. On closer inspection, I could see that the sphere wasn’t a solid object but instead was created by swirls of interlocking metal and stone. It gave the sphere an almost brainlike appearance, and the lines between the coils, while sealed, suggested that the sphere could be opened. It looked simultaneously ancient and new, a technological and archaeological marvel.

“What’s inside?” I asked, tentatively touching the sphere’s cool metal.

I looked over my shoulder to see Bobby a few paces behind me, looking nervous.

“Each holds a set of materials for making a place like this one. Seeds, embryos, money, contacts, digital files.”

“Like an ark?” I said, turning back toward the sphere in curiosity. Bobby approached me from behind. I could see his reflection, nodding, beautiful though warped in the sphere’s coils. He didn’t speak until he was close enough to make the metal fog.

I knew I should think this crazy, but Bobby felt more *alive*, more



tangible than he had ever felt to me before. Was this why his dreaminess, his lack of focus, had faded away, replaced by clear-eyed intensity?

I knew then that he was going to ask me to do something. The feeling came quickly, and instead of feeling used, I felt light. I was relieved, somehow, to know his intentions.

"I need you to captain this flotilla," Bobby said.

"You've seen me try to sail, Bobby. Is that a good idea?" I asked, humor—poor humor—my last defense.

Then, in a whisper, a croak even, I asked, "Have you *seen* me doing this?" I was embarrassed to even ask such a question.

"No," he said, but his words didn't ring true. His confidence appeared to falter then, for maybe the first time ever.

"I only know that I'm not the one to do it. You know who made the world the way it is now?" he asked.

"Rich white guys."

I knew it wasn't the time for another joke, but the mood was almost suffocating in its heaviness.

"Ha!" Bobby barked. "Well, maybe a bit. Did I ever tell you how my father got the money to open his gallery?"

This is what he wants to talk about now?

"Um, no," I said. "I just assumed he came from a long line of art gallery owners. Or bankers."

"No, Kyle. His father made a fortune dumping toxic waste. He developed a method of extracting and transporting it from factories, power plants, and other waste-producing entities. But rather than find somewhere safe to deposit the waste, he simply purchased large blocks of cheap, abandoned land—places in the mountains, in the desert, and by the sea—and dumped it there."

"Places like Bird Island?" I asked.

Bobby smiled, pleased that I made the connection. "Bird Island was his last purchase before he died. So he was never able to dump anything here. So I thought, 'What better canvas to start with than this?'"

He continued, "Now, I'm not saying that toxic waste alone ruined the world, but I do think it is one spoke on a huge wheel of destruction. And I've spent my life reaping the benefits of that destruction."

He paused, stricken in a way that made him look older and younger all at once.

"I want to atone," he said, whispering now.

"But why can't you atone by leading everyone to safety? Why choose me?"

"Because I don't deserve it. But you do."

"Why on earth would you think that?" I asked. Until moments before, I'd never seen Bobby lack confidence. Now, he was plummeting.

"I just told you. Everything I have, what I've done, is built on destruction. I can't bear it."

"What about your mother's money? Just pretend that's all you've been spending," I said.

Bobby just stared at me, his perfect lips parted in surprise. Then he laughed uproariously, which echoed off of the silver spheres.

I spoke again, and even though the mood had lifted slightly, I tried to be gentle.

"None of us, especially now, should feel responsible for the sins of our ancestors."

He sighed gently. "On some level, I know that. But since the first days of Bird Island and of the flotilla, I've known that something this fragile, this special, this important, needs to be led by the very best person I can imagine. And that's always been you."

It was a lovely statement, and at another time it would have been quite touching. In fact, there had been times when I would have done anything to hear Bobby say something like that. But now, I didn't know if what he thought about me had more to do with how he thought about himself than anything else.

"Where will you be?" I asked. My mind was whirling.

"I need to keep raising money. That's what I'm good at—getting

money from people. Saving the world is *justifiably expensive*.”

I laughed. This was the first thing he’d said in a while that made complete sense.

“I’ve had a lot of success so far, as you can see from Bird Island. But if we’re going to survive, I need to persuade more investors to join in.”

“And how will you persuade them?”

I watched Bobby smile wearily in the reflective circle, the coils of the sphere making his tired grin clownishly huge, foreboding somehow.

“With hope, as clichéd as that sounds. Bird Island started with the same resources that you’ll find in any one of those spheres. Yet every person here, all twenty thousand, has a life expectancy that is at least 50 percent longer than the average person living in a major metropolitan area.”

That would surely spur some investment. But what was it that Bobby had that all of the other people—the politicians, the humanitarians, the saints and the martyrs—didn’t? It wasn’t money alone. Or visions, if those were even real. And what did *I* have that made him think I could lead in his absence?

There are very few absolutes in life. One, for me, was that I would do anything for Bobby. That had been the case when I’d sat down in the diner, though I hadn’t known it yet. And maybe that is what it takes to save people. Or at least to grow rather than just survive. Nothing more than devotion to a true and constant friend.

Well, maybe slightly more than that. In Bobby, my devotion was matched with belief and action. I wasn’t sure whether his dreams were visions, or prophecies, or anything of the sort. But I was sure of him. How could I not be? Bird Island was a testament to his abilities.

And what could *I* bring to Bird Island? To the flotilla? I thought back to my beloved Atlanta, of how music and art and play provided joy even as the New Coast disintegrated. I could give that to these people, and to whomever we would find on the other end of the flotilla’s journey.

In Atlanta, I’d been expecting things to get worse, expecting to

survive the future rather than build it, just as I had in my youth, when I’d planned on abandoning my dreams before I’d even started. Then Bobby had come into my life and inspired me to pursue another path. Here he was again, and the only choice I had to make was whether to believe him, to believe in him.

Then it came into my head like an old song springing up to remind you exactly where you’d been when you first heard it—except I’d just heard this song for the first time only hours before. It was my dream from last night: myself with the flotilla drifting across mile-high waves, the ice, and then finally, the lighthouse. And its keeper: Bobby and his violet eyes.

“I’ll do it,” I said.

He smiled in response, which I saw reflected in the sphere.

“You’ll help? You’ll captain?”

“Of course I will.”

“Let’s go back up,” Bobby said, putting his arm over my shoulder and gently squeezing. I could feel his appreciation, but also his profound fatigue. “I want to show you something.”

We returned to the marketplace, and it felt different, more mine than it had before. Was I that easy to persuade? Bobby returned to the panel he’d used to call the elevator, clicking another impossible-to-follow sequence of symbols.

Bobby clicked one last button and then said, “Kyle, look, the sun’s coming out.”

Though we were indoors, I instinctively looked up. The ceiling of the giant space was parting. It rolled open, and as it did, it revealed the same water I’d stared into from the boat, but from below. Bright sun lit it from above, and I watched otters swim through seaweed like birds through branches, watched giant, fat manatees float through the air like zeppelins. A school of fish, sunshine pink and shimmering, glided by, casting a shadow across the marketplace below.

I looked at Bobby, whose violet eyes were watching me, and I realized

that this was the future he wanted for all of us. More important, this was the future I wanted for all of us, one that I didn't know was possible. A future where we could stop to feel the sunshine fall on our faces.

I watched the manatees for a few minutes and felt a lightness that I hadn't felt in quite some time, probably since the first coastal cities had been evacuated. Before then even, when we entered an age of hopelessness and greed. How long had we been suffering? Had we always been suffering?



2

STORY 2

PARADISE

HANNAH LILLITH ASSADI

ILLUSTRATIONS BY GENEVIEVE LACROIX

Rita was staring out at the desert from the window of Ms. Williams's English class on the Friday before Mother's Day in America. The entire year she had been trying to find a poetic word to describe her new home, thinking if she found it she might learn to love Arizona, but all she could come up with was: brown, hot, dead. She wondered if it was a fault of the desert or if it was a fault in the English language. The Arabic word for desert was far more beautiful: *sahrah*.

Back in class, Joey whispered to Sarah, "Goin' to Ed's party, blue-ball queen?" To which Sarah responded, "Fuck you." Rita did not understand why this upset Sarah. What was a "blue ball"? Angel threw a wad of paper licked with spit that grazed Rita's hand. Everyone else was doing things on their phones, which were technically supposed to be left in their lockers. Rita was the only person in her class who did not have one. She shared an iPhone with her father and brother, but that was usually kept charged in the kitchen. She hoped it was not too close to the faucet. She had moved it this morning to the plug above the oven. It was there above the oven, *yes, yes, yes it was*. It was not near the water; the apartment was not burning in an electrical fire. These all-consuming thoughts were interrupted by Sarah screaming at Joey.

"On the count of three, everyone be quiet!" Ms. Williams screamed, throwing the wad of paper back at Angel. "One, two..."

The room fell silent. It was twenty minutes until the lunch bell rang. Then the students would be released to the cafeteria, where there would be another fight: a water balloon thrown at the chest of a girl in a white T-shirt.

Everyone was hungry, but in the cafeteria it seemed to Rita that no one ever really ate. Food was thrown, spilled, and trashed; it was put everywhere but in her peers' mouths.

"For your writing assignment today, I want you to do something a little different," Ms. Williams said. Rita tried to guess at her age. She wore no ring. If Rita had to describe Ms. Williams, she would say that her teacher was handsome rather than beautiful. But handsome, she had been told, was a word reserved for men. "I want you to write a letter to a woman in your life—this does not have to be your mother, though if your mother is in your life, it should be, but if not, let's say a woman in your life you are grateful for. If you want to be teacher's pet, then you can write it to me."

"Oh my god," Trevor groaned. "L-A-M-E."

"I know how to spell *lame*, Trevor, thank you," Ms. Williams said.

Five minutes before the bell rang, Rita finally wrote something down. Instead of a letter, it was a proverb her mother loved. She distinctly remembered the last time she heard her mother say it: Rita's mother had become obsessed with saving the rose bushes on the porch. Like a curse of the war itself, spider mites had colonized the bushes after the first bombs fell on Aleppo that July. Overnight, all the blossoms had browned and died. Within a week, almost all the leaves had fallen. There was a single living branch left.

"*Yallah rouh jeeb mai...*," her mother said to Rita. Rita whined that she should just give up. The bushes were dead. Water would not help. But the truth was that Rita simply did not want to interrupt the show she was watching to water the pathetic roses. And though her mother's response made no sense to her then, it did to her now: "Rita, *al jenna tahta aqdam al ummuhat*."

In her notebook for Ms. Williams, she translated it to English: "Paradise lies under the feet of your mother."

Rita's mother was dead. It was not something she liked to talk about. She did not like to think about it either. Her mother's passing always returned very late at night, just before she fell asleep. Instead of praying, Rita would distinctly imagine her mother's feet as they were when she was alive, her mother's toes pretty and dainty and always painted red, unlike Rita's, which were long and ugly and even a little hairy like her father's. Before falling asleep, Rita would imagine squeezing beneath the arch of her mother's foot, and from there she could see paradise, which appeared to Rita always as the sea, with the clearest blue waters (where there were no sharks) on the edge of a great rain forest: a land entirely opposite to Arizona. Instead of the sun in the sky, there were a million stars, bursting supernovas, and nebulae. The sky was purple rather than blue.

Lately, her paradise dreams were troubled. Walking on her white crystalline beach to pick a coconut from a tree, Rita would notice that the sand was covered in blood, then that the blood was coming from the water, and finally that the entire sea had turned red, and in it were hundreds of bodies. Rita would wake up covered in sweat and pace the apartment, checking that the doors were locked and the gas on the oven was off. She would lie in bed for hours, afraid



to dream again, until the first sign of yellow dawn entered through the windows and the birds began to chirp. Sometimes, when she finally fell back asleep, her paradise looked even worse. Sometimes she heard the roar of sirens, or the crack of gunshots followed by screams. Sometimes the supernova rained fire like bombs. She found that she was not beneath her mother's feet after all, because her mother was lying beneath a pile of rubble, crushed, her foot sticking out—the only part of her not bleeding—almost still alive, just as Rita had found her in the real world one year and seven months ago. When Rita woke again, she was grateful she had to go to school, knowing that there was nothing to fear in the day ahead—not even in the snide comments from the Homecoming Queen Christy, who had recently said, referring to her hijab, “If you got rid of that head thing you might actually be pretty”—because she had already seen hell. She had lived in it.

At last the lunch bell rang. All the students in Ms. Williams's junior-year English class ran for the door as if the room had begun raining lava.

“Rita!” Ms. Williams called after her when she was already in the hall.

Angel snickered to Ed, “Yo, new girl is in trouble.” Rita was hardly new; she had been at the school the entire year.

“Would you quit it?” Ms. Williams said to Angel. “Rita, come here for a moment.”

Rita approached Ms. Williams's desk tentatively. She would have to explain to Ms. Williams why her writing assignment was so short. She would have to explain why she could not write a letter to her mother.

“Rita,” Ms. Williams said. “Hussein hasn't been to my first-period English class in three days. Is he sick?”

Rita did not know the correct answer to this question, to whether or not her brother was sick in the sense that Ms. Williams meant it. Rita nodded her head.

“Well, he’ll need a doctor’s note if he misses any more class,” Ms. Williams said.

Hussein was shot in the hand the same day that Rita’s father was shot in the spine. Hussein’s hand was disfigured by the wound, though he tried to hide it beneath extra-long sleeves and even sometimes by wearing winter gloves whenever he left the apartment. The boys from the apartment complex nicknamed Hussein “Edward Scissorhands.” The previous Tuesday, their leader, Logan, yelled, “Osama Scissorhands Bin Laden!” at Hussein from the back of the lunch line, and half the cafeteria erupted in laughter. Hussein had not been to school since.

Months earlier, Rita, her father, and her brother had gone to the public assistance office in hopes of finding a doctor who might perform a surgery on Hussein’s hand. The secretary said instead that they could cover part of the surgery for her father’s back, but not for Hussein, because it was considered “cosmetic.”

“We both stay crippled,” her father had said to the secretary that day. “I won’t fix if he can’t fix.”

“Have a good day!” was her reply.

Rita walked the long way home from school, along the freeway, where on one side of her an endless stream of cars raced by at eighty miles an hour, and on the other, the dull, brown, hot, dead *sahrah* stretched to oblivion. It was May. Already, the temperatures had risen past one hundred degrees. Rita was wearing jeans and a thin long-sleeved T-shirt. Her hair beneath her hijab was almost entirely wet. Then the freeway bent west, and Rita could faintly smell through the exhaust the strange musk of the desert plants. It was still odd to her that no one walked in Arizona. She felt like an alien in a world composed of SUVs, stoplights, and sprawling, almost always empty, grocery store complexes. The spread of saguaro cactuses, their limbs often disfigured, reminded her—though she wished it weren’t so—of Hussein’s left hand.

Her shift at Frank’s Pizza began at 5 p.m. It was already 3:45 by the time she reached the complex. Rita still had to cook dinner, shower, change her shirt, refresh the kohl around her eyes, and spray herself with perfume before she saw Paul, the delivery guy. Rita fantasized about Paul locking his arms around her, pushing her into the bathroom of the little pizzeria, and kissing her—violently, wonderfully—or taking her in the delivery car somewhere far into the mountains, which miraculously also hid a secret ocean where there were no sharks, crocodiles, alligators, snakes, bears, or bugs of any kind. Paul was blond-haired and blue-eyed; Rita liked to think he resembled Paul Newman, her mother’s favorite American actor. “*Helu Paul helu helu*,” her mother said every time she made Rita watch one of those old boring films he starred in. Back then, Rita thought he was too old to be beautiful.

The apartment complex was called Sonoran Vista. Rita considered it the ugliest building she had ever seen, both in Syria and in America. It was uglier than all of the beautiful mosques and ancient ruins turned to debris in Aleppo. Someone had painted the exterior the color of feces. The stairways were filled with cockroaches. The apartment carpeting smelled of cigarettes and beer. The pool was green and filled with the wreckage of monsoons from summers previous. No one swam in it, and there were rumors that poisonous snakes, found in the lakes and rivers of faraway places, had somehow populated the swamp of a swimming pool. Rita would not be surprised if one day a crocodile crawled out. There were two creatures in the world that frightened Rita more than humans: sharks and crocodiles. But she also hated scorpions, hyenas, and bats.

But the worst part of the apartment was all of the boys—Logan especially—who lived there. It bothered Rita that Logan also happened to look a little like Paul Newman. When Rita, eye makeup streaming down her face from the heat, reached her apartment at last, Logan, trailed by three other boys on skateboards, yelled at her, “Has your brother killed anyone yet with his Scissorhands?”

Rita slammed the door. It was as if the sun had never risen inside the apartment. Her father was asleep on the couch, as he was now almost all of the time. Sometimes, he rolled over onto his side to turn on the little television and watch the Weather Channel on mute. Hussein was at the kitchen table, his face cast perpetually in blue from the computer screen.

“*Hua barra?*” Hussein said.

“Logan is not king of the apartment,” Rita said. He had asked her if Logan was outside. Hussein returned his gaze to the laptop. Rita’s father turned onto his side, groaned, and reached for the remote. He turned on his weather, quickly becoming rapt with following the movements of an early hurricane headed for the northeast. The news was banned in the house. Rita’s father had not watched the news since they left Syria. Rita noticed that the apartment was beginning to smell of him, of an old man. She couldn’t remember when it had started to happen, his old man smell.

“*Baba, inta telfant al maktub?*” Rita asked. When the family first arrived, her father had called daily the number given to him by the resettlement agency, seeking a job. Rita was beginning to think he was lying to her when he said he was still trying.

“*Aiwa. Construction, faqat.*” Could it be that there were only construction jobs in the entire state of Arizona? The one job her father certainly could not take, given his back. Then her father said what he always said when she asked about work: “*Wa yahdi Allah man yisha al huda.*” Allah only helps those who want to be helped.

Rita didn’t think Allah had anything to do with her figuring out the cash register at the pizzeria.

“*Maa salameh baba.*” Rita kissed her father’s cheek. Hussein looked up, almost said goodbye to her, but then decided whatever was on his screen was more important. In another time, Rita’s father would have reprimanded her for the amount of makeup she had lined her hazel eyes with, the way her chestnut hair was falling out of her hijab,

why she was wearing five sprays of the perfume she had stolen from Walgreens. He also might once have noticed the way Rita circled the oven, counted aloud in her head not once or twice but three times over, the number of burners, and after accounting for each said: “off, off, off.” The way she returned to the bathroom, snapping pictures of the electrical outlet with their phone where she had plugged in her blow dryer (and yes unplugged it, yes unplugged it). *Yés it’s off, off, off.* Triple-checked the faucets in the sinks and in the shower, made sure the windows were all closed. There could be a monsoon; there could be a flash flood, but neither her father nor her brother would notice. Her father was intent on the weather over New England, and her brother was becoming a blue screen. Like they were still playing dead.

When they were shot—Rita’s father and brother—they had been walking with other men from their neighborhood to fetch rations for the family, and having believed the snipers had passed on from the area, ran out into the road. Rita’s father and brother played dead for an hour, tangled beside the corpses of neighbors they had known their entire lives. Rita’s father had taught the entire family to “play dead” before the war reached Aleppo. In their apartment in Aleppo back then, it was hard for Rita not to laugh, the four of them, Rita’s mother among them, lying on the tile floor, practicing death. When Rita first came upon her mother, her body crumpled beneath a blasted-out ceiling, Rita thought maybe, just maybe, she was playing. She was in there still after all....

Sometimes Rita felt like the three of them were all ghosts, living together in Arizona, in some purgatory, not just playing dead but actually dead, somewhere far from beneath her mother’s feet, but also not quite in hell.

Toward five, the heat had abated. The temperature sank below one hundred degrees. Cars were stuck in standstill traffic as Rita walked along the freeway. Rita combatted the thoughts that the entire

apartment was burning down, that the burner she'd cooked the lentils on was still on, and when she returned home she'd find her family burnt black. "Off off off," she said to herself aloud in English. She had never been this way in Syria before the war. *Off* meant *off*, not one hundred bombs falling, not apartment buildings burning, not her loved ones dead. Rita squeezed her eyes shut, and opened them again.

Over the valley, smog obscured the mountains in the distance, even the one that resembled a camel lying down. Paul had once told her that when he was a child, you could see hundreds of stars in the night sky in Phoenix. But now, at night, it was bright everywhere. It seemed no humans lived in Arizona—only cars, only malls, only highways. Her mother would have hated it for that reason. Whenever Rita's father wanted to take a drive out of Aleppo into the countryside, Rita's mother used to say another one of her favorite proverbs in response: "*Jenna mafiha nas ma tendas.*" A paradise without people in it is not worth walking in.

"*Mar-hey-ba!*" Paul cried when she approached the patio of Frank's Pizza. He was smoking a cigarette in the parking lot by the delivery car.

"*Marhaba,*" Rita replied. Paul had begun studying Arabic on his own. He had dropped out of high school; she knew this, but did not know why.

"*Keif mo-drinsa?*" Paul asked.

"I don't know," Rita answered. She had no idea what he was even trying to say.

"*Modrinsa* is school, right?" Paul asked.

"*Madressa* is well," Rita answered. Paul was wearing a short-sleeve blue shirt so that his heavily tattooed forearm showed. Rita wondered about his astrological sign. She had wanted to ask him, but felt too shy. She was a Cancer and hoped Paul was a Pisces: they were supposed to be compatible. Her mother had always told her to find a Pisces for a husband.

"Is slow today?" She pronounced her words clearly, opened her mouth wide, like her first English teacher in Aleppo had told her to do.

"Slow as hell," Paul said. He spoke quickly, dropped the last consonants on his words. Sometimes Rita had to watch his mouth to understand him, but when she did, she became distracted by his lips, which were pretty as a girl's. Paul was not handsome. He was beautiful. She imagined his mouth kissing her in places she had never been touched. "Fuck this fucking place."

Rita always felt embarrassed when Paul swore, like he was taking off his clothing and handing a piece of his nudity to her.

"I am clocking now." *What was the right way to say it?* She never knew. *Was it clocking in or clocking on or clocking at?*

"But where do you really want to be?" Paul asked. Rita shook her head. The answer was too big and too complicated to tell him. "I wish I could just paint all day." Paul was looking into the parking lot with an expression that seemed romantic.

"Have a smoke with me," Paul said. "No one's here." She couldn't tell if his smile meant he liked her or if he was secretly making fun of her. Maybe he had a monstrous nickname for her the way the boys did at the apartment for Hussein. The thought that he might return her affection was impossible. Surely he had a cheerleader somewhere: a Homecoming Queen, a blonde, blue-eyed teenage goddess like Christy.

Rita recalled her first cigarette: she had snuck one from her father's pack and smoked it in the middle of the night on the porch of their apartment in Aleppo. The city then was all alive, full of light and sound, the call of music in the streets, people laughing. The smoke burned but felt natural, like it was made to be a part of her. She had not had a cigarette since. Paul tossed his out before she had a chance to say yes or no. He opened the door to the pizzeria for her. Paul was so close she could already smell him: his clean scent, his aftershave, probably cheaper than her own perfume. Rita wanted it all over her.

It was nearly midnight when Rita finished her shift and began walking toward home. She liked the complex at that hour. Logan and his friends were all out at parties, drinking beer, smoking marijuana, somewhere far away. The lights were off in most of the apartments. Sometimes she felt the dreamy sensation that someone—a stranger—was watching her from one of the darkened windows. A camera was tracking her movements. She was part of a beautiful movie and was walking to a gorgeous, heartbreaking soundtrack. She closed her eyes, and it was almost quiet enough to believe she was on her island paradise, with its clear blue waters, the rain forest whispering around her. Rita found peace in the night in Arizona because she knew in Syria the sun had long since risen. On the other side of the world, it was bright.

Most weekend nights after work, she would sit on the porch of their apartment—while her father slept and her brother remained in front of his computer—remembering Aleppo sometimes until dawn. She tried to recall the scent of her mother’s roses in bloom. She remembered the smell of the trees, of the dirt in the ground, of the rain, the smell of her best friend Alia’s shampoo. Alia and her family had taken a boat to Europe. Either Alia was at the bottom of the Mediterranean or she was in Paris, London, Berlin—places Rita wished she were in rather than Phoenix. It was a terrible thing to feel jealous of someone who might be dead, and when Rita had these thoughts, she felt compelled to pray to Allah for forgiveness. Lately, it seemed, Rita only ever turned to Him when she felt guilty.

When Rita reached her apartment, she heard footsteps from within and her father’s voice. It was impossible that he would even be standing up. For a moment she thought the boys from the complex had gotten inside, and her father was not laughing but crying. He was being tortured. Rita dropped her keys, and her hands began to shake, when her father opened the door and took her in his arms with such force she thought her vision of the apartment burning had been correct. This was surely her father’s ghost.

“Rita, *habibti!*” her father cried. Hussein was still at his computer screen with his headphones on.

So the world had not toppled after all.

This was her father standing, pacing, excited. This was her father as Rita had not seen him for years. He was shaking a letter in her face like it was one million American dollars. “*Doktor Hadid! Wa yahdi Allah man yisha al huda!*”

The letter was signed by Dr. Jean al-Hadid. He was one of those fancy Arabs with a French first name. Rita read it: Dr. Jean was inviting them to dinner the following Friday. “Every week,” the letter said, “I host a refugee family in the valley. Would you please join me for dinner at seven in the evening?” Below, the scrawl of a pretty-sounding address.

“He saves us. He’ll do surgery for Hussein on the hand. A Syrian surgeon is best in the world!” her father shouted.

Rita left her father to rave into the telephone at a relative across the ocean and walked onto the porch. The lot was empty except for a single car idling in a parking spot to the right of her apartment. When Rita looked closer, she saw that it was the delivery car from Frank’s. The familiar shape of Paul was silhouetted by a lamp. He was sitting on the trunk, smoking. Rita wanted to crawl back inside of her apartment and hide, but it was too late. Paul had already turned around and seen her.

“You forgot your tips!” he cried.

“What you are doing?” Rita asked. She meant to add “here,” but the words fell out of her mouth.

“I wanted to bring you your tips.” Paul jumped off the car and walked toward the apartment. When he was nearly before her, Rita caught sight of his eyes, so blue they pained her.

“How do you know my house?” Rita asked.

“You told me,” Paul said. “My mom’s apartment is the next complex over.”

At that moment, the zombie Hussein had miraculously risen from his permanent home in front of the laptop. Her brother opened the screen door to the porch. “*Min hua?*”

“Nobody, go away,” Rita hissed to Hussein.

“*Mar-hey-bal!*” Paul shouted to Hussein, but Hussein had already slammed the screen door shut and closed the blinds.

“I go sleep now,” Rita said to Paul. Paul handed her the envelope with her tip money. “*Shukran* very much.”

His hand touched hers and lingered there, it felt to her, a beat long. She would have liked it to stay there forever. Rita went to sleep that night, not dreaming of her mother’s paradise, but of Paul.



“I am new man,” her father said, looking into the mirror before they left the apartment. And in fact, her father for the last week had been incredible for Rita to behold. He made breakfast. He shaved. He did not watch the Weather Channel once. He walked without hunching over. Her father was no Paul Newman, but to Rita, he was briefly almost as handsome as he had been before the war.

The iPhone said the journey to Dr. Jean’s would take two and a half hours each way. They had no car and would have to walk a mile to the bus station beside the pizzeria, where the bus came every thirty minutes. They would take that bus fifteen stops before transferring to another bus, which would go most of the way to Dr. Jean’s, just two miles short of his address.

It was even hotter than it was the week before, 103 at half past four. They had all put on their nicest clothing, and their nicest clothing was black. Beneath his breath, Rita’s father was singing songs she remembered from her mother’s movies. Meanwhile, Hussein would not look up from the ground. His hands were shoved into his pockets.

Rita was trying to picture the burners in the apartment. She had counted the four of them off, six times. The windows were closed. She had not used a blow dryer. It was definitely off, off, off, she whispered aloud. A car on the road ran over a glass bottle. Rita’s brother and father jumped. It almost sounded like a gunshot. A memory returned to Rita from their last days in Aleppo—a man running, in tears with a baby in his arms, screaming for God to save him, the sound of his voice drowned beneath gunshots while Rita watched him from the safety of the old tobacco store. Rita closed her eyes tightly, opened them. She began to shiver despite the heat.

That was not a gun. We are in Arizona, not Syria.

The bus filled and then emptied and then filled again. The entire ride, Hussein played some sort of game on their iPhone that involved killing fish. Rita’s father still sang beneath his breath, looking out the window. Rita watched the faces change on the bus as it moved through neighborhoods. At first, the faces were browner, and then the farther the bus got from the complex, the whiter they became. When they transferred to the final bus, there were hardly any faces on it except their own. And suddenly, they were on a road through the middle of the desert.

Dusk was beginning to settle over the ridges of the purpling mountains. There was a magical quality to the landscape Rita had never seen before. The *sahrah* left to itself—unscarred by malls and hideous apartment complexes—here it was: the bottom of her sea floor in paradise, the ocean turned upside down. There were so many saguaros, of so many different shapes, hundreds of them, stretching their arms toward the darkening sky. Rita squinted. It was a mirage, but there in the distance, wearing a white robe, Rita saw her mother walking through the desert. Rita looked at her father to see if he had seen her, but he had fallen asleep.

The bus stopped abruptly at a station that seemed to be in the middle of nowhere. “Last stop!” the driver said over the intercom. How could Dr. Jean’s house be anywhere here? There was nothing but desert. They had not passed a stoplight for at least ten minutes.

“Excuse me?” her father said to the driver and pointed to the map on the iPhone screen.

The driver put his hands up and shrugged. “Good luck.”

They were left in the middle of the road, the bus blowing dust all over their black attire. Rita’s eyes burned. Dusk was passing into night. Soon they would have only the phone for light, and then the phone would die, and they would be alone without food, without water. It would get as dark as the night they had met the smuggler who took them out of Aleppo. Rita had never known his name. Her father had handed him the money, which the smuggler counted thoroughly, and then they were put—the three of them—into the trunk of his car. Rita felt like she had forgotten how to breathe when the car stopped and they heard the government men speaking, their footsteps rounding the perimeter of the car. Her breath was caught in her chest. It would not come out. One of the officers hit the trunk with something, a baton perhaps. Rita’s father pressed his hands down harder on both Rita’s and Hussein’s mouths. She could feel her father’s heartbeat wild and mad in his chest. Then it was over, the car picked up speed, and they were left just like this on the edge of an abandoned town. The border was a mile away, the smuggler said. “*Allah ma’ak.*”

Back in Arizona, Rita looked in the distance and saw on the seat of a small mountain, a row of lights. There was a large house there, up a small road Rita could hardly make out. It was all alone, grandiose, like a palace from another century.

The three of them, for that two-mile walk to Dr. Jean’s, were all walking in the past, away from that abandoned town, into the dawn,

on toward the border. Birds somehow still chirped in Syria, and they had come for them that morning, oblivious to the blood and the bombs and to Rita’s mother being gone. The twilight was magnificent. The land never looked more beautiful to Rita. Syria was the color of straw. They were leaving. They would never return. Rita’s father collapsed in the road, burying his head in his hands, just before they reached the border. The wind that morning was made of tears.

It was dark by the time they reached the foot of the hill of Dr. Jean’s home. “We’re almost there,” Rita said. And when she saw the house up close, lit up like a chandelier in the dusky desert, for a minute she thought what she meant to say was: we’re almost home.

Dr. Jean was a tall, middle-aged man with green eyes. He wore a cream dress shirt with silky pants Rita yearned to touch, to feel against her face. He greeted them in English. “I was born here,” he explained, and waved his hands for them to come inside. The ceilings were painted like Rita imagined the churches were in Italy, and from them hung true chandeliers. The floor beneath them was marble and cold to the touch. They didn’t have to remove their shoes, Dr. Jean had said, but it was habit. Through the glass windows, Rita saw the sparkling spread of Phoenix beyond a clear blue pool that fell over the side of the mountain like a waterfall. Dr. Jean’s wife was blonde and beautiful, not unlike Christy. She wore an ankle-length opal dress and was hardly a decade older than Rita.

“This is Angela,” Dr. Jean explained. “She designed the interior of the house.”

Rita’s father was stupefied. He kept saying *helu helu helu*. Whether about the house, Angela, or Dr. Jean’s entire life, Rita did not know.

“You live American dream,” her father said next.

Dr. Jean smiled. “Would you like a tour?”

“*Shukran, shukran.*” Rita’s father seemed to have forgotten all of his English.

There were seven bedrooms in the house, five bathrooms, enough room in all for twenty families, Rita calculated, a movie theater in the basement, a basketball court to the right of the house. Rita imagined the tent cities where hundreds of her countrymen and women now lived, and thought of how it would look if Dr. Jean's house were full of them. They would roast meat and sing songs and dance around fires, looking out over the desert. The tour ended at the pool. Rita did not know how to swim—she had never learned—but imagined herself in those clear blue waters with Paul wrapped around her, laughing, his limbs slippery, his mouth sweet. In Dr. Jean's pool, there could be no sharks.

"We've made lamb," Angela said. The tone of her sentences seemed to end with question marks rather than periods. In her hand, perpetually, was a glass of white wine. Dr. Jean had offered them all wine too, and Rita, lost in her reverie, said yes, when her father interjected saying they would have soda.

Rita had not had lamb since her mother made it years ago, and though the lamb Angela had made was nothing like her mother's, she savored every bite, chewing slowly and carefully as Angela did. Rita's father and Hussein devoured their plates like animals, her father eating the meat with bread clutched in his hands rather than with a fork.

Dr. Jean sat at the head of the table, Angela at the other end. It was the longest table Rita had ever seen. Rita figured that at least twelve people could fit around it, and they were only five.

"You know, my mother and father were immigrants here too," Dr. Jean said. "They came here fifty years ago with nothing in their pockets but a dream. They bought a house in the valley and opened a grocery store that quickly became one of the most popular stores in the state, and now we have ten of them. I'm sure you've heard of it. Georgie's Supermarket? My father's name was George."

"*Aiwa*," Rita's father said. Then correcting himself, said, "Yes, we hear."

"But it wasn't always easy. They were successful but they always

missed Syria. They were always talking about their old neighborhood. They never quite came to accept Arizona as home. I suppose it never really was..." Dr. Jean looked at Angela. "What wonderful lamb, Angela! Angela is quite the cook, right?"

"*Shukran jazeelan*," Rita's father said and looked at his children to follow suit.

Hussein raised his head and smiled shyly. He had eaten the entire meal with his wounded hand in his lap, trying to slice the lamb with his fork only.

"Thank you very much, Mrs. Angela," Rita said.

"Where they are, *imik wa abuk*?" Rita's father said.

"Your mother and father?" Rita clarified.

"Oh, my parents passed many years ago," Dr. Jean said, still smiling. He had smiled the entire meal throughout his entire life story. He never stopped smiling, Dr. Jean, as if life and death were as pleasant as wine drinking and lamb eating. Nothing could touch him, not in this palace in the hills. His teeth were perfectly straight, perfectly white.

"*Allah yerhamuhom*," Rita's father said of Dr. Jean's parents. Dr. Jean coughed.

A small woman wearing an apron appeared from nowhere and gathered their dishes and their glasses. At first, neither Dr. Jean nor Angela acknowledged this figure, and Rita wondered if it was their job to thank her. Then Angela stood and followed the woman into the kitchen. When Angela returned, she had a tray of *knafeh* the small woman must have baked. The smell reminded Rita of her mother—that most luscious smell of rosewater and sweet cheese. Rita's mother had made *knafeh* for the last time on Hussein's birthday. Her mother was such a perfectionist about her *knafeh* that she sulked the entire evening while Rita, Rita's father, and Hussein all devoured it. "*Harat al knafeh*," her mother finally said. But that was why it was so delicious, because it was slightly burned.

And then it was all over, the dinner, the dessert. They had been at Dr. Jean's only an hour and fifteen minutes according to Rita's watch. Dinners back in Syria had lasted all night. They were all standing in the entryway and Dr. Jean had not offered to take them in, let them live in his palace, save them from the complex. And Rita's father had still not asked him about the surgeries. Rita's father had grown fidgety, she could see—he had not smoked a cigarette the entire night. Rita said to her father, "*Inta bidek tisaalo?*"

"What'd she say?" Dr. Jean said to Rita's father.

"*Shukran*, Dr. Jean," Rita's father said.

Rita held up Hussein's hand. "Dr. Jean, can you help us?"

Hussein's face turned red. He would never forgive her for this. Neither of them would.

They were so alike, her brother and her father. They lived as if an angel were going to knock on their door and carry them away in a chariot to a better life. The very angel who only helped those who wanted to be helped. Dr. Jean looked back nervously at Angela who walked toward them, her glass of wine refilled. She was smiling wider now, but her smile was saying "time to go" in a way only Americans knew how to do.

"It's not my specialty, but I have a colleague," Dr. Jean said. "Don't I, Angela?"

"Yes," Angela said. "Why yes."

"I'll be in touch with you all. Wonderful to have you. Just wonderful."

Rita's father kept saying *shukran shukran*, shaking Dr. Jean's hand like he was God, Himself.

"How are you all getting home?" Dr. Jean asked.

"The bus," Rita said.

Dr. Jean looked offended by her answer. "Oh no," he said. "I'll call you a car."

They spent the ten minutes until the car came with Rita's father thanking Dr. Jean over and over again, and telling him please no

please no to the car, and Dr. Jean nodding his head, ignoring him, saying he would call them in the coming days, very soon, not to worry, very soon.

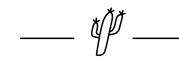
"Just wonderful, so wonderful you all being able to share a meal with us. See you again," he smiled.

And then they were in a black Suburban, one of those cars that resembled the army tanks Rita had seen so many times from the side of the road. It smelled of new leather and air freshener and peppermint. The radio was on playing pop songs about love, and out the window Rita gazed into the desert passing back into suburbs, and as the light became brighter, and the houses more tightly set against one another, she prayed to her mother that Dr. Jean would have them back to his house the very next week. She did not care if her brother and her father were angry at her for her boldness; she was trying to save their lives. One day she would bring Paul there. She fantasized about him waiting for her in the pool: she would release her hair for him and dive down into the clear blue water like a mermaid. She would learn, just like that, how to swim. And then so quickly they were back at Sonoran Vista. The driver said only one word the entire drive, and it was *goodnight*.

As soon as they had exited the car, Hussein turned to Rita. "Mind your own fucking business."

"*Shu hada?*" her father said, uncomprehending.

"Nothing," Rita said.



The last day of school before summer vacation arrived, and there was still no word from Dr. Jean. Hussein had returned to school but had received a D on his final math test. Of the two of them, Hussein was the better at English, though he rarely spoke it, and Rita was the better at math but was terrible in English, though she tried to speak it all the time. Rita was the only junior in her calculus class. Rita felt the most

solace inside of math equations. The world simplified to solving y as a function of x .

"I can help you with the math," Rita said to Hussein on the walk home. Hussein was staring at the iPhone. He had learned to play on it and hold it with only one hand. "Math is peace for me."

"Steve Jobs dropped out of school. And he was Syrian," Hussein said.

"You can't drop from high school," Rita said. Hussein grunted and returned to his game, which involved multicolored birds. He was so occupied by the phone that when they approached the door of their apartment, Hussein hardly noticed that "go the fuck home towelhead terrorists" and "sandy Scissorhands sucks ISIS cock" was graffitied on their apartment door.

For the first time in many months, Rita did something without checking herself, without making sure her father was still alive inside, that nothing had burned down, that the windows were all closed. Something took over her. She dropped her book bag at the door. She felt as if a thousand crows had burst from her chest, and she was attached to them by string, and they were flying her away from the door, toward the apartment pool where she knew Logan and the boys would be at that time of the afternoon.

"Rita! *Ty le hone!*" Hussein screamed after her.

Without saying anything at all, she walked up to Logan, who was in the middle of telling some sort of terrible joke.

"What are you...?" Logan started to say, but before he could, Rita's hands were pressed against his chest, and the next thing she knew, she heard the smack of his body fall into the pool. Rita did not wait to see his reaction. She ran away from the boys, and though they chased her—one managed to tear her hijab from her head—they lost her at the first stoplight when she ran through traffic, through the sound of angry horns. Rita had always been a strong runner. She ran and ran, and in her head could not kill the delusion mounting in her: she had killed Logan. Rather than landing in the swamp, snake-ridden,



alligator-filled, monsoon-trashed pool, which she *had seen, had seen, had seen*, with her own eyes, but *no, no, no*, maybe Logan's head had hit the ledge of it. Not only was he dead, but her brother and father were both burning alive in the apartment, for she had not checked the burners. And she was all alone. And she could not go back.

Suddenly, she thought she could run all the way to Dr. Jean's. She could hide there. She caught her breath at the station by the pizzeria. She had no money for the bus, but she knew the route well enough. She remembered it. She remembered everything.

It was nearly sundown, but the heat was still beating down on the valley. Rita had no water. Her lips were chapped, and her hair lay sleek and wet against her face. It had been years since she had been outside without covering her hair. She believed she had reached the part of

the desert the second bus had taken on the way to Dr. Jean's. She was almost there. There was a sign that read: LANDFILL. Rita did not know what a landfill meant but thought it might be something to do with the land filling a place, a place full of land? Of desert? Pure *sahrah*? Rather than a place filled with malls and cars and buildings.

She walked on. It was only after some minutes that the smell began to reach her. She could not place it at first, though it was familiar. The dusk was settling and turning the desert into that pretty magical thing she had seen on the bus, but here up close, she saw the desert was filled with pieces of plastic, that there was no empty space of earth but rot all around her and crows swooping down like a plague pecking at the corpses of human waste. Rita's head began to feel heavy. In the distance she saw a wave of water. Maybe she was in Aleppo. She was walking amid the debris. Soon she would find her mother, her mother's foot twitched even after death. She had come upon her at this hour, this same hour, the blue hour. Rita screamed at the two medics who crowded around her, who were too late. She pointed to her mother's foot. She shouted at them to save her. They weren't Arabs. They couldn't understand her. They were French but spoke to her in English. She read Médecins Sans Frontières on their badges. Her mother's foot moved again, ever so slightly. The medic took her mother's pulse, shook his head. "It's a Lazarus sign," he said to Rita. "Lazarus?" Rita pronounced it slowly. She did not know what it meant. "*Mish hone*," the medic said, pointing at Rita's mother. Not here. She is not here.

The sunset above Rita in Arizona was tortuously beautiful, red and yellow splashed like paint on the blue night, but Rita was still in hell. She had never made it out.

"Rita!" She heard the voice from afar, the way sound travels underwater. Soon she would faint. She turned slowly. She had to walk back the way she had come. She had to find the road.

Paul was walking toward her. Another hallucination. Was this what death was like? If so, it was not entirely bad. She could grow used to the smell if she could see Paul. He was so close to her now.

"What are you doing?" he screamed. She would have liked to ask him the same question.

"What?" she managed to say. Her mouth was parched. He handed her a bottle of water, which was as warm as the air. "Where we are?"

"We followed you," he said. Paul took out a pack of cigarettes and lit one. He was nervous, she saw. His hand shook. He dropped the lighter, then, though revolted, clawed it out from the trash. He was flesh and blood. "Hussein was running down the road by Frank's. I picked him up and we followed you all the way here. Hussein didn't want you to know we were following you. But I couldn't let you walk farther in this shit."

"Where are we?" Rita said again.

"In a fucking landfill," Paul said. This time Rita didn't feel embarrassed when he cursed. Rita wanted to yell it out too, yell *fuck fuck* at the sky, at the world, at God if He were ever listening. Come to think of it, English did have a good word: it was fuck.

Then she saw it, the little black Honda with the Frank's sign on its side parked just yards away from them and Hussein in the passenger seat not staring at a blue screen but through the window, at her. "Come on, I'll take you guys home," Paul said.

Rita wanted to tell Paul she didn't know where home was—if it even existed, if it ever had—but she only took his hand and let him lead her out of the landfill, a word she still did not understand, into the car, which smelled of cigarettes, beer, and of Paul, of his cheap, sweet aftershave, which she still, despite everything, wanted all over her.

"*Una bahebik*," Hussein said when Rita got into the car.

"I love you too," Rita said to Hussein.

It was already night when Rita and Hussein returned to the apartment. Their father was asleep on the couch, the weather muted and projected

over his face. There was a heat wave in New York, storms throughout the Plains. Rain would fall in Arizona the following morning. Hussein went to sit at his computer. She could hear through his headphones Skype trying to dial someone and failing, someone who was maybe, by now, too far away from this life. Rita walked onto the porch. Paul was still there, digging for something in the trunk of the delivery car. She ducked down and through the slits of the porch watched him walk up to the apartment with a large duffel bag.

She watched him secretly until dawn rose. Paul had finished his painting, thinking himself unobserved all those hours, then drove away. Rita could already smell the coming rain. It was a stunning smell: rain in the *sahrah*.

Rita walked outside to look at their new door. It reminded Rita of something she had dreamed: a seascape of blue, mermaids swimming, cactuses shooting out of the water, an ocean made of desert, the night sky filled with stars. Paul's painting was even more beautiful than her paradise.



3

STORY 3

THE ERASURE GAME

YOON HA LEE

ILLUSTRATIONS BY WENYI GENG

Looking back, Kimmy Chang would say the candy bar wrappers changed everything. But if she thought hard about it, it went back further: beyond the watchers in the darkness, beyond the Other Game, beyond the people who hadn't seen what she saw. It went all the way back to the dailies she woke to each morning this election year.

On this particular morning in early spring, Kimmy had hoped to sleep in rather than meeting her friends for their usual walk, when the daily from her phone in its cheerful purple case prodded her awake. "Good morning, Kimmy"—a warm contralto. On her screen appeared the presidential candidate her friend Gray called the Dragon—too good to be anything but a myth, who spoke to Kimmy every Tuesday, as per the Equal Time Clause.

"I know you're not old enough to vote yet, but a year goes by very quickly. I wanted to express my appreciation of your household's involvement with the community. Your community's Game scores for civic engagement are especially impressive! And I've noticed that your personal scores in the neighborhood live-action games are higher this week. Keep it up and—"

Kimmy didn't like the way the Dragon singled out her Game-playing. She was a backstabber in the live-action games, with a knack for charming her targets. That was her strategy, playing as an assassin. Kimmy didn't play like everyone else, and she didn't think that was worth any plaudits, which was partly why she played the way she did. It weirded her out that the Dragon kept track of her specifically—even praised her for this. But she knew the Dragon spoke to everyone like this. And most people even liked it: her roommate Mari, for one.

Kimmy tuned out the Dragon's velvety voice as she ran a brush through her shoulder-length brown hair. As a child she'd longed for midnight-black hair like her Asian-descended mother's, to match the dark eyes she'd inherited. Both Gray and Mari had convinced her there was nothing wrong with her appearance, one of the few things the two agreed on.

Bright-haired Mari had already showered and was pulling on a sleek gray jacket for her morning run. "I thought I was going to have to wake you up," Mari teased. "The household could use a bigger health rebate, you know!"

"Thanks for the reminder," Kimmy lied. It wasn't that she objected to the act of running, she just hated the way her phone automatically logged her hours for the benefit of her household. Couldn't she have just one thing all to herself? Greedy as it was.

She wouldn't dare distress Mari by admitting that she sometimes cheated on the self-reports; she'd learned hacks to get around them from Gray. "See you at school? I'm guessing you already grabbed breakfast."

"You know me so well," Mari said with a wry smile.

They'd been roommates since they were twelve. Kimmy didn't always agree with Mari, but they got along more or less, even if Mari didn't approve of Gray. Mari would never mention it, but it had been driving a wedge between them this past year.

Mari left. Kimmy sauntered to the shower, lingering so that she'd miss her running buddies' texts. She'd tell them that she'd overslept. Guilt pricked at her: they weren't bad people. She just was tired of everyone talking about the upcoming elections. If she had to put up with that chatter first thing in the morning, she was going to scream.

Kimmy decided to avoid the park that her running buddies frequented and instead headed in the opposite direction: she'd get more exercise this way, even if she wasn't going to log it. Besides, there was no point when the scoring system changed every year as state officials fine-tuned it. Kimmy had gotten into her share of arguments about the Game

concerning whether the rule changes were unbalanced or written to produce state-approved outcomes over her individual wellness. She bit her tongue now, because the squabbles would never end.

Kimmy grabbed a hasty breakfast—oatmeal and a yogurt—which the household system also automatically logged. If not for Gray's complaints about privacy, she wouldn't even have noticed. Then she dashed out to meet Gray, hoping she wouldn't miss them. Lately they'd been elusive, and she was getting spooked. Her phone insisted she'd received seven messages. None were from Gray. She dismissed the messages without reading.

As she jogged down the street, she caught a flicker of motion out of the corner of her eye. Miz Laura was waving from her wheelchair on a porch across the street. *She must be on sentinel this morning.* Most sentinels were elders. Their age gave them authority, and it was one of the less physically strenuous roles available. Miz Laura preferred the job because it allowed her to say hello to everyone in the neighborhood. In addition to greeting people, sentinels noted the activities of passersby: jogging, running errands, commuting. As a child, Kimmy had caught one of the house elders cross-referencing the sentinels' observations against surveillance data and statistics that were turned in by the household. She'd pretended she didn't care, but for several years she had nightmares about eyes in the dark watching everything she did. Even then, she'd known better than to tell anyone about the dreams.

She was puffing by the time she reached the spot where she usually met Gray—on the days they bothered to show up. Gray would have laughed at her. They could slack off for days on end yet still run faster than her. Maybe she should pace herself better. Kimmy consoled herself with the fact that her exercising regularly would help her to be a productive, long-living citizen, or so the elders claimed.

Gray wasn't there—and Kimmy began to worry. This was the fourth day they'd blown her off. Where was Gray? According to her classmates, Gray was tangled up with some of the unlicensed medics

in Old Town. Maybe it was true, maybe it wasn't. She wished they'd trust her with it, whatever it was.

Kimmy pulled out her phone to check her messages again. That was when she saw the wrappers.

Shiny metallic candy bar wrappers were scattered all over the grass and in the patches of clover beyond, blown about by spring breezes. Kimmy didn't recognize them as candy bar wrappers at first. These days they were rare in Town now that the state rigorously tracked eating habits, banning processed foods from consumption. Gran Rosa fondly recalled the days when you could have a bowl of cereal with sugar and chocolate milk for dinner if you felt like it, but she always said this with a furtive air. Kimmy couldn't see the appeal, but then she'd never had cereal or candy. To her, it was just one of those things elders grumbled about when they spoke of the way things used to be in the Town, contemplating whether or not they should move to one of the states that hadn't passed Game legislation.

Kimmy stared, baffled by the wrappers. *Who eats sweets these days?* A few kids ordered the stuff online, but even then, prepackaged sweets weren't that popular. In a proper Town, you gathered together on special occasions to make cupcakes or hamantaschen or dulce de leche.

Kimmy bent down to inspect the nearest wrapper. *Why hasn't anyone tagged the site as needing cleanup? This is easy points; littles should be all over this.*

CHOCOLATE DREAMZ: the wrapper depicted an oozing chocolate bar, along with text in a script Kimmy didn't recognize.

She squinted at the wrapper and inhaled too deeply, gagging at the



sickly sweet smell of caramel, chocolate, and marshmallow.

Kimmy thought about tagging the site, inviting others to score some points. Hell, she could do it herself. But she was curious about the writing on the wrapper. Surely it wouldn't be so bad if she liberated just one for study? She'd always liked mysteries; it was what drew her to Gray. Stealthily, Kimmy scooped up a wrapper, brushed off the bugs, and stuffed it in her pocket.

Gray might know something about this. They read up on the oddest things. I just have to find them.



Kimmy didn't catch up with Gray until after school. She went to Gray's usual spot in the courtyard—a bench next to a bed of modified daffodils just starting to bloom—as though she were summoning Gray by force of will. She sprawled with book in hand, pretending to read while two teachers, Mx. Blum, who was non-binary like Gray, and Mr. Greene, discussed the national elections on a bench nearby.

"...seriously? Miz Monde read unemployment statistics to you for ten minutes?" Mr. Greene asked incredulously. "Why didn't she just text you a chart?"

Ah, yes. Miz Monde: "The Dragon."

"Anyone can copy-paste a chart," Mx. Blum said in all earnestness. "Hearing the candidate discuss the figures and statistical regressions, on the other hand—"

Kimmy grinned. Of course Mx. Blum, the math and computers teacher, liked to talk numbers.

The two teachers compared the Dragon to their other favored candidates. "Lopez has a strong science background," Mx. Blum said. "I'd rather have someone who knows a fact from a fable making decisions about environmental reclamation."

Kimmy thought back to Candidate Lopez's dailies. As far as she

could tell, Lopez's real interest was in touting her fancy degrees. Besides, Lopez's platform concerning the environment, especially protecting coastal lands, didn't seem significantly different from the Dragon's.

Meanwhile, Mr. Greene liked Dr. Nguyen because "he has a face you can trust," which Kimmy thought was a terrible reason to vote for someone.

"He does have an excellent smile," Mx. Blum said with a wink. Kimmy snickered into her hand. Mx. Blum went on, "But he's trying too hard to woo the older generation. And I have concerns about his plan not to force the Control Towns to join the Game for their own good."

As a little, Kimmy had thought the name was odd, considering that the Control Towns *didn't* follow the rules of the Game, until someone explained that it came from the idea of experimental controls.

"The Game improves health outcomes," Mx. Blum said primly. "It'd be unethical *not* to enforce participation."

"Yes, and then people move to states that don't have the Game so they can escape all the surveillance," Mr. Greene argued. "Is that any better?"

Certainly people already moved to Old Town for similar reasons. Due to some legal loophole, its inhabitants weren't required to participate in the Game, although officials collected baseline statistics when they could get the inhabitants to cooperate. People went there for unmonitored medical treatment. Kimmy knew a girl who'd gotten an abortion that she didn't want her household to know about, and an uncle who bought migraine meds through an Old Town pusher so his employer wouldn't find out. She'd considered looking for Gray there, but she hadn't yet worked up the courage to venture there on her own. Old Town was a whole different world, a glimpse of the vanished past.

During Kimmy's great-grandparents' generation, people had lived in neighborhoods lacking sidewalks. They'd had liquor stores and vending machines but nowhere to buy fresh produce. People

had worked soul-crushing jobs that involved sitting at desks all day. Granted, not much had changed, but back then people didn't receive breaks for walks or for yoga. There were no integrated gyms unless you worked at one of the more affluent companies, and you didn't earn rewards for your household the way you did today. She couldn't imagine how anyone could live that way. Kimmy listened in secret fascination whenever the elders talked about the old days. From a young age she'd sensed that no one would approve if someone of her generation showed too much interest in the way things used to be—the way things still were in Old Town.

Just as Kimmy let her eyes drift shut, a tap on the shoulder made her sit up so suddenly the blood rushed to her head. The book fell out of her grasp. "That's not neighborly!" she said before realizing who it was.

The tap had come from Gray, who'd gotten their nickname from the gray eyes they'd inherited from their father. The color was startlingly pale against their dark skin. Gray was all limbs; their black hair curled ferociously in all directions. Kimmy wished her own hair had as much character. Gray's sweater had seen better days: right now it sported green stains and smelled of sweat and dirt. However, their jeans were spotless.

"Where have you been?" she demanded violently. Kimmy resented the way Gray's housemates blamed her for Gray's absences. She lowered her voice. "At this rate they're going to send you to social rehabilitation."

Gray's eyes sparkled with friendly malice. "But Kimmy, don't you know, it's for my own good." They let out a cackle.

Kimmy rolled her eyes. Just because everyone *said* its purpose was to help people integrate with the community didn't mean that anyone went voluntarily. One of Gray's housemates, Jon, had spent a long year in social rehab after threatening his roommate with a kitchen knife. Gray insisted that Jon had been provoked—as if that excused the

behavior. It was a sickness. Even today, Kimmy had difficulty talking to Jon. Oh, he seemed normal *now*, but the house elders must have sent him away for a reason.

"I have your assignments for you." Kimmy felt obliged to nudge Gray into catching up with their classwork, even though she knew it was futile.

Gray was always slipping away to Old Town. If Kimmy was honest with herself, she loved their stories of the cantankerous characters who dwelled there: from people who drank nothing but cocktails concocted from imported sodas to the "merfolk" who swam in the tainted waters. She kept promising herself that she'd work up the courage to join them there, as much as the thought of interacting with Old Townies repulsed her.

"I'll bull my way through it later," Gray said, as she'd known they would. "I got something to show you, though."

Right on cue, Mx. Blum concluded their conversation with Mr. Greene and headed toward the two of them. "Gray," Mx. Blum called out, "it's nice to see you showing an interest—"

Gray snorted at the reproof in Mx. Blum's voice. Kimmy frowned, wishing they would take the teacher seriously. "C'mon," Gray said as they broke into a run.

"Don't worry, Mx. Blum, I'll make them do their work," Kimmy called out, then sprinted after Gray. At least her phone would credit her for the running.

Kimmy glanced over her shoulder. Mx. Blum didn't pursue them, but she saw them making a notation in their phone. Kimmy suppressed a groan. *Another report to Gray's household.*

She stumbled over a crack in the sidewalk. Gray had slowed their pace to allow her to catch up with them. At this hour, most adults were still at work. Other students out on strolls waved at them while the sentinels they passed scowled—word had gotten around. A few shouted after Gray to check in with their household, though they were

going to report Gray's location to the elders anyway.

At last, Kimmy and Gray reached another of their favorite spots: an oak tree at one of the local parks. Everyone knew Gray hung out here. The two of them couldn't linger. But Kimmy assumed Gray had a good reason for coming here instead of getting lost as usual downtown amid university students and office workers who had too much on their minds to track a couple of stray teenagers.

The Town kept an eye on everyone, but there were gaps in the surveillance. Fortuitously, the oak partially blocked some of the sentinels' views. Kimmy remembered how shocked she'd been as a little when Gray had explained this to her, then pleased that they'd shared the secret with her. It wasn't much of a secret, but as Gray liked to say, *even small rebellions count for something*. Over the years, Gray taught her how to slip out of sight, a skill that rendered her both thrilled and appalled at herself. Gray shared that they'd learned their tricks in—where else—Old Town.

The Town was an hour's drive from the Old Town, most of which had been submerged when the coastal waters rose. Some people still clung to existence there, having refused resettlement in the Town proper. Others worked there, monitoring the wetlands and preserving the fisheries.

Kimmy leaned against the tree's trunk, panting for breath. Gray was huffing as well. When they'd recovered, Gray pulled out a pocket knife and began to scrape the tree's bark.

Kimmy raised her eyebrows. They weren't supposed to do that. "Don't tell me you've been skipping class because you're busy defacing trees."

"Nope, I just wanted to keep track. I found some weird stuff here the other day, and now..." Gray gestured for her to follow them.

Curious, she did. They penetrated the park, with its cool shadows and desiccated curtains of Spanish moss. It wasn't long before they came across a patch of ground where more candy bar wrappers appeared,

not far from benches and tables where littles were picnicking with their caretakers. None of them glanced toward the messy bouquets of wrappers.

"Hey!" Gray shouted toward the picnickers, causing Kimmy to jump. "You guys wanna pick this stuff up?"

Kimmy checked her phone as the head caretaker, a pale woman with her hair dyed lavender, scowled at Gray. No one had tagged the wrappers as a cleanup job, which made no sense, since it was the kind of thing you wanted to get littles in the habit of doing. It was a perfect learning opportunity and easy points for their households.

"There's government business involved," the woman said, clearly uneasy. "Leave that stuff alone. They'll dock your household for messing with it. Some kind of experiment."

Kimmy started to laugh. *Government business?* Why would the government care? Unless someone was sabotaging a household so it wouldn't get paid when the health rebates came in?

Gray wasn't laughing. Neither was the woman.

Kimmy was baffled. "Here," Kimmy said, "I'll tag it." *And clean it up* since no one else was volunteering. It annoyed her to be stuck with the task.

Dutifully, Kimmy snapped a pic. The phone filled in the location, type of chore, and how many points it was worth. Just in case, she added a preemptive claim on the task for herself and, by extension, her household. She hit enter.

The confirmation came up red, then blinked at her. Everything, including the pic, disappeared. Kimmy bit down on a swear word, remembering that there were littles present.

She tried again. Same result. What's going on?

"Hey," Gray said, tapping her shoulder. "Let's get out of here."

The unease in their voice perplexed her. "There's some glitch in the system, let me try again—"

"Let's *go*," Gray said with more urgency.

Kimmy scooped up one of the wrappers and shoved it in her pocket.

They fled the park. No words were exchanged until they'd walked all the way, by a circuitous route, to a café downtown that had lax security, enabling people to eat and drink without worrying about affecting their household scores.

Guilt nagged Kimmy as she ordered a chocolate croissant, even though the occasional indulgence wasn't bad. This was the third time this week she'd had one—frequent enough to affect her household—and she didn't plan on letting the system log it. Guilt-free, Gray ordered only tea.



Kimmy would have liked to have sat outside to enjoy the cool air, but Gray forestalled her. "I don't want to get tagged by random people who have nothing better to do," they said. "Let's stay inside." So she followed Gray to a table in the corner, away from the windows, with a clear view of the street.

"Show me what's in your pockets," Gray said once they'd both sat.

Kimmy fished out the two wrappers. Both said CHOCOLATE DREAMZ. They had even been opened the same way, the seams pulled apart expertly at the ends. She pulled out her phone.

Gray grabbed her wrist, fingers digging painfully into her flesh. "Don't."

She snatched her hand away with an effort. "What's the big deal? I was just going to run a search."

"Then the search will be in the records."

"So?" Kimmy couldn't see what the issue was. The household monitored searches in case anyone got involved in weird shit like that

one kid who'd been caught sending pics of himself to a woman two decades too old for him.

Gray closed her fingers over the wrappers. "Put those away. There's something fishy going on with these wrappers because I've seen them a few other places, and people keep behaving funny around them. I tried tagging them for cleanup too, and you can guess what happened."

Now she was intrigued. "Deleted from the system?"

Gray nodded.

"Someone's idea of a prank," she said. But she wasn't so sure, especially after the caretaker's words. *The government, really?*

"Sometimes I see someone strolling around Town," Gray went on, almost in a whisper. "They drive this black car and munch on those candy bars. My points slip every time I try to draw attention to them. Weird, huh?"

Kimmy's head was starting to hurt. "You're imagining things. It's probably someone with bad taste in snacks."

Their whispers were attracting attention. A cluster of students at the next table pointed at Gray.

"You need a proper meal, and if you're not going to buy something here, your blood sugar's gonna crash," Kimmy said. "Let's get a bite to eat and play board games at my place."

One of the students raised a camera to snap their picture. Gray got up, almost knocking their chair over before turning their back and heading for the door. Kimmy stumbled after them.

Kimmy knew she had been babbling. The prospect of Gray being whisked away to social rehabilitation scared her. The household had already been flirting with the idea. The weirder Gray's stories got, the more she worried that Gray's elders would send them away, and she would never see them again. Or worse, Gray would flee to Old Town, and she wouldn't be able to find them there.

Gray slowed, begrudgingly, only once they were four blocks away from the café. "Will you promise not to do a search on those wrappers?"

“Will you come to dinner?” Kimmy countered.

“Do you promise?”

“I promise,” Kimmy said reluctantly. “C’mon, let’s get some food into us.”



Kimmy’s household consisted of twelve apartments nestled against one another, with a common area for recreation and chatter and a dining room that could accommodate the inhabitants and their guests. Kimmy urged Gray to clean up first, persuading them that every bit of respectability helped. Gray rolled their eyes at her but emerged from the bathroom cleaner.

The aromas wafting from the dining room made Kimmy’s mouth water. It was a relief to bask in the smells of the spices and sauces that the household liked to cook with. Kimmy had gotten out of helping to cook for the past few days, preferring to spend her time seeking Gray out. Still, she contributed by being diligent about doing the dishes when she got home.

Kimmy hoped everyone would remain civil about her choice of guest. She was starting to feel optimistic when they ran into her roommate Mari.

“Kimmy!” Mari exclaimed. “I wasn’t sure you’d show.” She frowned at Gray. “Shouldn’t you be catching up with your household?”

“I invited Gray. Is there a problem?” Kimmy asked. It was rude for Mari to confront Gray about their household status. Strictly speaking, it was an internal household matter.

“You should know,” Mari glanced around, then lowered her voice. She met Kimmy’s gaze squarely, then said to Gray, “There’ve been people agitating to freeze you out if you don’t shape up soon. You’re messing with your household’s score.”

Was Mari being passive-aggressive, or did she intend the warning

sincerely? Freezing was usually the last resort before the elders sentenced someone to social rehab.

“You should eat,” Mari added, returning her attention to Kimmy. “Most everyone’s done, but there’s plenty left for *you*, Kimmy. I made them save some of that *agua fresca* you like so much.”

The remark was innocent enough. Gray’s expression didn’t change, but they didn’t know Mari as well as Kimmy did. The way she kept ignoring Gray was unmistakably impolite. Kimmy hated being pulled between her roommate and her friend like this.

“Thank you,” Kimmy said, hoping to smooth things over. “Gray likes it too—”

Mari’s face went blank, then she turned and walked away. Kimmy flushed in anger.

Gray leaned over and whispered in her ear. “No big deal,” they said cynically. “I’ll see myself out—”

“No, stay!” she said, more sharply than she’d intended.

“I don’t think this is such a good—”

Kimmy dragged Gray into the dining room with her. Gray made a point of serving herself the same foods that she did, so she picked out things that she knew they liked, such as grilled eggplant and tabbouleh. They quirked a small sideways smile at her in gratitude. It almost made her feel better.

Even though there was plenty of space, the two of them sat near the end of the table. The only other people in the dining room were three adults and a younger teen fretting over homework.

“Good to see you, Kimmy,” lanky Mr. L called out. He insisted that everyone call him that because his last name was Polish, both long and hard to pronounce. The fact that he gave a different last name every time someone insisted on hearing it didn’t help. The other adults didn’t pause in their heated discussion of a man at their office who kept bringing in baked goods and interrupting everyone at their desks and tanking everyone’s healthy workplace scores.

“How were your dailies, Mr. L?” Gray cut in.

“You were supposed to act normal,” Kimmy hissed. Honestly, she wanted to help Gray fit in enough to stay out of trouble.

“No, I don’t mind,” Mr. L said, to Kimmy’s aggravation. “Nice to see a young person taking an interest.” He looked pointedly at Kimmy. How did he know that she barely paid attention to her dailies, anyway? *Is there anything the household doesn’t track?* She was starting to wonder if the Old Townies were onto something after all.

Kimmy stammered, “I—I’ve been so distracted, I don’t mean to—”

“Relax,” Mr. L said, smiling. “When I was your age, I didn’t care about politics either. But it’s good for the whole household to get engaged, you know?”

Kimmy wanted to look up the household’s civic engagement scores to see if they’d tanked recently: why else would Mr. L be hassling her about the dailies? She already had to feign interest when people discussed the candidates at school. Was it too much to hope that she could escape having to talk about the upcoming election at home, too?

“That’s what I’ve been telling Kimmy,” Gray said, a blatant lie, but it distracted Mr. L. Kimmy mouthed a thank-you when Mr. L wasn’t looking. “I’ve been impressed by the way the Dra—Miz Monde—has a plan to bring the Control Towns forward into the future. They’ve been allowed to freeload for far too long, and...”

Kimmy suppressed laughter as Mr. L nodded sagely in response to Gray’s bullshit. *Or was it bullshit?* It surprised her that they had been paying that much attention to politics. Gray was able to rattle off parts of the Dragon’s platform of which she was only peripherally aware: everything from more stringent environmental protections to proposed expansions of the household monitoring system.

“How are you going to enforce compliance, though?” Mr. L asked. “That’s a big ask for police.”

“I like the idea of having new Towns partner with existing ones while getting their sentinels set up,” Gray said, as if they didn’t spend

all their time *avoiding* sentinels.

Not wanting to draw attention to herself, Kimmy studied the candidates’ posters on the walls, especially the Dragon’s. The Dragon looked subtly different in every one, and Kimmy wondered which portrayal was the closest to the truth. Any kid could mess with photomanips, and the Dragon must have professionals designing her campaign materials. Certainly the face that had appeared in Kimmy’s daily this morning, an elegant middle-aged woman with lantern eyes and a crown of braids, didn’t quite match the depictions in posters, full of chameleon smiles.

Gray was the first person Kimmy knew who called her the Dragon, but others used the nickname too. It came from her campaign logo, a dragon coiled around the Earth, “protectively” as one of the household sentinels remarked. Kimmy thought it looked more like a dragon defending its hoard, which troubled her.

“The world is everyone’s treasure,” the Dragon liked to say. “We have to take care of ourselves so we can guard our planet. That means bringing everyone into the household system, and making sure no one continues the selfish traditions of the past.” It was a message that had become increasingly popular with her generation, although the Control Towns remained holdouts.

Everything Gray was describing sounded reasonable. At the moment they were glibly discussing the Dragon’s plan to provide tax incentives to compliant Towns. Mr. L certainly seemed to approve. Yet Kimmy could tell that Gray didn’t like the Dragon, even if Mr. L didn’t know Gray well enough to detect the undertone of scorn in their voice, the way they spoke too crisply. *What does Gray have against the Dragon?*

She wanted to ask, but then Gray finished their speech and thanked everyone still present—the teen had left, no doubt seeking a better study environment. “Catch you later,” Gray said to Kimmy, yawning. “I should get home before someone suggests I need a curfew.”



Frustrated, Kimmy went to bed early, waking once when Mari padded into the room. “Don’t mind me,” Mari murmured. “Looks like you’ve had a day. We can talk later.”

Yes, Kimmy thought miserably. She wasn’t sure Mari was the person she’d go to with her questions. Mari had made it clear that she didn’t approve of Gray, and Kimmy wasn’t optimistic that complaining about election season would go over well either. It annoyed Kimmy that Mari would rather be seen agreeing with everyone than indicate her own opinion. But she couldn’t point this fact out without starting a fight, so Kimmy mumbled a noncommittal response and closed her eyes.

Some hours later, she woke from uneasy dreams of merfolk sharing candy bars in a parody of a feast. Amber light sliced into the room from the window. Kimmy eased herself up and rubbed the sand from her eyes when she saw a shadow moving outside.

Kimmy got up and tiptoed over to the window. Someone was standing across the street, a dark figure in a dark coat. They raised something to their face—*binoculars?* Her breath caught, and she hastily edged away from the window. The stranger had been looking at her.

The stranger lowered their hand, then brought it up again. This time she couldn’t figure out what it was doing until a shadowy shape resembling a leaf fluttered down. Kimmy was certain it wasn’t a leaf but a candy bar wrapper.

“Kimmy!”

She almost bit through her tongue in alarm. Mari had woken and was blinking at her in confusion.

“Go back to sleep,” Kimmy said, hating how her voice shook. “I just—I just need to go for a run.”

“At this hour?” Mari sat up and reached for her shoes. “I’ll come with you. You’ll need company.” Her voice was soft, understanding.

It made Kimmy, unreasonably, want to slam the door on her even though she hadn’t done anything wrong.

“No! I mean, that’s sweet of you, but—”

“Come on,” Mari said, still good-humored despite the fact that it was 3 a.m. “You have the worst ideas, but what are roommates for? You’d do the same for me if I couldn’t sleep.”

Once that might have been true. They’d spent a lot of time together when they’d first become roommates. Kimmy missed those days, but she’d fallen into Gray’s orbit, and Mari had pulled away. Oh, she hadn’t been jealous exactly. She simply didn’t get Gray—never mind all the times Kimmy wasn’t sure she got Gray either.

The fact remained, however, that Mari wouldn’t understand the urge to investigate a mystery like this one. Mari would suggest something sensible, like waking one of the sentinels to report the incident. Then the adults would investigate, or fail to investigate, and Kimmy wouldn’t learn anything. They’d just tell her to concentrate on her studies and bringing her household participation scores back up.

Kimmy desperately needed to shed Mari so she could check on the stranger alone. Not wanting to miss her opportunity, Kimmy reached for the most hurtful thing she could think of. “What, are you low on points and that’s the only thing you can think of, even at this time of night?”

Mari’s entire face crumpled. “You know that’s not it,” she said. “I’m just worried that—”

“Save it.” By then Kimmy had yanked on her own shoes. She felt ridiculous venturing out in her pajamas, even under her jacket, but time was of the essence. “Don’t look for me.” Kimmy swept past Mari.

“Kimmy, I don’t think this is such a good—”

Kimmy slammed the door. Vindictive glee swept through her at the sight of Mari’s hurt face. After a lifetime of doing her best to get along with everyone, Kimmy was shocked by herself. A small voice in the back of her head told her that she was going to regret this.

Kimmy ran out of the bedroom and down the hall, crashing into the main door. Her hands shook so badly that it took her several tries to work the latch and open the door. At least she wouldn't have to explain herself to a sentinel at this hour, unless Mari reported her. *Which Mari might well do....* She'd better hurry.

The cold air hit Kimmy like a slap to the face. She stared into darkness interrupted by pools of yellow light, blinking back involuntary tears before she gathered her wits and sprinted toward the stranger. Except they were gone—or were they? She glimpsed the fluttering of a coat and more dark leaf shapes flickering near grass and clover. Distracted, she tripped over the curb and barely broke the fall with her hands.

For several moments, Kimmy sobbed at the jolt of pain in her ankle, the scrapes on her palms and knees. Then she dragged herself to her feet and limped onto the sidewalk.

Kimmy reached the spot where the stranger had been standing. It was littered with candy bar wrappers. She picked one up, nose wrinkling at the sickly sweet smell. She swiped her phone on as a source of illumination.

The wrapper said CHOCOLATE DREAMZ.

Kimmy's stomach clenched. She wasn't going to eat chocolate for the rest of the year.

She jabbed at her phone to see if she could tag this site for cleanup. The hairs prickled on the back of her neck as her ears caught a slight click, like metal on metal.

"Kimberly Chang," said a low voice. It cut her like glass: so smooth that one didn't realize one had started bleeding until after the fact. "That's not going to work."

Slowly, Kimmy lifted her head and stared at the stranger, who was toying with a fully wrapped candy bar.

"I'm not part of your Town," the stranger said, gesturing with the candy bar. "I don't care about points for going on walks, or getting along with my coworkers, or any of the asinine things that you people

occupy yourselves with. My Game is for higher stakes. Go back to bed, Kimberly, and apologize to your roommate."

"Why does *your* Game involve sneaking around at this hour?" Kimmy demanded. She couldn't imagine anyone encouraging this kind of behavior, unless...

The stranger grinned at her. "I'm going to report you. Keeping an eye on certain disruptive individuals, of course. There's always a market for blackmail material."

Her face went hot. She hadn't kicked up that much of a fuss, had she? Or were they referring to Gray? "I'm not—"

"Not what? Disruptive?" The stranger gestured dismissively. "Ask your household elders what they think of your behavior. The way you breeze past your dailies every morning and pay more attention to that nosy friend of yours than to your roommate or housemates. *And* you haven't been jogging regularly—not with your exercise group, anyway. Your points have been slipping, and it will reflect on your household's reputation and monetary allotment. What are you going to do about that?"

Although Kimmy was used to the computers and her community monitoring everything she did, it bothered her to have a complete stranger recite her misdeeds. She raised her phone to snap a picture of the stranger, so she could tell the household elders about them later.

Kimmy's phone blinked once, brightly, then powered itself off. She gaped at it. "What—"

"Sorry about that," the stranger said unapologetically. "In my world, I lose points for leaving a record of my passage."

"Then why talk to me at all?" she demanded. After all, the stranger could have hightailed it before Kimmy got close.

She couldn't help being intrigued by this offhand detail. It reminded her of playing an assassin in the live-action games. Certainly it sounded more fun than jogging and faking enthusiasm for vegetables.

"Because you *don't* listen to the dailies, and that means you *might* be

useful someday,” the stranger said, which made no sense after they’d upbraided her. “You should pay more attention, the way your friend Gray does.” They grinned. “Gray’s already playing my Game, they just don’t realize it yet. If you’re going to be next, you should jump in with your eyes open.” The stranger began striding away.

“Wait,” Kimmy called out. *What does Gray have to do with this? And why do the dailies matter?*

She started after them, but they had already made it to a—a car? A car, sleek and black, looking more expensive than anything she’d seen in the neighborhood. It didn’t have a license plate, either. Dumbfounded, Kimmy watched as it drove off.



Mari didn’t speak to Kimmy the next morning, despite Kimmy’s attempt to apologize. Mari was normally forgiving, but even her tolerance had limits. *She’ll come around*, Kimmy told herself. Kimmy wasn’t sure how much she cared anymore, though. If her own roommate was going to treat her like the enemy, why bother trying to make nice?

Kimmy paid closer attention to her dailies this time. Today’s took the form of an interview with the four leading candidates, including the Dragon. The status of Control Towns was a much bigger issue than she’d realized. She ran through key quotes from the candidates:

Dr. Nguyen: *The importance of communities’ right of self-determination is paramount and must be preserved at all costs despite the possibility of inequitable health outcomes.* Kimmy made a face at the way he was clearly trying to impress his listeners with fancy intellectual talk.

Candidate James, whom Kimmy remembered as the dark horse: *The Game is anti-American! The true heart of the nation lies in the so-called Control Towns. Vote James to get rid of government interference!*

Candidate Lopez: *Now that we’ve proven that the Game makes everyone healthier, it’s time to phase out the Control Towns. We don’t need to keep relics of*

the old days. This is a step we should have undertaken years ago.

And at last, Miz Monde, the Dragon: *I’ve heard a lot of complicated talk about the Control Towns, but it boils down to something simple. We’re meant to be one nation united in the goal of preserving our planet. The Control Towns stand in defiance of this goal. It’s that simple.*

Kimmy was used to dailies lasting roughly fifteen minutes. But today, she received a follow-up message after the daily: “I’m so glad you’re taking an interest,” the Dragon said. She winked.

Shaken, Kimmy skipped school, not even feigning sickness. It was odd. For one thing, the dailies were organized so that every candidate received equal time. Customizing the message to each recipient was standard, but she’d never received anything like this before. Did Gray? *Is that why they’re so interested in the Dragon, even if they don’t support her?*

To her shame, she could see why the Dragon’s personal interest could be seductive. Being treated like an independent adult—like someone whose opinions mattered—made her breathless with excitement. She bet Gray felt the same way.

Maybe that was why Gray had drifted away from the Game, with its hollow promises, and into this other world with its own stakes.

Today the household scoreboard showed that they were dead average at keeping their streets and yard clean. She checked the neighborhood task list: emptying the garbage, checking in on disabled neighbors, preparing healthy snacks, showing up to work or class on time, the usual. The scoreboard cycled through other displays. Besides the aggregate health indicators, it tracked productivity both at work and in school, sociability, club activities like scrapbooking or basketball, and live-action games. No mention of the wrappers: neither on the tab for pending tasks nor the list of completed tasks. It was as if they didn’t exist at all.

Kimmy hurried out the door without looking back, despite the sentinel hollering after her. At this hour, the people she passed were on

the way to school or to work. Many of them gave her sideways glances since she ought to head to class, and yet she was walking in the wrong direction. Some snapped photos, bad news for her; the instant they uploaded to the system, everyone would know where she was. The question was, would anyone in her household pursue her?

Kimmy hastened to the place in the park where Gray had shown her the wrappers. No one had cleaned them up or tagged them for cleanup, just as before. By now the wind had strewn them about so the mess had spread, a fitting metaphor for her life at present.

Out of stubbornness, Kimmy perched on one of the nearby benches, then tagged the site not only for cleanup but also for neighborhood watch. After all, if random unfriendly strangers were wandering through, littering might not be the worst thing they were up to. The Town had a low crime rate, but that was dependent on everyone staying vigilant. Littering was a low-priority tag. Maybe escalating the tag would get someone's attention. Even if most folks were at school or work, someone might add it to their to-do list, and she should see that.

Instead, the tag vanished. *Again.*

Kimmy's mouth went dry. She could pick up the candy bar wrappers, points or no points, but then the evidence would be gone. Despite what her eyes told her, she was starting to doubt the wrappers were really there based on the way the Game software kept responding to her tags.

Although she'd get grief for cutting class, Kimmy headed home. Uncle Charles, who was old enough to be her grandfather, was on sentinel. "Bad day?" he asked, face crinkled in concern.

"Uncle," she said, "is Gran Lesley at home? I need to talk to them in private."

Charles frowned at her. "You need someone to walk you to the clinic?"

"It's not that kind of trouble!" If only her problems could be fixed by a chat, however mortifying, with a doctor or counselor. The households kept changing how they addressed that kind of checkup. On the one hand, they wanted to encourage people to get health care,

especially if it later prevented bigger problems; but they also wanted to avoid encouraging people to seek expensive procedures when they weren't necessary. Still, that didn't stop people from seeking unlicensed medical care because they didn't want everyone knowing about their problems. Poor health scores could affect the household standings, which Kimmy had always thought unfair. It wasn't as though people got sick on purpose.

His eyes narrowed. "It's Gray, isn't it?"

"I think they're in trouble," Kimmy said. She was so relieved that someone cared about Gray that she answered before thinking the consequences through. "Maybe to do with the elections."

Uncle Charles clucked, "Come inside, then."

Kimmy did so. Uncle fired off a text, and another elder came to take his place as sentinel. Kimmy and Uncle Charles found Gran Lesley helping a new mother with her little. Gran looked up, their expression impatient.

"Let me clean up first," Kimmy blurted out, aware of how sweaty she was. "I'm not fit to be around a baby that small. I'll get them sick."

Gran started to chastise her for not planning ahead, to say nothing of running around in her pajamas. Kimmy bolted to her bedroom. There she came to a dead stop: Mari. She looked Kimmy up and down; Kimmy winced.

"We need to talk," Mari said quietly. "I don't want to take this to the house elders."

This was a complication Kimmy didn't need. "They already called



me in to talk to them,” she said, which wasn’t entirely a lie.

“Oh,” Mari said. She bit her lip. “I’m—I’m sorry. I didn’t think—”

As Mari spilled out her concerns, Kimmy rummaged in her dresser for fresh clothes. Her fingers closed on a blank sheet of paper, and she frowned. *Is someone pranking me?* Then she flipped it over, careful to shield view of the paper from Mari with her body, and her heart almost seized. It was Gray’s handwriting:

THE DRAGON’S BEHIND EVERYTHING.

She wondered when Gray had snuck into her room. Everyone knew Kimmy and Gray were friends. It wouldn’t have been difficult for them to come up with some pretext like picking up homework. While the cameras tracked Gray’s movements, Gray would take advantage of their false sense of security. Kimmy thrust the note into her pocket.

“Kimmy?” a voice called. It was Uncle Charles. “Gran’s ready for you.”

“She’s in here,” Mari called out, helpful as ever.

“I’ll be right there. I’m headed to the shower right now,” Kimmy shouted back. With Mari right here, Kimmy needed an exit strategy.

She had to get to Gray and learn what they knew. Her instincts screamed at her to run. Instead, she said, “Listen, I’m sorry about last night—”

“Don’t worry about it,” Mari said, gracious in victory. “Go get your shower.”

Kimmy forced herself to walk at a normal pace to the bathroom. How had her life spiraled out of control like this? Sure, she’d been restless, impatient with the strictures of the Town’s society, but she hadn’t expected to find herself at odds with her community.

Yet, if she admitted it to herself, part of her thrilled at breaking loose from the stupid rules she’d faked adherence to all her life.

After closing the door, she turned on the shower, not bothering with hot water—cold would do. She just needed to make it sound like she was in there.

Kimmy shed her pajamas and wadded them up out of sight in the closet, then pulled her fresh clothes, socks, and shoes back on. Making sure the coast was clear, Kimmy slipped out of the bathroom, shutting the door behind her as quietly as possible. She almost cursed when a ponytailed little rounded the corner and careened into her.

“It’s okay,” Kimmy whispered, crouching down so as not to spook them. “I’m playing hide-and-seek. Don’t tell anyone you saw me.”

The little nodded, wide-eyed. Kimmy relaxed. Just as she edged toward the door and freedom, however, she heard them shout gleefully, “SHE’S HERE, KIMMY’S HERE, COME GET HER!”

Kimmy gave up on stealth and bolted. Fortunately, her longer legs gave her an advantage. Behind her, she heard the little’s giggles.

The sentinel started to her feet as Kimmy ran by, but she shook off the older woman with ease. Kimmy kept up the sprint as long as she could, letting her feet choose the way, until her lungs burned and tears stung her eyes, only to wind up at Gray’s favorite tree.

Is it too obvious? Will the household send out an alert to bring me back home? Someone might seek her here. A candy bar wrapper had stuck to her shoe, but she was too busy wheezing, doubled over, to peel it off.

After she had regained her breath, she straightened and ran her fingers over the tree’s bark. *Wait a second*—someone had carved letters into the bark. She remembered Gray defacing the trunk earlier. It couldn’t be a coincidence.

The graffiti read: OLD TOWN DEAD BRIDGE.

Had Gray thought that leaving messages on trees was safer than texting? Then she remembered that the household monitored texts. Besides, if everyone kept avoiding the candy bar wrappers, people might be less likely to investigate a site like this.

Kimmy didn’t have a knife on her, but she did have keys for her

house even though it was rarely locked. The keys served more as a symbol that she belonged to the household. Silently apologizing to the tree, Kimmy scratched over Gray's graffiti until the text could no longer be read.



Although Kimmy wanted to head directly to the Old Town Dead Bridge, she checked Gray's household first, just to be thorough. A pair of adults was arriving early from work. She avoided meeting their eyes. It was clear from their expressions that they recognized her as Gray's friend, and that they didn't have a high opinion of Gray, or of her.

"Gray?" the sentinel said after Kimmy made herself understood. She'd always been clumsier at sign language than she liked, and this elder was partly deaf. "Shame about the kid. The authorities will look after them."

Kimmy thanked the sentinel and walked away before he could spot the panic in her expression.

With any luck, Gray had skipped out before the household elders could send them to live with the socially uncooperative and their caretakers. Kimmy didn't think Gray was ill, but she wasn't confident of Gray's ability to convince folks otherwise. She had to find Gray and persuade them to act properly, at least long enough so their household's score could recover.

Kimmy took the bus to Old Town. Despite its proximity, it was technically a Control Town. A number of people in the Town held jobs there, mainly in construction, urban design, and environmental reclamation. She remembered the Dead Bridge to which she was headed, which was missing an entire segment from the middle. It had been damaged in a tornado years ago and was still being rebuilt.

Most of the other passengers kept to themselves. One dour woman

eyed Kimmy sidelong, then frowned at her phone. Was Kimmy the subject of an alert? It was a relief when she reached her stop and could leave the strangers behind.

Kimmy walked at a brisk pace toward the bridge Gray had indicated. The whole place felt cold. The few gardens she spotted were choked by weeds, making the dismal streets and gray buildings even uglier. Far from neighborly, people scowled and ignored one another. Water fountains were few and far between. None of this would have been tolerated in the Town that Kimmy inhabited.

Surely the people who lived here didn't want to continue living like this. Yet, if the dailies were to be believed, a significant number of Control Townies wanted to maintain their way of life. She wondered if Control Townies put up with sentinels. Only a few people sat on the porches, and one of them had already gotten most of the way through a six-pack. She doubted he was paying attention to the street. The thought of freedom from constant surveillance left her giddy with possibility.

At last she reached the bridge. It overlooked a small river. Although the water levels were low this time of year, the safety railings were new. But they wouldn't stop someone determined to jump...

Kimmy shivered. *Gray wouldn't—*

"Kimberly," a familiar voice said.

She whirled to face the stranger, whose name she'd never gotten. They stood in the shadow of a wall with faded graffiti. Gray accompanied them, hunched, not looking at her. They'd slung an unfamiliar green backpack over one shoulder. It was the exact hue of the Earth in the Dragon's campaign logo.

"Gray," Kimmy called out.

"Sorry I caught you up in all this," Gray said, their voice strained.

Kimmy smiled at them, trying to project reassurance despite the nervous thumping of her heartbeat. *Is the stranger threatening Gray?* Showing fear or regret was very unlike her friend.

The stranger held out a phone toward Gray. Gray accepted it.

“What’s the phone for?” Kimmy demanded.

“Answers,” Gray said. “Questions,” the stranger said simultaneously.

Gray fished in their pocket, then handed the stranger their old phone, the one with the purple case that matched Kimmy’s own. She didn’t know why it hurt her so. “You can’t just give it away,” Kimmy said, “that’s—”

“Don’t need it where I’m going,” Gray said.

Kimmy didn’t understand.

“I should say goodbye to my household elders, though,” they added.

Kimmy’s panic crescendoed. Where was Gray headed, and why wasn’t she included?

“I can drive you,” the stranger said.

“No,” Kimmy said firmly. She wanted a chance to question Gray without the stranger listening in.

The stranger lifted an eyebrow at Gray. Gray nodded. Kimmy suppressed an irrational surge of jealousy.



On the bus ride home, Kimmy’s attempts to talk to Gray were met by silence and a discreet, disapproving glance toward the other bus riders. She got the message: they couldn’t afford to be overheard by strangers.

She walked Gray to their household. The sentinel stopped them and fired off a report. “I’m sorry,” she said. “You’ve been evicted.”

That fast? Without a hearing, or...?

“Gotta pick up my stuff,” Gray was unfazed. “Unless you want it.” They grinned like a predator at the sentinel.

“No,” the sentinel said after half a beat. “Go ahead.”

Kimmy followed Gray in, whispering, “You’re going away? For good?” She ached to join them. The prospect simultaneously terrified her and excited her.

“Just watch,” Gray said in a maddeningly normal voice. They

continued to the common room, where several people were passing around a vegetable tray and others were playing cards.

Several people eyed Gray and Kimmy uncertainly. A little stared at Gray and asked in a piercing voice, “What are they still doing here?”

Gray unzipped the green backpack and flung a cornucopia’s worth of candy bars onto the floor, all of them CHOCOLATE DREAMZ. Kimmy gagged at the whiff of chocolate, wrinkling her nose at the haze of caramel and artificial flavors. The room went dead silent.

“You can’t do that!” Kimmy said to Gray. “They’ll never take you back if you—”

“Too late for that,” Gray said, their mouth twisting. “You want one? There’s plenty.”

Kimmy choked back a hysterical laugh. Suddenly she was tempted to grab a fistful, to gorge on the chocolate without consequence.

People averted their eyes from the candy bars; they didn’t even take out their phones. It was as if they knew reporting Gray wouldn’t do any good.

“You’re sticking me with this mess?” Kimmy snapped. The tension was getting to her. She’d meant to say, *I’m not leaving you*, but it had come out wrong.

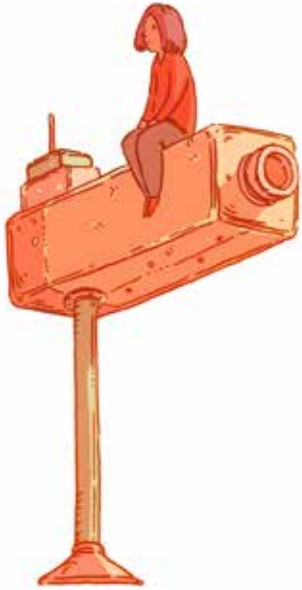
“I can’t exist in two places anymore,” Gray said. They then pivoted on their heel and walked out of the common room.

After a stunned second, Kimmy hurried after them. “Where are you going to live now?” she demanded.

They had reached the foyer with its scoreboard. The bar representing “community integration” had peaked because Gray was no longer counted as one of the household residents. The image blinked, then was replaced by the Dragon’s logo. Kimmy froze.

“The Dragon isn’t real,” Gray said in a hushed voice. “But she takes care of her own. *That’s* where I’m going.”

“What do you mean, she isn’t real?” Kimmy asked, to cover the spike of fear that went through her at the prospect of losing her one friend.



“She’s not a single person; she’s a bunch of elites harvesting our data so they can control the country. Politicians and the rich, tech wizards, shadow syndicates. She’s going to win this election, and I’d rather work for a winner.” Gray opened the door and headed outside.

It made a certain sick sense. She could even sympathize with Gray’s decision to cash in. Better a player than the played. She’d learned *that* in the Game, even if it wasn’t the lesson its designers had intended.

“The Dragon’s agent found out about some of the black-market meds from Old Town I’ve been peddling,” Gray said. “Stuff my household would frown upon, like a politician who struggles with depression or a teacher who doesn’t want anyone to know they get panic attacks or all the students who don’t want their households to know they’re on birth control. Or—”

“I get it,” Kimmy said. “But if the Dragon’s not a single person, then what about the dailies?”

“Some actor,” they said. Gray stopped a few yards from the sleek black car that waited outside. “Could be computer-generated. But the people puppeteering the Dragon study numbers to find out what we’ll buy and how we’ll vote. Money and power. We make it easy by telling them everything about us. Fads in food and clothing and entertainment. And they’re about to expand into the Control Towns, too.”

Kimmy’s expression must have conveyed her disbelief because Gray added, “I can prove it.” They pulled out the phone, dialed a contact,

then handed it over to her.

The phone rang once before someone picked up. A warm contralto answered. “Hello, Kimmy.” The Dragon’s voice.

Kimmy swallowed.

“Everything your friend has told you is true,” the Dragon said.

“You’re not real?”

“Are numbers real, Kimmy? Are ideals? I’m as real as you need me to be.”

“Am I—have you gotten me kicked out of my household, too?” She couldn’t imagine that the Dragon would share this information with her, then let her return to her life.

The Dragon ignored the question. “Just think of what I could do for the nation if you let me. I can always use more agents: people who know the truth, people like Gray and yourself.”

“You mean people who can’t go back home,” Kimmy said.

Kimmy’s eyes found Gray’s. Their guilty expression told her that they’d already heard this offer. Heard and accepted.

Who was she to criticize? Kimmy didn’t have many options left, having alienated herself from her household. She’d already drifted out of the safe, easy life the Town had offered her. At least if she went with the stranger, she would still have the friend she’d left it for.

Besides, she was tired of pretending to be another meek student. If she worked for the Dragon, she could learn how the system worked. Maybe slant the situation to her advantage.

She wanted to pull the strings, rather than being another puppet.

“Okay,” Kimmy said. “I’ll do it.”

“Excellent,” the Dragon said. “Get in the car.”

The connection went dead.

“Chocolate bar?” Gray asked as they both entered the car. “I saved you one.”

This time Kimmy accepted.



STORY 4

THE SWEET SPOT

ACHY OBEJAS

ILLUSTRATIONS BY CHRISTOPHER NIELSEN

Isa's wife, Louise, had startling green eyes like a cat, but no ordinary cat—a Persian breed, maybe named Soraya or Mahin, with one pie slice of her right iris a light copper color. Isa liked to think of its glint as the clapper of a bell, the unheard peal ringing over and over. She loved those eyes, even if they belonged to an ordinary Midwestern girl, a PhD in English from the University of Wisconsin at Madison, with lots of stories about a long-ago radicalism that were hard to reconcile with her laconic daily routine, a head of tight red coils, and skin so delicate and white that any pressure left a pink print for hours.

Most days, Louise would get up at six and put on water for her chai, then grind coffee for Isa. After she dressed for work—casual because she managed a bookstore, one of those storied independents whose regulars could recall legendary readings by Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Octavia Butler and that one night when somebody grabbed Emilio Insolera's crotch during a film screening—she would wake Isa because she'd undoubtedly rolled over on her good ear, shutting off any chance of hearing the alarm chirping on the nightstand and ignoring the vibrating watch on her wrist.

Isa and Louise had been together sixteen years, ten of those married, and in that time, they'd been both cheerful and strained but—more important—adaptable. Each move they made was determined by their kids. (They'd had one apiece with the same anonymous donor, both of whom turned out to have perfect hearing, but Mateo needed glasses at six and Emma had asthma. Isa would watch Emma struggle for air and have to hold herself back from administering mouth-to-mouth or ordering an oxygen mask from a website she'd discovered was the Amazon of emergency medical supplies.)

Because they'd never come up with a permanent or regular schedule, every morning they posed the same questions: Who was taking the kids to school? Who was making their lunches? Were they set on after-school pick-up? How much time would Isa have for work that day—she was a freelance content specialist—before she had to take Mateo to swim lessons? Who was going to the supermarket?

They knew they should have set a schedule for grocery shopping, but Isa was an inveterate improviser—something Louise had loved when they were dating but was considerably less charming after they started a daily life and had kids—and went only whenever the toilet paper ran low or when she had a hankering for plantains or rice pudding, leaving Louise to figure out what to do with the stale sourdough and what to combine with the wilting broccoli rabe. They shared a grocery list on an app that suggested meals based on their proposed purchases—each item was followed by a big *I* or *L* to delineate who'd added what—but Isa rarely inputted anything and, when she did, she exempted it from consideration for any possible meal plan.

Now that they'd decided to separate, they told friends *it didn't matter why*, but the truth was Louise had taken a lover: a stringy straight woman who seemed to have become a permanent fixture around the house from one day to the other. Every once in a while, the new lover would disappear with Louise for a few days of kid-free bliss, leaving Isa on her own to figure out three kid-friendly meals a day until Louise's tryst was over. Just how many times could they have mac and cheese? Did a whole salad bowl of popcorn count as a meal? The only promise she made Louise that she felt equipped to keep was avoiding fast food. Without Louise in the car, it could take her ten whole minutes to get her order straight, making the voice on the black box next to the brightly lit menu in the drive-thru repeat everything until Mateo and/or Emma got impatient and screamed: "Mami, he's asking if you want beef, chicken, or steak on your taco salad!" And then it would take just a beat before the three of them would shout in unison: "What's the difference between beef and

steak?” And then it’d start again with the black box screeching: “What?” And Mateo: “What do you mean *what?*” And so on.

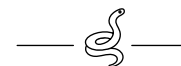
When it was Louise’s turn, she’d order a pizza now and again, but most of the time she’d immerse herself in something complicated she wanted them to appreciate and thank her for: pork loin in vodka sauce with authentic Azorean cheese or poached shrimp with Meyer lemon ginger coulis. The kids generally ate the rice or veggie side, then snuck a yogurt or some cereal. But the back and forth at the table—“The shrimp is mushy,” “That’s how it’s supposed to be, creamy,” “I said mushy, not creamy”—was always shrill and would feel like pinching on Isa’s eardrum, which made her queasy when she got up to clear the table. She’d poke her fingers in her ears, even though it accomplished nothing.



Isa’s hearing hadn’t gone all at once. It wasn’t as if she’d woken up one day and sound was absent from her world. Instead, it had faded. She began to notice she was asking people to repeat things more and more. Sometimes she’d respond so out of left field that Mateo and Emma would laugh, or cringe. One day, she realized she could no longer hear the garbage truck on its rounds outside her house. Watching TV without subtitles was like a tuba recital, and announcements on trains became waves of static. Most voices were muffled or slurred. Her own speech had slowed too, as if she were trying to role model volume and pacing for her interlocutors.

Louise had been patient. She’d repeat things over and over, first louder, then slowly, crisply pronouncing each syllable. Somewhere along the line, Isa had begun losing the kids—neither’s voice seemed to hit her frequencies. She’d ask Louise, “What did they say?” This had become the default—Louise as interpreter: “...what Mami means is...” But Isa didn’t need or want that kind of help, and this made her

feel left out, adrift on a nameless sea. Sometimes she’d stand in the middle of the kitchen, so stunned by her loss she couldn’t remember if the kids were fed, or if it was Tuesday and Emma was waiting for her to pick her up from softball, or if she’d left a candle lit somewhere.



Sometime in the spring of the previous year, Isa got up early one day and stumbled into the kitchen to find Louise and Esther bent over a recipe book, shoulders touching and mouths within inches of each other. Esther—or Esty as Louise liked to call her—was part of the parents’ pool that drove the kids to school during the year. She had a very large and comfortable vehicle, a van of sorts, that allowed the kids to watch TV and put their water bottles in individual cupholders. Esther was married to a man, but upon seeing them together, Isa felt a slight buzzing in her ears. They’d made a batch of bread pudding pancakes to surprise the kids, including Esther’s twin girls—both on the spectrum—who sat at the dining room table not talking or moving while Mateo sprawled across the floor and tied his shoes and Emma screamed from the bathroom that someone had used her hairbrush. As it turned out, all four kids found the bread pudding pancakes too sweet and gooey and pushed their plates away after the first bite. This didn’t disappoint Louise and Esther, who shrugged and laughed and scraped the goop into the garbage without offering Isa so much as a taste. Isa thought about asking how long Esther had been coming early to make breakfast with her, but they’d been married long enough that she knew she wouldn’t get a straight answer and decided to spare herself the irritation.

About a month later, they were invited to Esther’s husband’s birthday party, which threw Isa because—to her knowledge—neither she nor Louise had so much as laid eyes on the man. It was a potluck for which Louise made gluten-free panko-crust crab cakes (it turned

out Esther was both a pescatarian and gluten-free). To Isa's surprise, the totality of the guest list for the party was the husband and his parents, Esther and her parents, and Louise and her.

"What the hell are we doing here?" Isa whispered to her wife in the hallway as one exited the bathroom and the other entered. "Surely she's got friends who she's closer to than us. And doesn't he have *any* friends? This is so weird."

Louise shrugged. "I don't know," she said, but she was smiling, and her green eyes had that Soraya-Mahin glint, the clapper ringing with happiness.

If Isa had had to describe Esther's husband, she would have said he was pleasant enough, a good dad, as evidenced by the display of projects he had done with the girls, which were all over the house. Esther bragged about her boxing lessons in a way that suggested she had an undeservedly high opinion of herself and, as Esther spoke, Isa noticed her very long, manicured nails and considered how uncomfortable they might be inside a boxing glove. She found it comforting to imagine Esther's fingers curled, nails pinching her palms.



When Isa finally got an audiology test, the specialist—a guy named Teo—handed her a couple of sheets of paper with graphs in black and white that showed where her hearing began and ended with big yellow circles drawn with a highlighter.

"So what can we do?" Isa asked, not really wanting to examine the sheets too closely.

Teo looked at her, alarmed. "Once you lose hearing, you can't get it back," he said. "Didn't you read any of the materials we sent you?"

"You mean there's no Lasik for hearing?"

"No. Some people say certain kinds of chiropractic treatments help, mostly with tinnitus, hyperacusis, that kind of thing," he said,

but Isa must have looked despondent because his voice went up a register in an attempt to be cheery. "You know, they're doing all kinds of experiments these days. For the most part, they know what causes deafness, and they're working on regenerating the loss of hair cells in the cochlea. It won't be anytime soon, but they'll probably come up with Lasik for hearing in your lifetime."

In your lifetime wasn't soon enough for Isa, and as it turned out, Teo's assertion that the cause of hearing loss was well-known was only partly true. When he really got going about her particular case, it turned out hearing loss was a bit of a scientific mystery. No one really knew what was going on in her cochlea, that tiny snail embedded in the brain.

"It's too deep in your head to get a good X-ray or MRI," said Teo, "and if you cut into it, you'll go completely deaf."

"So I'm not going to get better..."

It wasn't a question, but Teo treated it as such: telling Isa about the wonders of today's hearing aids, how they're so precise you can hear a baby breathing in the next room, how she could pipe music right into her brain and control how much noise she was willing to tolerate. He showed her mics she could clip on friends to hear them better across from her at a noisy restaurant and how she could stream calls right into her ears. He said if her hearing loss got profound enough, she'd be eligible for a cochlear implant, and then she could retrain her brain to pick out the sound of needles falling on the floor, or a cat purring next door.

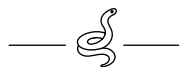
What he didn't mention was how financially prohibitive everything was: with most insurance companies—including Isa's—refusing to cover hearing aids, never mind the fancy mics and Bluetooth stuff, the cost of even the most rudimentary aids was in the thousands of dollars.

The particular ones Isa needed were so expensive, she had to accept another client to help pay for them, which meant she set herself up for a busy June in which she and Louise barely saw each other. She had to meet with the client and sometimes operate out of their office, which was about an hour from their house. Because they worked past regular

hours, she often came home well after dinner and sometimes even after the kids had gone to bed.

What she hadn't realized then was that Esther would be around so much as a result. She began taking Mateo and Emma to their summer camp to help on the mornings Isa was working so Louise wouldn't feel overwhelmed; in exchange, Louise would pick up her girls from their special ed camp in the afternoon. Isa would see the photos Louise posted on Instagram of Emma happily cuddling on the couch with them, the girls expressionless.

Sometime after that, Isa noticed Esther started spending the night. It was simply more convenient, especially if she was helping with dinner when Isa wasn't around. Isa would hear them laughing on the bed in the guest room when she got home, a sound like popcorn or fingers snapping. (Louise always woke up in their bed, which was no small comfort.) One time she spied them shoulder to shoulder again, their mouths within inches, while they watched *Beetlejuice*, Louise's laptop propped up on Esther's belly. Isa knew it was *Beetlejuice* only because of the reflection in the window. Otherwise, their voices came to her from very far away, like a conversation underwater.



When Isa first started using the hearing aids, the world seemed filtered through a TV controlled by an imprecise remote. It took a while to figure out how to find the right volume: at first, she thought loud was what she wanted, but then she realized loud also meant all kinds of aural debris came thundering through too, like ambulances on the highway. Instinctively, she went to cover her ears until she remembered the app on her phone that let her turn down the sound. At work meetings, she realized how much she'd been missing: suddenly everyone thought she was quick-witted and sharp, and she was.

But a few weeks after starting to use the hearing aids, Isa noticed she was still relying on other cues. She heard better with her glasses on, that was certain, and she was still expending huge amounts of energy trying to interpret facial expressions and body language, grabbing onto keywords, and leaning on Louise. "What did she say?" had become a mantra of sorts, with Louise patiently repeating, rephrasing the world. (Later, much, much later, Louise would confess that though she was glad to help, the dependency had begun to make her feel pressured and responsible in ways that also made her uneasy.)

Isa complained to Teo during one of their sessions to adjust her hearing aids, but he got frustrated with her. "You have to learn to hear with these. It's not the same thing," he said. "You want everything to be the same, to locate sound perfectly, but you're going to have to work at it, to listen differently, to mark and measure space and find your sweet spot."

But she was so frustrated. She signed up for a lip-reading class hoping to connect with others in her situation, but only three others enrolled: a married couple and a teenager who came with a different relative or friend to each class. Isa learned all about phonemes and visemes and realized that, even though she was an impatient and not especially good student, she was still learning, and that this new skill enhanced her "hearing" beyond what she might have imagined.

She also considered taking ASL but realized she didn't know any other Deaf people. Would she eventually have to find a Deaf happy hour or meet-up? She looked at her calendar skeptically; she was already so busy, so overtaxed. Then she looked long and hard at the listing for family ASL classes at the community center, in case of future profound hearing loss. When would that come? Maybe never, and they'd just waste their time learning ASL... If she could still hear, however hampered, and they—not just her but the whole family—didn't know any Deaf people, would ASL make sense at all?

Isa remembered when Mateo was born, how she and Louise

promised to speak to him in Spanish, to raise him as a bilingual child. And at first, they were both very diligent: “*Nariz*,” Louise would say, pointing at his nose, and Isa would read books to him. But the truth was that Isa and Louise’s relationship existed in English; they’d never spoken to each other in Spanish. It didn’t come naturally, and neither of them had the discipline to work at making the switch. As a result, Mateo and Emma could greet Isa’s family in Spanish but nothing more.

Emma would be great at ASL, with her theatricality, but Mateo? His vision was so poor, and he was so shy. Isa read the class description again. Maybe someday, she thought, she’d corral them into it.

If it turned out she needed it.



It was sometime in November, right before Thanksgiving, when Louise told Isa about Esther. That is, when she finally admitted, after months of evasion, that she and Esther were lovers. Louise asked for a divorce, which didn’t strike Isa as a surprise, but she resisted anyway. She couldn’t imagine how her story would end without Louise and those Soraya-Mahin green eyes, those bells, the way everything seemed to work out no matter their lack of planning and schedules. More significantly, though, Isa knew they’d never argue about custody. She couldn’t fathom an existence in which the kids weren’t always present. What would she do on the days and nights Louise had them? The silence that would fill the house seemed greater than anything she’d ever feared.

“I want a life that’s more intentional,” Louise said.

“We can do that,” Isa responded. The ringing in her ears was back, now like an insistent telephone. “We can have that.”

I will do anything, Isa thought, suddenly aware of every one of Emma’s photo booth strips on the fridge and Mateo’s shoes scattered just off the front door, ready for her to trip on them in the middle of the

night. Would they split the strips, half staying, the other half pinned to Louise’s new fridge? Did Mateo have enough shoes for two places and this suddenly precious chaos by the front door? Isa wanted each and every piece to stay where it was.

Louise stroked her arm. “No, we can’t,” she said with a sad smile.

“Of course we can,” Isa insisted. “What, you think I can’t learn new ways of doing things?”

“You *are* learning new ways of doing things,” Louise said. “I’m really proud of you, the way you’re handling your hearing loss.”

“See?” It was all she could do to not yank off her hearing aids, stick her fingers in her ears and try to turn off the ringing. She knew stress just made things worse, but she couldn’t avoid it.

Louise shook her head and whispered: “No, baby, not this time.”

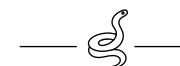
“But I can, I mean, unless there’s someone else”—though of course! *Of course* Isa knew there was someone else—knew who it was—could probably diagram their love story if the occasion arose—but then, just as she stood on the edge of the cliff that meant her life as she knew it was over, there was nothing she wanted more than to be wrong, to be so very wrong. “I mean, if this is really about that, then that would be another story.”

“There is someone else,” said Louise, her voice such a wisp Isa had to lip read her.

“There *is*? Who?” *But she knew.*

“Esty. Esther,” Louise clarified, in case she hadn’t heard right.

Esty, Isa thought in surrender as she felt herself falling and falling, endlessly falling—*of course Esty.*



The truth was, she’d guessed it back in August when Louise casually mentioned that besides all the mornings and evenings at their house, there was also now a routine of afternoons in the park with the kids.

“Doesn’t she work?” Isa asked. “I thought she worked.”

“She does,” Louise said, that copper glinting full tilt, the silent bell ringing. “She’s a writer.”

“When does she write?

Is she suffering writer’s block or something?”

Isa asked.

“No, actually, she’s writing like mad...she...she says I inspire her.”

“You inspire her?” Isa couldn’t have explained why she found that so ludicrous, but she did, and she laughed, which she realized immediately had hurt Louise’s feelings.

“That’s funny to you, huh?”

“Yeah...I mean, no, of course not, but ‘inspire,’ it’s just such an odd word. I thought maybe I didn’t hear you right.”

That same night, Louise told her that Esther would sometimes sit by her on the playground and stare at her, and that the stares made her self-conscious.

“Then tell her to stop, for Christ’s sake,” Isa said, exasperated. She didn’t want to hear this.

“But, the thing is, I like it too,” Louise confessed. “I don’t think anyone’s ever looked at me, ever seen me, quite like that before.”

“Really?” Isa asked. The very fact that Louise was telling her this—confiding in her like a friend and not a lover—was a revelation she didn’t want to acknowledge. She would ride this out, she told herself. She would play along. They’d been together a long time, and there’d been crushes before, close calls, vaguely threatening situations, and



Isa knew if she refused to acknowledge them, if she refused to name them, that Louise would be too cowardly to confess, and they’d both be relieved when the storm passed and the little ship that was their relationship righted itself on its own.

“She says I’m luminous.”

“She said this at the playground?”

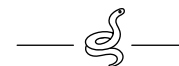
“Yes, she said she thought so from the minute she first saw me.”

“When was that?”

“Apparently about a year ago, at the school talent show. Well, before the show, when I was talking to Mateo by the side of the stage, trying to give him confidence about his new glasses. She said there was a light coming off my face as if I were the moon itself.”

“Is there something I need to worry about here?” Her hand was trembling, and she shoved it in her pants pocket.

“No, no, of course not...” Louise said sadly. “You know I’d never do anything to threaten our family.”



But Isa was threatened. She couldn’t come home without running into Esther or some remnant of Esther: her laundry in the washer, her herring loaf in the fridge, Emma trying to make her daughters smile or Mateo being irritated by them, Esther herself washing Louise’s car in the driveway or reading her poetry out on the deck surrounded by an arch of carefully arranged tiki torches. Staring at Esther’s mouth, Isa could make out exactly what she was reading: “Had we but world enough and time...”

“Is it possible we could get some family time, or some you and me time, soon?” Isa asked. She’d come to regret not signing up for the ASL classes, if for no other reason than she’d have had Louise and the kids to herself for those sixty minutes once a week.

Louise seemed confused. “This *is* family time,” she said, apparently

counting Esther and her girls doing homework with Mateo and Emma at the dining room table as part of their nucleus. “Do you want to do something just with me? Is that what you’re asking?”

“Yes, I’d like a date with my wife. Is that okay?”

“Of course,” Louise said, popping open the calendar on her phone.

“Doesn’t her husband ever want to spend time with her?”

“He does.”

“When?”

“I don’t know...”

“Don’t you wonder?”

“No, I’m just happy she has time for me.”

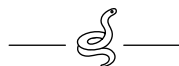
“She seems to *only* have time for you.”

“You’re being so unfair. She’s here to help because you’re not.”

“I’m not because, on top of everything else I’m financially responsible for, I have to work even more to pay for the world’s most expensive hearing aids and all my Deaf classes.”

“Yes, and I’m trying to support you in that, and she’s trying to support me in supporting you.”

Had she heard her correctly? In that instant, Louise’s cellphone screen faded to black, taking the calendar back into the void.



There was so much commotion, so much activity at the house during the day, that Isa had found it impossible to work, even when she locked the door to her attic office and pulled off the hearing aids. In order to get things done, she started going to bed at the same time as the kids and getting up at four or five in the morning, buying a few hours of stillness to do her creative work. She’d do the banking and answer emails later, when it didn’t matter how loud it got when Mateo had a meltdown because Esther’s girls had borrowed his comic books without permission.

It made sense that, since she was up before everybody else, she’d just go ahead and pack their lunch when she took a break to refill her coffee mug. One day, as she was placing a bag of crunchy seaweed in a lunchbox, Isa looked up and saw a drowsy Mateo rubbing his eyes with his fists.

“*Buenos días*, Mateo,” she said. He mumbled something back. “What are you doing up so early?”

He looked over at his lunchbox. “Is that seaweed?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t like seaweed.”

“Since when?”

“Since Esty started packing red hot cheese puffs instead.” He reached in the pantry to pull out a bag but came up empty-handed. “Oh man, we’re out of them. Can you please get more, Mami? I really like them.”

When Isa opened the shared grocery app to add the cheese puffs, she noticed the list now included an inordinate amount of seafood as well as gluten-free bread and crackers. Then she realized Louise had not merely included things for Esther on their family grocery list, but that Louise had added Esther herself—there was a big *E* after each of the new items.



Then, one night in early December, Isa came home and found the house unusually quiet. Esther's van was nowhere in sight—she'd even driven around the block to make sure. She suddenly realized Esther hadn't been as much of a presence lately. Emma had even told her she missed her, which Isa had pretended she hadn't heard.

When she unlocked the door, she found the kids already in bed and Louise at the dining room table nursing a cup of tea. Isa walked over and dropped her bag, then pulled up a chair and sat. Louise poured her a cup and added agave, the way Isa liked.

"What happened?" Isa asked.

"Esther came by for a bit, to talk, but it didn't go great."

Isa pulled out her phone and went straight to the app for her hearing aids, turning on the noise reduction and focusing the sensors on the area right in front of her, where Louise was sitting.

"It's crazy, isn't it?" Louise's voice sounded fuller to Isa now, though it had an odd electronic tinge.

"What part?"

"All of it," said Louise with a shrug. "I think about leaving all the time, you know, I do, and then I think, where would I go if she doesn't make the same move?"

"I thought the whole idea was that you'd go together."

"Well, I don't think her husband would like that very much."

"Wait—she's not leaving her husband but you're going to divorce me? You're going to divorce me even though I need you but she's staying with the husband she never sees anyway?"

"I don't know. I don't know!" Then Louise said something else but it got lost when she buried her head in her hands.

"What? Can you repeat that, please?"

"Forget it."

"C'mon, don't do this. I just didn't hear you. Don't punish me for not hearing you."

The husband, it turned out, had recalled Esther, not completely, but enough to change the way the story had been going.

Isa sighed.

"I love our family, Isa, I do. I love the kids, I love you, but I think, is that enough? I know you'll be fine, better than fine. You just have to stop thinking you can't go at it alone."

"I will, but I won't be fine. Don't say that."

"You will be, and so will the kids."

"They'll wind up in therapy. And aren't we sharing custody?"

"Of course we're sharing custody. And anyway, everybody winds up in therapy. At least they'll have a common problem."

"I would like to spare them therapy. They have a right to not have to go to therapy, to live a life in which therapy isn't necessary. They have a right to not have to wonder why Esther is here all the time."

"They don't wonder, Isa. They know. My God, don't you think they know? Esty takes them everywhere, helps with homework, does their laundry. Where the fuck have you been? And I have rights too, you know, regardless of the kids, like to happiness."

"I didn't know you were unhappy!" Isa exclaimed, though all she could think about was *regardless* of the kids. What the hell?

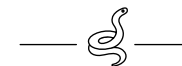
"I know!" Louise shouted, exasperated. "That's my whole damn point. You haven't known anything about me in ages. Do you know what kind of tea I drink, Isa?"

Isa glanced down at her cup. "Green tea?"

"That's what I'm having now, but do you know what I drink in the morning?"

"Earl Grey with a little bit of low-fat milk and brown sugar."

"Not for years. I drink chai. And that, my dear sweet Isa, is my point."



Isa realized that when she dreamed, she now visualized her deaf self. She wore her hearing aids and heard everything pure and clear: the drone of a plane in the sky, the different parts of a sneeze, the doorbell vibrating. In her dreams, she had her own sign language, and she spoke it with ease: bending into the phrases, her eyes widening or fluttering, her mouth twisting for emphasis as her shoulders slipped back. It was like she was talking while dancing to an invisible hula hoop—using her whole body, her knees, her pelvis.

In these visions, the kids wore hearing aids too, and Mateo would offer her fun facts about hearing: “Snakes have no ears,” he’d explain, hula hooping too as he talked and signed, “but they can pick up vibrations because they still have some *vestigial* ear parts connected to the jawbone.” Isa knew he loved pronouncing new words. His hands were flying all over the place. “Did you know they can’t hear themselves hissing?”

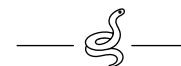
Could she hear herself? Isa checked, clicking her tongue real fast, rolling her *Rs* in exaggerated fashion.

The hissing, Mateo said, was just to warn others. And then he hissed, and Emma hissed, and all three of them hissed, but Louise—who’d been there all along tying shoelaces and washing behind their ears and slapping pieces of bread together into sandwiches—suddenly covered her



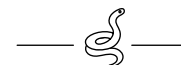
ears. Isa couldn’t tell if she was wearing hearing aids too. Suddenly Louise dropped down between the three of them, crossing her legs as if she were about to meditate, and began to sob.

The hissing, Isa realized, sounded like Esther’s name.



The relationship with Louise, like Isa’s hearing, hadn’t faded all at once either. At one point, it had seemed they’d be together forever, and that felt exhilarating. Even after the rush dissipated, there were still so many ways they connected that seemed golden; if anything, Isa had become more grateful over the years. She believed in her soul that they saw each other’s flaws, each crack and fissure, and that their love filled them with the same promise: *I see you, all of you, all the things you don’t want the world to know. I see what you’re ashamed of, what terrifies you, and I still choose you.*

And then, somewhere along the line, it happened, like a slow-moving desert wind. They began to turn their backs in bed, to run out of things to talk about, to repeat the same stories. Their days became filled with updates on work and scheduling, reports on the kids, and negotiations for playdates, summer camps, laundry, and nights out with friends. The glint in Louise’s eye dimmed.



She would get used to it, Isa told herself: she would compensate, she would learn to live unable to locate sound, and she would figure out how to decipher what the kids were saying without Louise interpreting. If necessary, she’d make them say it thirteen times or write it down or she’d clip a mic on them. She would go to a Deaf meet-up, she’d go to therapy, she’d try experimental treatments, she would meditate and give up salt. She’d learn to schedule: grocery trips but also vacations

with the kids when it was her turn. She'd learn to pick them up at Louise and Esther's new place—because she knew that's how Louise would move out, with someplace to go and Esther to welcome her, and she, Isa, would have to contend not just with not having her kids all the time but with the fact that Esther would be weighing in even more than she already did, that Emma and Mateo had already been lulled into accepting her and that when the family portrait was taken, it would be her, Isa, standing alone on the margins while the six of them filled the frame. Isa would love them more each time she saw them and cry less each time they were with Louise and Esther and away from her. She would accept Esther. She would come to accept her so profoundly that, many years into the future, when Louise began to waver, she would feel sorry for Esther, and for the kids, who'd grown to love her and rely on her.



One lonely night after Louise and the kids had gone to bed and Isa was watching a movie on her iPad on the couch, she felt the buzz of the doorbell and quickly glanced at her watch: it was almost midnight. She clambered up off the couch and peered through the peephole, which framed Esther, soaking wet.

"What are you doing here at this hour?" Isa asked as she opened the door and gestured for her to come in.

Esther ran her hands through her dripping hair. "Are they all asleep?"

"Yes, of course they're asleep. Don't you know what time it is?"

Esther nodded and bit her lip. "Listen...can you hear me all right?"

"Yes, perfectly."

They were mirroring each other, each in a semi-crouch anticipating the other's jab.

"I know you know what's going on."

"Everybody knows what's going on."

"Well, no...and that's why I'm here."

"What are you talking about?" Isa scrunched up her face.

"Look, listen...I love Louise and your kids..."

"Wait, what is this? What are you doing?"

"I'm trying to explain something to you."

"I don't want to hear anything from you."

"Well, you have to. You have to understand my side of the story," Esther said as she reached across Isa's chest and pulled her up to her by the opposite shoulder.

Isa tried to shake her off, but Esther proved surprisingly strong.

"I just want you to know she's the love of my life but..."

"Stop! Stop!" Isa said, struggling to free herself and reaching up to cover her ears.

"No, listen, it doesn't matter."

As they jostled at the front door, Isa heard Louise stirring upstairs.

"Stop!" Isa said, one hand cupping Esther's mouth while the other grabbed the back of her neck. Her ears were ringing, a loud clanging song coming from somewhere deep in her cranium. "Just shut up, shut up," she told Esther, "and go, go, get outta here."



It hit Isa all at once. Somehow she'd gotten the idea to keep their stories separate: hers and Louise's from Louise and Esther's. And the kids. She had been treating each as a separate entity, with its own pace, its own light, its own gravity. But now, as she stepped out of the house with car keys in hand, each story mapped onto the other, the pages rustling as she slammed the car door and turned on her GPS. She thought: *Today I had yogurt with pistachios and honey for breakfast, and Louise took a long hot shower that set off the smoke alarm in the hallway and nearly shredded my ears, and Esther came to stand before me.* She thought: *Today I walked and read and played around on my phone, and Louise went for a run,*

and Esther cut the stalks from the flowers Louise sent her and put them in a vase. She thought: *I wiped the kitchen counters and Louise swept the garage floor and Esther wrote six new poems.* She remembered Emma and the twins on the couch, and Mateo barely glancing at them, their presence as common at the house now as Isa herself.

It was all related, connected, linked: her love for Louise, Louise's love for Esther, Esther's love, the children sharing food, assigning themselves seats in Esther's van.



As she drove through the thickening rain, Isa turned her head, scanning from one side of her windshield to the other, because she could barely see what was in front of her. A truck passed her and pulled the car sideways, toward disaster, but Isa resisted. When she got to Esther's house, she didn't ring the bell or knock but gently pushed open the door left ajar, which startled Esther, who was sitting on the couch with her head in her hands. Her face was wet, but it was hard to tell if it was rain or tears. Isa wanted to speak, but all she could manage as she stepped toward her wife's lover was to mouth the words: *Don't be such a coward.* Thunder clapped down on Esther's house and lightning brightened them for an instant. Esther jumped, but Isa calmly remembered reading that thunder only had about 100 decibels. She reached over and offered Esther a hand. As soon as Esther touched her, Isa could hear Louise's bells ringing, no longer silent, and she could hear them perfectly, the way they were intended to be heard.

5

STORY 5

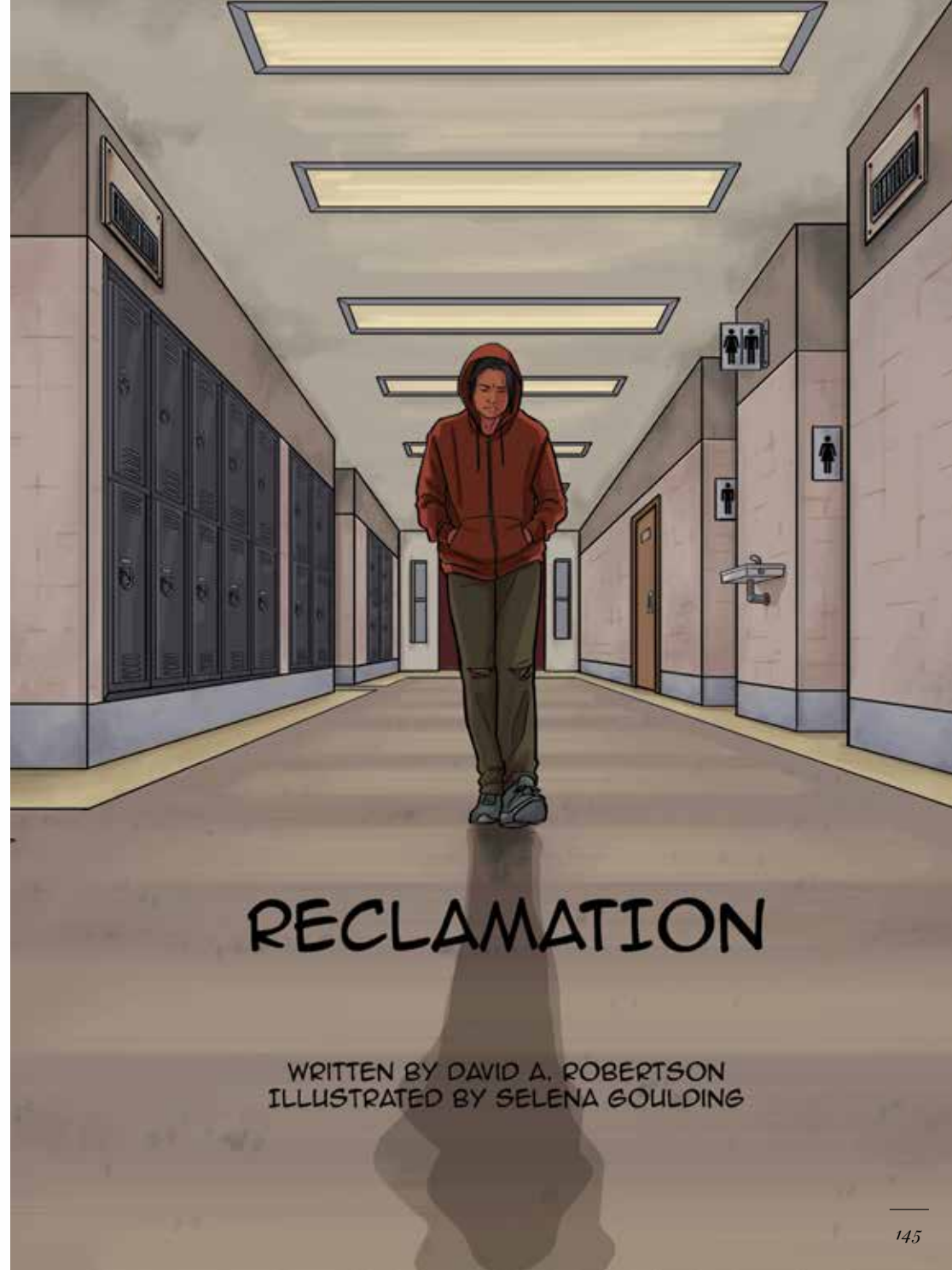
RECLAMATION

DAVID A. ROBERTSON

ILLUSTRATIONS BY SELENA GOULDING



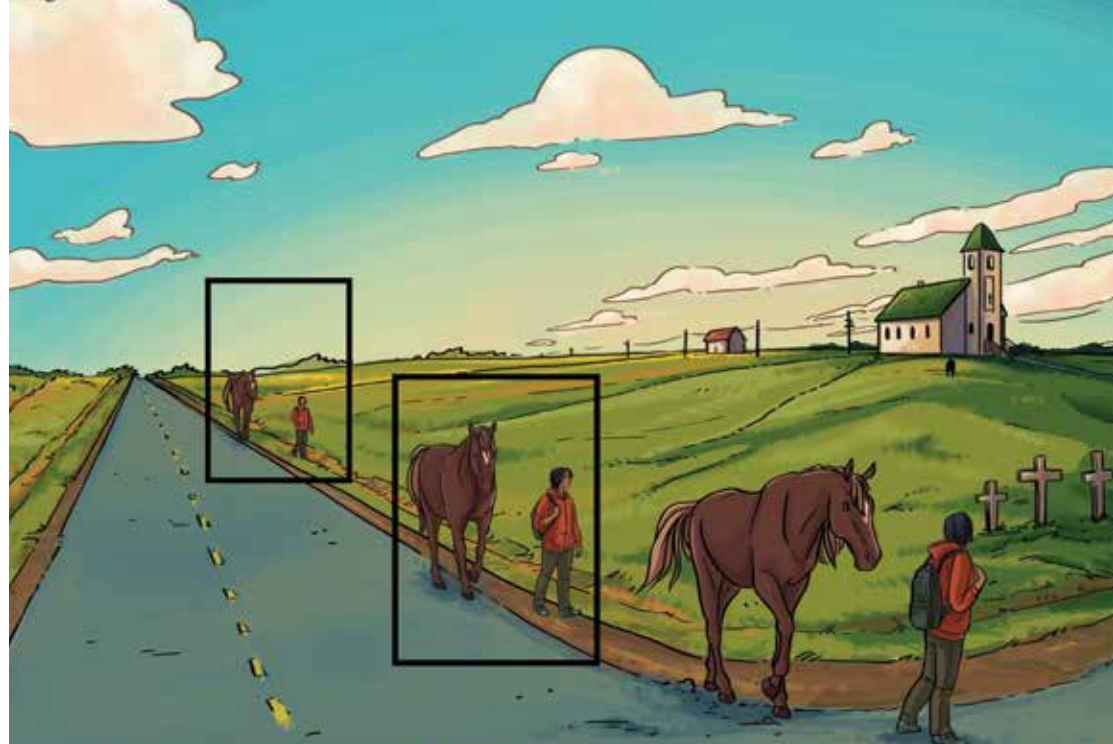














HELLO.



WHY
THE LONG
FACE?



UHHH...

YES,
YOU, KID.

OH, I...



CAN
I SIT?



I'VE LIVED
IN WOLF POINT MOST
OF MY LIFE, WITH MY MOM
AND DAD, BUT THEY'RE
NEVER REALLY
THERE.

BEING ALONE
AT HOME KIND OF
MAKES ME FEEL ALONE
EVERYWHERE.

WHERE
DO THEY
GO?



I STILL CALL
THEM SOMETIMES,
LIKE THEY MIGHT BE
SOMEWHERE
ELSE.



BUT
WHEN THEY'RE HOME,
IT'S THE SAME. THEY'RE STILL
NOT THERE. NOT FOR ME,
ANYWAY.

AND YOU
FEEL SAD
ABOUT IT.



I FEEL LOST.
THEN I WANT TO HURT...
MYSELF, SOMEBODY
ELSE. THEM.



I DON'T WANT
TO FEEL THIS WAY
ANYMORE.

SO WHERE
ARE YOU
HEADED?

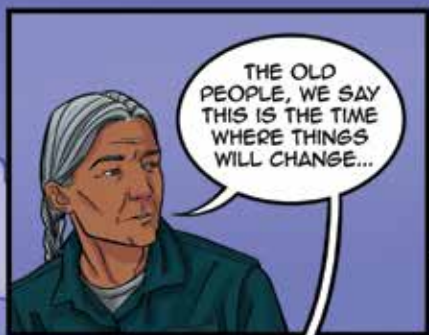
POPLAR.
GOT SOME FAMILY
OVER THERE.



YOUR PARENTS MIGHT'VE FELT LOST TOO, WHEN THEY WERE YOUR AGE. MIGHT'VE LED THEM DOWN A BAD PATH.

THAT DOESN'T MAKE IT RIGHT, THEM DRINKING LIKE THEY DO.

NO, IT DOESN'T. BUT YOU COULD FIND A BETTER WAY.



THE OLD PEOPLE, WE SAY THIS IS THE TIME WHERE THINGS WILL CHANGE...



...WHERE WE'LL BECOME WHO WE ARE AS AMERICAN INDIANS AGAIN.

WHY'D IT EVEN HAVE TO GET THIS WAY?



WE WERE A TRIBE OF WARRIORS. NOMADIC HUNTERS. THIS WAS OUR IDENTITY AS DAKOTA.

BUT THEN THEY TOOK OUR LAND AWAY... OUR BUFFALO.



FINALLY, THEY TOOK OUR HORSES AWAY.



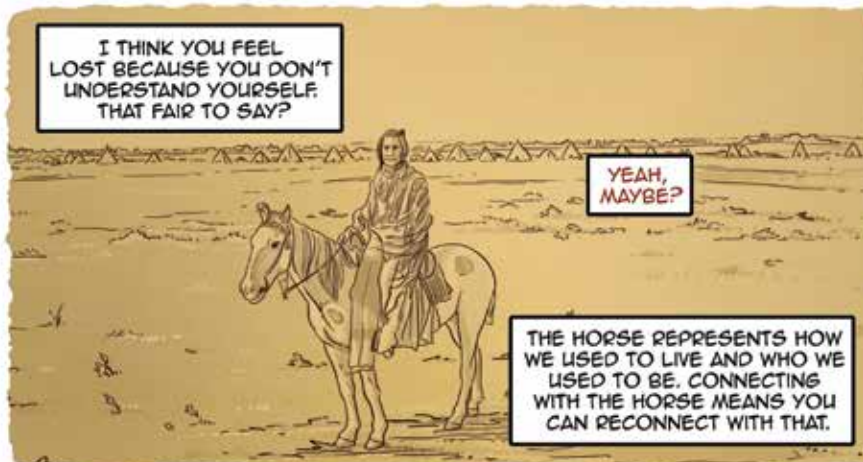
ME, I ONLY JUST STARTED TO LEARN HOW TO BE INDIAN AGAIN.

KNOW WHAT HELPED?

WHAT?



TURNING TO THE HORSES. THE WAY I USED TO.



I THINK YOU FEEL LOST BECAUSE YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND YOURSELF. THAT FAIR TO SAY?

YEAH, MAYBE?

THE HORSE REPRESENTS HOW WE USED TO LIVE AND WHO WE USED TO BE. CONNECTING WITH THE HORSE MEANS YOU CAN RECONNECT WITH THAT.







EVERYTHING.

THE END.



STORY 6

OBSOLESCENCE

MARTHA WELLS

ILLUSTRATIONS BY AYA MORTON

Jixy heard the yelling and crying and headed down toward the maintenance bay with vengeance on her mind. She didn't know what those kids were doing, but this time somebody was going to get sent back to Mommyland with a note reading "I'm disruptive and a danger to myself and others" seal-taped to their forehead.

When she dropped into the bay, Arnie smacked right into her, and in the light gravity knocked her back into the bulkhead. She thought he'd leapt on her to play-fight while mistaking her for one of his friends, but then it registered that he was the one doing the sobbing.

Jixy hugged him automatically, looking past his wiry shoulders to see who the culprit was. She spotted Lilly's hair first, a big dark pouf secured with a purple band, bouncing as Lilly rapidly climbed up the light gravity bay toward her. But she couldn't imagine Lilly doing anything to make Arnie cry like this. Then the incident response alarm jolted Jixy in the shoulder where her comm was secured. All the kids knew better than to hit it for something as minor as a play-fight-turned-real. Jixy demanded, "What the fu— What the hell happened?"

"It's Gregggy, he's hurt—" Lilly reached her, catching the overhead handlebar. Her dark eyes were big with shock, and her throat moved like she was swallowing back the urge to vomit. "He— Something— Something hurt him—"

Jixy's heart sunk through her stomach as her adrenaline ramped up. An accident, then. A bad one. She disentangled Arnie and pulled the comm off her shoulder to check that Lilly had also hit the code for a medical emergency. She had, smart kid. "Where is he?" Jixy swung forward. "No, baby, you stay here with Arnie, just point."

Lilly pointed, down and back toward the entrance of the second-level tech storage compartments.

Jixy pulled herself along the ladder, her feet floating behind her. This was spoke four, and she was moving toward the end that connected with the center shaft, well away from the gravity created by the spin of the station's outer ring. She reached the first storage compartment and looked inside.

Blood floated in the air, but there wasn't much of it. Most of the globules were the light gray augment fluid. Then she saw Gregggy, drifting in the center of the compartment.

Gashes marred the metal cage of his chest, his limbs had twisted, the flesh ones still covered by the sleeves of his uniform coverall, but the three metal appendages that had replaced his legs were broken into bits. As he drifted, Jixy found herself staring into a terrible wound on the side of his head. The bone shattered, the metal peeled open, broken through to his brain...

Something happened to his old bot parts, Jixy thought, even as her stomach tried to surge right up her throat. *Something exploded*. That shouldn't be possible. Augments didn't explode, even augments as old as Gregggy's. Something near him must have exploded, or broken free and hit him. But there was nothing like that in the compartment, no blast damage, no floating debris...except for Gregggy.



Jixy had Dubarre, their general fixer, go over the bay to figure out the cause of the accident while she and Shen Jean the medic took care of poor Gregggy.

This meant retrieving all the bits of him that were floating in low gravity, and using a vacuum tool to suck up the blood and fluid. Jixy had done a lot of jobs in her life, but she'd never had to clean up the body of a friend like it was floating garbage. She kept shaking, and her

fingers were freezing. It wasn't cold in the bay, so it had to be shock. Shen Jean kept wiping her face on her sleeve, her tears unable to fall in the light gravity. "You okay?" Jixy asked her, and her voice came out as a raw rasp.

"Yeah. This just happened, Jixy. He was still warm." Shen Jean didn't usually look anywhere near seventy-two, but at the moment you could see every year on her face. "He told me the other day he thought he needed another component refit."

"He did?" Gregggy had been an exploration rover for the Luna government for over eighty years and had helped build the early settlements on Luna and Mars. When all the surviving rovers had been pensioned off twenty-two years ago, Gregggy had spent a month in a hospital, having many of his outdated specialized augments replaced. At that point, Gregggy could have used his pension to settle down in a cushy habitat somewhere, but he had kept working and ended up on Kidland Station as a teaching assistant. He had told Jixy he had been a teacher back on Earth, in his first life before the rover program. He was great—had been great with the kids.

Jixy felt her throat getting tight again. Shen Jean, sadly studying the photo on Gregggy's torn ID badge, wasn't helping. Jixy added, "You think it was something internal then?" Maybe her first impression had been right; a power source in one of Gregggy's old augments had malfunctioned.

"No," Shen Jean said, then frowned. She carefully tucked the badge into a pocket and sealed the flap. "So much damage, it had to be—"

Then from the other end of the compartment, Dubarre said quietly, "This wasn't an accident."

"Huh?" Jixy grabbed a support and turned.

Dubarre was holding a bolter used for heavy construction, studying Gregggy's head, still attached to his floating body. Jixy couldn't look at the body so she focused on the tool. She wasn't sure exactly what kind of bolter it was, but she knew a category three safety violation

when she saw one. It shouldn't be here, not on a completed, occupied station. *Where the hell did that come from?* Jixy wondered. *Had Gregggy brought it in and it had somehow misfired and killed him?* No, that was stupid. One misfire wouldn't do that, and she could see from here its cartridge was empty. And where would he have gotten it? It couldn't have come in on a supply run without being flagged in the inventory system as a hazardous item.

Dubarre's expression held growing consternation and disbelief. He said, "You're going to need to do an autopsy, Shen Jean."

"What?" Shen Jean said. Then in horror and dismay she grimaced, wrinkles deep at the corners of her mouth. "No one did this. Don't tell me that."

"Huh?" Jixy said again, then her brain slammed back into gear. *I've been stupid, stupid. I should have thought of this first.* She pulled on the support to draw herself closer to the body. "Show me."

Dubarre gently turned Gregggy's head and held up the bolter. Right on the sharp end was a clot of blood and brain matter, mixed with short strands of Gregggy's faded blond hair. Jixy had seen the gash and hadn't understood what she was looking at. With the tool for comparison, now she saw. Her heart dropped. "Oh, not this."

Shen Jean whispered, "Who would— Why would—"

Jixy thought about all of them, the adult staff and the kids of assorted ages, and her heart just wouldn't have it. It was impossible.

The alternative, that it wasn't one of them, was equally impossible.

Except it obviously wasn't, because there was Gregggy's dead body. She swallowed back bile. "Bag the rest. We got to get to command."



Jixy ordered everyone to the command module. Most were there already, since it was standard training to go there in an emergency and wait for instructions. All the modules were along the ring in the gravity

zone, and Jixy felt heavier than usual as they took the lift up the spoke into the ring. While Dubarre and Shen Jean took poor Greggry to the infirmary, Jixy asked the education admin Tia Joi to do a headcount to make sure everyone was here, then she ducked into the admin center.

The first thing they taught you in station admin emergency response was the phrase, “Hull integrity, life support, communication.” Jixy was in uncharted territory here but decided communication needed to go first. She initiated an emergency call to Base Admin and recorded a brief description of what they had found and what they were afraid it meant. She knew she sounded shaken, but for once she didn’t care; somebody who knew what they were doing needed to get the hell here and take charge.

With the transmission lag, it would take time for Base to respond. It was going to be a nerve-racking wait. She planted her hands on the console. Right, what’s next?

Safety. She had to make sure they were secure up here before she command-sealed everything. She called Sully and asked them to take a group to search the module. “Okay, uh, what are we searching for?” Sully replied.

That was a good question. Reluctant to admit what she thought was happening out loud, Jixy said slowly, “Do a rescue search.”

There was a long silence. That was the search protocol for a missing person, someone who was hurt and stuck somewhere. It meant looking in every spot a person could conceivably conceal themselves in, intentionally or not. Then Sully took a sharp breath. “Will do, Jixy.”

Jixy signed off. The command module wasn’t very big, so it shouldn’t take them long. Now she needed to figure out how this had happened. If something small had managed to slip in past the scan buoys and attach to the hull, it might show up on the maintenance stats. She pulled the log and checked it, once hurriedly then again slow and careful.

No anomalies on the hull. “Of course not,” Jixy muttered aloud.

Why should anything about this be easy? But the sensors were meant to look for leaks and damage. A small vehicle or even a powered suit might go unnoticed, and the operator could get in through one of the locks while it was in an open cycle for an automated delivery.

Stations weren’t made to be impregnable because there was no reason to be. You assumed anybody showing up and wanting in would either have scheduled their arrival in advance or be desperate for help and trying to draw as much attention as possible. What was happening now was just weird and creepy and...Jixy had never seen anything like it. Maybe in the bigger stations like Mommyland, the central hospital station, and the Io and Titan mining depots, but Kidland was part school and part work center for staff who needed low-impact assignments due to age or medical reasons. They helped the kids do their education courses, taught them station jobs, and did the light work that kept the station running as a supply transfer point. This kind of thing—pretty much any kind of thing at all—never happened here.

Her comm beeped, and Tia Joi said, “Headcount’s complete, everyone’s here.” There was a hesitation, then she admitted, “Sorry for the delay. I was coming up one short, and then remembered the total included Greggry.”

Jixy rubbed her face. “I think we’re all going to be doing that for a while. Thanks, Joi.”

Joi signed off. Jixy was glad her first impulse had been to order everyone up here; maybe part



of her brain had been working despite the shock. Now that she was certain nobody was off somewhere working and ignoring comms, she put the station in emergency mode. Every hatch outside the command module would be sealed and alarmed, and it would take an admin code to get through.

Jixy braced herself for a second, then pasted a calm, confident expression on her face. She pushed away from the console and stepped out of the admin center.

From the foyer platform, she could see down into the big lounge, where the bench seats along the walls, the floor, and the couches in the two entertainment kiosks were mostly full of kids, with a few adults scattered through. There was a smaller secondary lounge off the mess hall where the others would be gathered. Everyone seemed confused, upset, restless.

Greggy had told her how comfortable he found it here, as opposed to the new habitats. Rovers were few and far between now, and people just weren't used to seeing them anymore. But most of the adults on Kidland were old enough to have worked exploration or construction in the Mars tunnels, and just about everybody had prostheses or internal medical augments of some kind. None were as old as Greggy, of course, but they were old enough to remember watching news stories about the heroic rovers founding the first bases on Luna and Mars. Jixy wasn't, but she'd been born on Mars and studied them as history. At thirty-five, she was also the youngest adult on Kidland Station.

Tia Joi, standing near the entrance to the lounge, spotted Jixy and stepped into the foyer. Sully and Aarti came in from the other direction. Both looked worried, but Sully told her, "We searched, there's nothing out of the ordinary."

Keeping her voice low, Tia Joi cut right to the chase and said, "Did someone get aboard and do this? How could that happen?"

Jixy hadn't expected to keep it quiet, but she had hoped for a little

more time than this. She said, "That's what I'm trying to figure out."

"It's happened before," Sully said. As Joi and Aarti turned to look at them, they added, "On Juno Outremer Three-four, thieves got aboard and stole supplies." They shrugged uncomfortably. "We didn't find out till they were gone, though, and no one got hurt."

"Greggy must have stumbled onto them, tried to stop them," Aarti said, sick at the thought.

Sliding in between Sully and Aarti, Lilly said, "We need to be detectives." Her expression was determined.

"Lilly, I told you not to speculate about this," Tia Joi said, firm but kind. "You need to sit down and finish your juice."

"I drank the juice," Lilly protested. "That's for shock. I don't have shock."

Jixy wished she didn't have shock. She hoped her competent admin expression was convincing as she said, "Base will send somebody soon." She told Joi, Aarti, and Sully, "Just...make sure the others stay calm."

She got their grim nods and went on through the hatch into the infirmary. Greggy was laid out on the med table, Shen Jean bending over him. Jixy told Dubarre, "You've got to find out if that bolter is on our inventory somewhere."

His expression said that he knew that as well as she did. "I've started a query. It's class three hazardous equipment; if it was here before today, it'll be on the list."

"They came at him from the front," Shen Jean said. She indicated the impact points in Greggy's chest components. "They killed him, then they started trying to take his parts, then got mad and just..." She made a helpless gesture. "Went off on him."

"Take his parts?" Jixy repeated. "What kind of sick—" Then she caught an expression on Shen Jean's face. "Shen Jean?"

"There's a story," Shen Jean said. She straightened up. "Scary story told in the Mars tunnels, you know."

“Yeah.” Dubarre nodded for her to go ahead. “I heard that story in the Juno stations, too.”

Jixy thought this was not the moment for a scary story, not when they were standing over pieces of their friend and coworker laid out on the med table. Until Shen Jean said, “Something or someone goes after the helper robots and people with prostheses and augments.” She nodded to Dubarre’s prosthetic arm. He hadn’t liked the dark brown options since none quite matched his skin tone, so he had gone for red and silver instead. The effect was quite stylish, and he tended to wear tank tops to show it off. Shen Jean continued, “Lots of prostheses and medical augments in the tunnels, right, from all the construction accidents.” She tapped her chest, where her heart augments were. “This story used to scare us enough to make us pee.”

Jixy remembered her first thought when she had seen Gregg’s body. The thought she hadn’t wanted to express. That it had looked like someone had tried to break him up for salvage while he was still alive—“But it was just a story.”

“Yeah,” Shen Jean agreed and looked down sadly at the remains.

“No. In the Juno stations it was more than a story.” Dubarre unconsciously cradled his arm. “I saw hazard bulletins that mentioned it from Juno Central, and it showed up in one of those true crime shows from Earth. They called whoever was doing it the Piecework Killer.”

Jixy didn’t have time for this. “We’re supposed to teach critical thinking on this station, folks.” Lumping what was probably a bunch of unrelated assaults and bar-fight murders together and then coming up with a serial killer theory to explain it was what the entertainment media did best, and Jixy enjoyed it as much as anybody, but this was the real world they were dealing with here.

Dubarre lifted his brows. “Augments do get stolen.”

“Sure, but from morgues and medical storage.” Augments were usually so tailored to an individual’s medical profile that there was no point in stealing them, except for their parts. It wasn’t like you

could take one from one person, stick it in someone else, and expect it to work. Not that that would stop someone who wanted one so much they would kill to get it, Jixy guessed. “I’m sure someone’s got killed for a medical augment before because people are terrible and anything can happen. But let’s not tell everybody there’s a serial killer aboard, okay?”

Shen Jean grimaced and said, “When we get done here, I’m gonna do a news search on it.”

Dubarre said, “Jixy, you don’t have Gregg’s comm in your pocket, do you?” He was looking over the debris from the scene laid out and sorted into piles on the other med table.

“What? No.” Jixy lifted her brows. That was solid evidence, something she could work with. “It’s gone?”

He studied the fragments of what was left of Gregg’s augments. “I’m not even seeing any pieces here.”

Shen Jean turned with a frown. “We got all the debris, I’m certain. So whoever did it must have took Gregg’s comm.”

Dubarre glanced up, thoughtful. “If they’re dumb enough to leave it on, I can scan for it.”

Jixy didn’t think whoever did this was dumb. Mean and angry, but not dumb. “You try that, I need to check with the kids.”



Jixy called Lilly and Arnie into the little compartment Dubarre used as an office. They sat down on the deck in front of her because there wasn’t anyplace else to sit. Arnie looked nervous, but Lilly seemed more determined than anything else. She said, “Blood splatters. The murderer will have blood splatters on their clothes. We need to search the station.”

“Lilly, it’s not—” *That easy*, Jixy meant to say, because obviously this had come straight from the true crime or mystery thrillers in the

entertainment kiosks. But it wasn't a bad idea at all. "Hold on." She keyed her comm and said, "Shen Jean, can you give everybody a little DNA scan for Gregg's augment fluid? Just to make sure."

"Oh, good idea," Shen Jean replied.

Jixy signed off and said, "That was a good idea, Lilly."

Lilly nodded seriously. Arnie elbowed her in approval.

Jixy got straight to the point. "I need to ask you two, did you see, or pick up, Gregg's comm when you found him?"

She got nearly identical head shakes and "No, Commander." Jixy added, "Think carefully. You didn't see the comm anywhere?"

Arnie swallowed hard. "We thought—" he began, and stopped.

Lilly's jaw hardened and she lifted her chin. "We didn't know it was Gregg, or even a person. We thought somebody was joking us, had made a dummy out of garbage to scare somebody." Her voice broke on the last word. She sniffled but didn't cry. "That's what we thought."

Arnie was going green under the light brown of his skin. Jixy edged the waste container closer to him in case he vomited. These kids were going to need therapy. Half the station was going to need therapy after this. Jixy pushed, "But you didn't see the comm."

"No, Commander." Lilly was serious. "The murderer must have taken it. To use it to listen in on our communications."

Arnie frowned. "They'd have their own comm, though."

Lilly gave him a withering look. "Wasn't one of us. A stranger did this."

Arnie scoffed, but he looked worried. "But nobody could just get on the station without us knowing."

Lilly shrugged. "Somebody did."

Missing comm and a class 3 bolter appearing out of nowhere. It wasn't proof, but it was sure as hell evidence. "Well, Lilly, I can't say I think you're wrong."



Shen Jean's DNA sweep came up negative, which was a relief. Having an unknown intruder on the station was bad enough, but having someone you knew and worked with turn out to be a murderer was a whole other horror show. But Dubarre's search for Gregg's comm ID came up negative too. Whoever had it must have removed the power supply.

Then the call from Base came in, and Jixy went to the admin center to answer it.

When it was done, she managed to send a terse acknowledgment without swearing, closed out the call, and did not slap the console. The next patrol was twelve hours out, twelve hours until real help—people who knew what they were doing—could get here.

Shen Jean and Tia Joi poked their heads through the doorway. Shen Jean said, "What's the ETA?"

Jixy tried not to look like someone who had a half-dozen kids watching old episodes of *Criminal Investigation Mars: S. Meridiani* trying to figure out what the hell she should do. "Twelve hours."

Shen Jean snorted in dismay. Tia Joi's eyes widened as she bit back whatever curse tried to come out. Then she said, "The hatches are command-sealed, so if they're still here, they can't get to us."

Shen Jean said slowly, "Eh, I don't know. Someone who got aboard like this might be able to code break or jimmy our hatch seals. Stations are designed to be safe; they're not meant to keep people in or out."

Tia Joi gave her a look. "That does not help, Shen Jean."

Jixy rubbed her temples, wincing. Shen Jean was right, and it was scaring the crap out of her. Someone who would do that to Gregg might do anything: stay around hoping for another victim, set off a bomb, or even destroy their life support. But the station's diagnostics read normal, so they hadn't messed with any systems yet and hadn't tried to break into the command module, if they were still here. They were just sitting here somewhere.

And the fact remained that if they had come here looking for people

with augments to attack, this was an excellent place to do it.

It struck Jixy suddenly that she had been thinking of someone getting onto the station, immediately attacking Gregggy, and then leaving or hiding somewhere aboard. Maybe her brain had gotten stuck there because the more likely alternative was terrifying: *Someone had gotten on days ago, just waiting until they could get to Gregggy while he was alone.*

Jixy knew she had to find out; she couldn't just sit here.

She pushed to her feet. "I need to go down the spoke and check something."

"What?" Tia Joi stared. "No!"

Shen Jean demanded, "You lost your mind?"

Jixy made the mistake of stepping out of the admin center, and some of the kids heard. Lilly jumped up and ran to join Shen Jean and Joi. "You're going to look for clues, Commander?"

Dubarre frowned at her from across the lounge and mouthed the word "clues?"

"Yeah, clues, that's right. Everyone just sit tight while I check the supply ship. I'll be back."

Tia Joi shook her head slowly. She started to speak, then glanced at the listening kids.

Shen Jean was staring at Jixy, the color drained out of her paper-thin cheeks. She said, "I'll go with you."

"We both will," Dubarre said.

If whoever this was had some kind of fixation for prostheses and augment tech, she didn't want them anywhere near any of the others. Especially people like Shen Jean, or Tia Joi with her kidney augments. Or Dubarre's arm, or Sully's knees. Jixy was the youngest adult and the only one here without any kind of an augment. She'd been told at her last medical that she'd need one for her hearing eventually, but that was some ways off. "No, you've got to stay. I'll be fine." Everyone took a breath to object, and she said, "That's an order."

She eyed them all. This was a training community, but it fell under

station regulations, and Jixy was still the commander. When it came down to it, this was her job, her responsibility. After a moment, everybody subsided reluctantly. Lilly had already disappeared, probably back to the entertainment kiosk.

Dubarre followed her through the short passage toward the hatch. Keeping his voice to a whisper, he said, "You're doing the dumb thing people do in horror stories."

"I know. But I have to check. We have to know." The automated supply shuttle that had arrived five station-days ago was the best possibility. And whoever it was might have gone back there to hide. If Jixy knew for certain where they were, she could comm for help and trap them. "You go back and act calm for everybody."

Dubarre stopped at the hatch. "If you get killed, I'm making a formal complaint."

"Ha, ha," Jixy said, and walked briskly down the corridor before she lost her nerve.

Jixy entered her command code at the lift station so the system would let her in. As the door slid open, Jixy stepped through and entered spoke six for the destination, which was closest to the shuttle ports in the shaft.

She stepped back to grab the steadybar. As the module hatches and the lift hatches started to close, a small figure flung itself through. The safety protocols squawked, and the hatches hesitated just long enough to let the figure pass, then closed and sealed, and the lift moved smoothly along the ring. Jixy stared incredulously at Lilly. "What the hell?"

Lilly's little face was set in a stubborn glare. "I want to come with you. You need backup."

"For the love of God—" Jixy gritted her teeth. She started to push the emergency stop to return, but that would have set off a stationwide alarm. It would have warned the intruder that someone was messing around in the lift system. "I don't have time for this, Lilly. Now I have

to wait till we get there and take you all the way back and—”

Lilly glared. She breathed hard, like she was running a race. “You need help! That’s rule 1: don’t do anything dangerous alone, don’t go places alone, take someone who can call for help!”

“Lilly, do not throw my own rules back in my face! You are a kid. You are my responsibility. Your safety is more important than mine.”

“I found him! They killed him and I found him! He was my friend!” Lilly shouted.

Jixy shut up, and they stared at each other. The lift reached spoke six and started down it toward the shaft. Jixy felt her feet start to leave the deck as they began to lose gravity.

“He was my first friend here.” Lilly choked the words out and swallowed back tears. She gripped the rail as she started to float. “No one liked me because I was from Earth. He told the others he was from Earth too, to be nice to me. And they did. He said he knew what it was like, being alone. He said when the first Luna rover exploration program ended and the support crew he worked with got old and retired and died, he was alone. He said the new people didn’t remember him from before he got the bot parts. They acted like he was just a machine.”

Jixy let her breath out and rubbed her eyes. Greggry had called Earth his “first life,” but he hadn’t given many details about his family or his teaching career there. She knew rovers had had a hard time after the first exploration phases ended and the habitat constructions began, that the rover program had budget cuts and lost personnel, but he had never talked about that. Rovers going from heroic figures who made the news all the time to just outdated curiosities would have been hard to live through.

He had never said what had caused him to volunteer for a work program that meant giving up his legs and arms and most of his insides for augments. Whether it was illness or a terrible accident, she knew it must have been bad. Nobody had agreed to become a rover

unless the only other choice was dying. But that had been eighty years ago, back in the bad old days, when good medical augments had been too expensive for anybody but the super-rich.

It figured Greggry would share more about his life with the kids, especially if he caught them bullying a newbie like Lilly. Jixy said, “He was my friend too, honey. That doesn’t mean I should let you risk your life following me.”

“I’ll be careful. I’ll do whatever you say,” Lilly promised. “And I know a lot about mysteries. Books and videos both. I can help. We need to catch whoever snuck aboard before they do something to the station.”

“I know. That’s why I sealed the command module, so whoever it was wouldn’t sneak in and kill all my kids.”

Jixy thought that might scare Lilly, at least as much as it was currently scaring her, but Lilly only subsided a little. “It’s got to be the last supply ship, right? That’s how the murderer got aboard.”

“Probably.” Jixy wasn’t going to ask at what point Lilly had figured that out. If Lilly had twigged to it long before Jixy had, it would just be embarrassing.

Part of Jixy was glad Lilly was here, because doing this alone would be so much worse, and the rest of her was angry at herself for the cowardice. Not as angry as she was at the intruder for killing Greggry, for coming into their home and making it strange and frightening.

“But they won’t still be there,” Lilly said. “They’re in the station somewhere.”

They might still be there. And if they were, Jixy might be able to seal the shuttle and jettison it, so Base could easily pick up the intruder when they arrived. “Yeah, but I need to make sure that’s how they got in, before I do anything else.”

Lilly nodded. “There’ll be clues. When we figure out who they are, where they came from, we’ll know why they killed Greggry and what they’re gonna do next.”

“Well...yeah.” It did sound reasonable when you put it like that. The

lift slowed, nearing the dock. “Stay in here, okay? And if I tell you to hit the return—”

“I’ll do it,” Lilly promised as the lift thunked to a stop and locked itself into place.

Jixy looked out at the hatch window, but nobody seemed to be lying in wait in the corridor, unless they were flattened up against the wall, which was hard to do in the light gravity. She opened the hatch.

Everything seemed normal, all the indicators in the wall panel reading good, and nothing out of place in the row of air locks. Jixy eased out into the corridor and pulled herself along the rack. She checked the locks of the two empty slots first, making sure the hatches were still command-sealed. Nothing looked tampered with. Both were used by construction/repair skids, which were small vehicles that moved around the outside of the station for repairs, though neither lock had a skid docked now. Jixy hesitated. A skid would be handy for an intruder, who could use it to hide in, move between various locks on the station’s hull. But the logs hadn’t shown any anomalous movements. She needed to ask someone up in command to check on the skids’ locations.

Then she went to the supply shuttle’s lock. A quick check of the status console showed everything looked all right, that the hatch hadn’t been tampered with since the lockdown. Jixy tapped in the entry code, and the lock released a hiss of air as it opened. Air. Jixy frowned and checked the panel again. It was reading a level of atmosphere inside the shuttle that was for a live transport, not for the lower levels of vacuum-sealed supplies and equipment. Relief hit her first, bringing on a wave of internal heat. *It really wasn’t one of us. We’ve been right all along, it’s an intruder.* Then renewed fear. *Oh hell, it really wasn’t one of us.*

Before this, Jixy might have wondered what was worse: imagining there might be a violent stranger aboard the station or knowing it for certain. Knowing for certain was definitely worse.

She moved back until she was sure she was out of earshot and clicked

her comm. Trying to keep her voice as low as possible, she whispered, “Emergency Priority.” Her voice came out hoarse, and she cleared her throat self-consciously.

“Jixy?” Shen Jean replied. “You okay?”

“Fine. Is Dubarre sure Gregg’s comm is off?”

“He’s sure. You found something?”

“Yeah, someone’s tampered with the shuttle. Looks like that’s how our unauthorized visitor got here.” She made herself sound calm. The comm recording would go on the official report, if the intruder killed her.

“Oh, shit,” Shen Jean breathed.

“Yeah,” Jixy agreed. A thought occurred to her, and she added, “This shuttle’s last stop was Station Titan. Can you check the news reports and see if there were any disturbances there?”

“I’ll check,” Shen Jean promised.

“Also, we need to make sure all the repair skids are where they’re supposed to be.” Jixy glanced down the corridor and saw Lilly in the hatchway of the lift, watching intently. Lilly flashed her a thumb’s up. Jixy sighed and added, “And Lilly snuck into the lift after me, and I can’t get her to go back.”

Shen Jean swore a lot, the only non-profane word of which was “kids.” She added, “You both come back up here. We’ll seal in until Base arrives.”

Jixy had already thought of that. “Can’t, whoever this is...” Whoever it was had hijacked an automated shuttle and modified it to allow for atmosphere on a pre-programmed trip. And Shen Jean had been right, the intruder might be able to get past the command code seals, if they were that good with jacking systems. Rampaging around the station, nothing to stop them from altering or just bashing the hell out of any equipment. Maybe trying to breach the station’s hull. “I got to try to pinpoint where they are.” Jixy heard the words come out of her mouth and felt sick.

“Oh, Jixy,” Shen Jean said. Then after a moment, her voice hardened. “If you catch them, kick their arse.”

It was just words, but weirdly it helped. “Will do.” Jixy signed off and muted the comm to make sure it didn’t beep when she least wanted it to.

The shuttle’s interior lights had come on automatically, and Jixy saw it was safe enough for the moment. With Lilly holding the lift in place, no one else could get down here. *Yeah, I should have brought someone*, she thought. It would have given Lilly less of an excuse to follow her, at least.

She pulled herself inside the shuttle hatch.

As she drew herself into the first compartment, she felt like her eyes and ears were enlarging, trying to detect any hint that someone had been in here. The shuttle had been designed as an un-crewed ship, hauling supplies from station to station, but it had facilities for people if needed. Jixy checked the lockers next to the hold that could fold out into bunks, with a tiny toilet facility and a tiny galley, but it didn’t look

like any of it had been used.

Was she wrong about this?

Then she grabbed the next locker handle and felt the sticky residue along the inside. She jerked her hand back and cautiously sniffed it. Sugar in liquid form. She felt down the side of the locker and found another sticky patch near the bottom, this one with a tiny bit of plastic food-wrapper stuck to it. A package of liquid ration had broken against this locker at some point. Somebody had been



in here, and they had been neat and careful, except for these traces of spillage left behind. *Hah!* Jixy thought, and went to check the intake vent.



Lilly bounced excitedly as Jixy approached. Jixy held out her hand, showing Lilly the clear scrap baggie she’d used to collect the fragments she’d found in the intake vent. “Clues.”

Lilly leaned close to examine the bits and pieces of shattered component. She said, “We need to check where that shuttle came from, see if anybody got murdered there before it left.”

“Shen Jean’s on it,” Jixy told her, pulling herself into the lift. “Why aren’t you on the station leadership track?” She thought Lilly might be wasted in the standard school. Jixy had gone to station school on Mommyland. Being from Earth, Lilly wouldn’t have had that advantage. Still, somebody should have done an evaluation at some point and noticed the kid was this smart.

“I don’t know.” Lilly shrugged that off, obviously too focused on the current problem to think about her future education. “Motive will tell us where the murderer is. We know the motive, we know what they want.”

“Lilly, this is real, this is not like videos and books...” The stories about the tunnel and station Piecework Killer that stole prostheses for fun might be mostly myth, but Jixy was willing to believe the intruder had a need to steal augments. The vivid image in her head of Gregg’s torn body, the missing parts, the way something had hacked at his head to get to the interfaces...Jixy took the envelope back from Lilly, flattening it to examine the tiny fragments more closely.

Lilly folded her arms. “They get the videos and books from real stuff, Commander Jixy. There’s certain ways people solve mysteries and it’s always—”

Jixy waved at her, distracted. “I’m sorry, honey, I think you’re right. I think this person did want something from Gregg. They wanted his interfaces.” She remembered it had been her first impression when she had seen the horror that was left of Gregg’s head. Those were the most complicated of his components, the ones that made the rest of his augments work like he had been born with them. “These broken pieces, these are from an interface. One that came apart when it was being worked on.”

Lilly frowned and looked at the bag again. “Did the murderer get Gregg’s interfaces?”

“Yeah, I think so,” Jixy said slowly. “So why aren’t they down here, hiding on the shuttle, waiting until it leaves?”

“Maybe they know we know about the shuttle. Or maybe they want something else before they escape.” Lilly nodded thoughtfully. “See, we’re figuring it out.”

Maybe they were. “Let’s see.” Jixy pulled the system access off her belt and flicked through the opening screens to find the general inventory. If someone needed the tools and other equipment to install interfaces, there was at least one place aboard the station where they would go. “I need to seal off the mech workshop on the spoke three engineering module.”



Jixy called Dubarre on the comm to see if he had a lock that could keep anybody from hacking their way through a command-sealed hatch. He had something he thought might work, so Jixy’s first stop was the command module. She handed over a mutely protesting Lilly to Dubarre and took the hard-lock in exchange. “That basically makes the hatch inert, so just slap it in place and get out of there,” he told her.

“Got it,” Jixy said and stepped back into the lift. She could have

taken the access corridor from here, but the lift was faster. She entered the address for spoke three, and the lift slid away. If she—and Lilly—had reasoned this right, the intruder would be several compartments deep in the module, where the workshop was. What they were doing in there—whether working on their stolen interfaces or trying to insert them into themselves—Jixy didn’t know.

The lift reached the engineering module foyer, and Jixy peered cautiously through the hatch. This module was a different design, mostly because it had been the original module brought here and used as a platform, while the rest of the station was built around it. The foyer was long and deep to accommodate monitoring stations that had been used for construction pods. What she could see of it was innocently empty.

She stepped out of the lift. The lights were on, and the air hissed through the vents, and everything seemed normal, but the back of her neck itched, and her teeth hurt, and some primal part of her brain was hissing quietly, “*bad idea*.” All she had to do was slap the lock on the sealed hatch, that was all. Then run back to the command module and wait for Base to get their asses here. She’d leave the security issues to the experts and put Lilly in for some advanced station management courses.

She moved quickly through the foyer toward the hatch. It was closed, and she felt a sharp spike of relief. She stopped at the panel a meter from the door and quickly hit the sequence to check the command seal. The hatch’s handle blinked confirmation, and she stepped close to put her palm on the biometric scanner just to be certain.

It didn’t beep. And there was something coating the sensor. She pulled her hand back, feeling the sticky substance that had transferred to her palm. Baffled, she rubbed at it. She realized it was gray augment fluid, partially dried, mixed with blood. Then someone behind her said, “Too late.”

Jixy’s throat went dry. As she turned, she tightened her arm against

her side three quick times, activating the emergency panic button in her comm strap.

The person had been standing in the shadows, so still and quiet they had blended into the bulkhead and the conduit running along it. They were taller than her by more than a head, dressed in gray, their skin so pale it was almost translucent, cheeks and eyes sunken. Everything about them was colorless, except the brown of their eyes.

Jixy had studied deescalation, talking down people who were desperate or ill. She knew all the right ways to begin this conversation, but what she said was, “You killed Gregggy, you fucker.”

The person stared down at her, unblinking, then said, “Oh, you gave it a name?”

Jixy’s jaw hurt from trying not to scream obscenities. “He was my friend! He was a teacher.”

The person cocked their head. “It was a rover.”

Jixy swallowed back spit. “That doesn’t mean he wasn’t a person, you sick piece of shit.”

They loomed over her. “When they make you a rover, they murder the person.”

“That’s bullshit. You murdered the person.” Becoming a rover had just extended Gregggy’s life and given him different parts. Saying it had somehow made him inhuman was obscene.

The intruder stared down at her for a long hard moment. Jixy felt a weird sense of disassociation, like she was watching this on video or reading it in a book. *No, you’re here*, she reminded herself. *You may not be here much longer, but you’re here.* And she was going to get some answers. “Tell me why you think you need his interfaces.”

They stepped back, watching her. “For me.”

“But why?” This close, Jixy could see the painful-looking rash creeping out from under their collar, the scabbed patches on the gray-haired skull. This person was badly ill, maybe dying. “Do you have augments? Is something wrong with them? Gregggy’s interfaces will

only work for another rover. If you know anything about rovers, you have to know that...”

“If I know anything about rovers.” The intruder took two long steps back, making Jixy’s heart thump. They pulled open their jacket.

Their whole torso was an augment, with no attempt made to make the finish look like skin, or like a decoration or anything that was meant to be there. She said, “Why did...” What wanted to come out was: Why did you do this to yourself? *What a stupid question that was.* “What happened?”

“I was murdered,” they said, watching her coldly.

Jixy suddenly realized what she was looking at. “You were a rover.” Nobody had made rovers in over seventy years. All the Luna and Mars rovers had died, or were living out their retirement somewhere. She had seen the rover monument on Mars, all the names and their stories, where they were now. The kids had done an assignment on it because of Gregggy. “How can you be a rover? They’re all accounted for.” And they had no reason to let themselves suffer like this, with failing augments.

The person sneered, and she saw they had no teeth. “Yes, the heroic volunteers. I was a corporate rover.”

Oh, shit! Jixy thought. She had read about the early corporate off-Earth expansion, unregulated, unsafe. Surely those corporations hadn’t been allowed to make rovers. But there was no other way this person could be a rover and not be on the Luna or Mars government lists. “Corporations made private rovers and no one knew.”

Their sneer was tinged with pity. “Of course. To work the outer asteroid belt, where the precious elements were, away from the cameras and the cheering crowds.”

Jixy felt sick. “But why do you need Gregggy’s interfaces? Can’t you just go to a hospital, go somewhere for help?” What had those corporate bastards done to this person to make them think they couldn’t get help? What had been done to their brain? Was she dealing with someone who

had been so isolated and brutalized that murder seemed like a good idea, or were they so ill that they didn't know what they were doing?

"I needed a refit. When I need something, I take it. Augments, interfaces." They grinned at her. "Your friends called me Piecework."

Now Jixy felt dumb as well as terrified. "You found a way to use Gregg's comm to listen to us without it showing on our system."

Their expression twisted in contempt. "I didn't need his comm. I can get into any system."

Jixy needed to take control of this conversation. She was all over the place, and it wasn't helping. Had this person really killed people and stolen augments for years, or had they gotten that from using the comm to eavesdrop on the Piecework Killer conversation? About the only thing she was certain of was that this person had killed Gregg because they thought they could repair their own failing systems with his interfaces. She steeled herself and said, "You don't need to steal interfaces. We can get you help—"

They stepped closer again. "Lies."

"I'm not lying," she said. "The Luna government, the Mars med/health agency—"

"The Luna government didn't murder me. Vision Space Dynamics murdered me." Their voice was a whisper of fury. "They said the contract would be for twenty years. Do you know how long ago that was? Vision Space Dynamics went bankrupt, and their assets went to Io Explorations, and then they were bought by Sideral, and then they went bankrupt. And then they sent the old equipment to recycling and told me to leave. It has been seventy-six years."

Who let this happen? Jixy wanted to say. *Who does a thing like that?* No wonder Piecework had thought being made a rover was like being murdered. The Luna and Mars government rovers had gotten support and refits and eventually pensions. Piecework had been discarded like an outdated appliance.

Regardless, *they killed Gregg*, Jixy thought, *and maybe other people*. They

came here because they knew Gregg was an updated former rover and they had been waiting to catch him alone. But this was illness, caused by deliberate negligence, by the rotting technology that some shitty, irresponsible corporation had left in this person's brain. It was monumentally unfair. If they had just been given the treatment they needed, this would never have happened. *Gregg would want me to stop this, fix this.* She said, "Tell me your name."

She knew immediately she had said the wrong thing. Their expression turned cold. "Call me Piecework."

"That's not your name, that's from an entertainment video." She tried to make her voice firm and reasonable. "We can help you. You need a hospital. You need a lawyer."

"Promises, promises. Corporation promises."

Their voice had changed in a way that sent ice through Jixy's chest. This conversation was almost over, and she hadn't done anything but make the person—Piecework—mad.

Then behind Piecework, in the faint light from the lift foyer, Jixy caught a dark flash. It took a second for her brain to process that it had been a brief glimpse of someone's dark hair. Somebody was in the access corridor adjacent to the lift, and they had just risked a quick peek through the hatch.

The others had gotten the panic button transmission, they were nearby, and a flush of relief and renewed fear made her skin turn cold. If they were going to do something, she had to get out of Piecework's reach. "I'm not a corporation. This isn't a corporation station. We can



get you help, real help.” Piecework watched her with narrowed eyes, and she thought her momentary freeze must have been obvious. She added, “That’s what Gregggy would want.” It was true, and it distracted Piecework, making their mouth twist in fury.

She stepped back and sideways, away from the foyer. She knew she couldn’t talk Piecework into surrendering. She and the others would have to trap Piecework, wait for Base to get here, then get Piecework sedated and taken to a hospital. She said, “You didn’t know Gregggy, he would have wanted to help you. He never would have—”

Whether Jixy overplayed it or someone in the corridor made a noise, Piecework whipped around toward the foyer as Dubarre and Sully charged in. They both brandished cutters. Dubarre said, “You’re trapped! Give up and we’ll—”

But Piecework lifted up, legs and arms extending, looming up over them. Dubarre and Sully pulled closer to each other but didn’t back down. Jixy ducked around and stood beside them, facing Piecework again. “Just let us help you!”

Jixy thought Piecework was going to attack, and Dubarre would have to hit them with the cutter. Then there would be a melee here in the foyer that would go very badly for all four of them. But Jixy saw Piecework’s eyes change for just a second, their expression going from anger to confusion. They looked down at her, and the confusion cleared. They spun, slammed a hand down onto the biometric panel, and the hatch slid open.

Jixy shouted, “Hey!” which she was well aware was a dumb thing to do under the circumstances. But Piecework dove through and the hatch slid shut behind them even as Dubarre and Sully surged forward.

Dubarre swore and Sully said, “How’d they do that? That was a biometric—”

“They hacked the panel somehow,” Jixy said, remembering the fluid on the plate. “Get it open!” She elbowed past Sully to the monitoring station and booted it.

“Where are they going?” Sully said.

“I don’t know. There’s nothing—” Jixy swore as the schematic appeared on the screen. “There’s a construction skid docked on the module!”

Dubarre stepped up beside her. “Can’t be. I checked, they’re all docked on the shaft—”

Jixy grimaced in dismay. “Piecework was good enough to get through our command seals, hack our comm system. Moving a skid without leaving a log entry is nothing.”

“Eject the skid off the station before they get aboard,” Dubarre urged her.

Others were coming into the foyer behind her, but Jixy didn’t look around, frantically running through the sequence to eject the skid. The monitors blinked into life above the panel, and a glance showed her Piecework, climbing through the foyer, one compartment away from the pod’s hatch.

“If they get to the skid,” Dubarre was explaining to someone, “they can take it around to the shuttle dock.”

Jixy’s fingers flew, and just as Piecework reached the outer lock, the disengage sequence started. The hull monitor showed the skid detach from the station and drift away.

Jixy hit the all-ship comm. “Please, it’ll be okay. We can help you.” She kept her voice calm. “Please.”

Piecework looked toward the camera and said, clearly, “I won’t come back.” Then they stepped through the hatch, and the lights blinked for the open cycle.

Dubarre swore, and Jixy stabbed the override frantically, but it didn’t respond. Seconds later, the lock flushed, and she saw a figure tumble out into space.

Jixy’s breath froze in her chest. Then she slammed her hand on the console.



Some of the others were glad Piecework was dead, because of Gregg, others were just upset about everything. Jixy felt like she'd failed Gregg again.

And failed Piecework. Somewhere among all the failing technology in Piecework's brain was a person who knew that what they were doing to survive was wrong. Jixy was sure of it. There was no way she, Dubarre, and Sully could have won that fight, and Piecework had run to keep from having to hurt them.

But then the Base patroller showed up, and the first thing they did was send a security group to search the station top to bottom, and another to search the area outside the station for the body.

Except they didn't find the body, or the repair skid.

Jixy discussed this with Dubarre and Shen Jean, while sitting in the admin center with the door locked, nursing contraband cups full of gin that Sully had smuggled in from their last trip to Io Station. Later, when things had calmed down, Jixy talked to Lilly.

Sitting across from her in the admin center, Jixy explained what Piecework had said and done. Lilly listened quietly, and then said, "Gregg would never have done that. If he hadn't been able to come live here and get his refits, he would still never have done that."

Jixy agreed, but said, "Gregg had advantages, like his retirement from the Luna government. I don't think we can understand what Piecework went through." They still didn't even know the rover's real name; and even if Vision Space Dynamics had left behind any public records online, they weren't likely to include anything about a private rover program that would have been illegal in most Earth jurisdictions. "It doesn't excuse what they did to Gregg and anybody else they might have hurt—"

"I know." Lilly stood up, her expression thoughtful and troubled.

"How many more rovers like that do you think there are, Commander? Could we find them and help them?"

Jixy had been hoping Lilly wouldn't ask that. If one old space exploitation company had had a rover program they had kept quiet about, it stood to reason there had been others. The fact that none had ever come forward to ask for help didn't bode well for their survival. "Probably not, honey. But I don't know how we can ever find out."

Lilly considered that for a moment. "Maybe I can think of a way. One day."

Jixy wouldn't bet against it. "Maybe you can. When you do, come tell me."

Lilly nodded, and went to join the other kids.



7

STORY 7

VIRAL CONTENT

MADELINE ASHBY

ILLUSTRATIONS BY HELEN LI

“What do you mean, flu?” Jynette asked. “Nobody dies of the flu.”

“Thousands of people a year die of the usual flu,” Gloryanna corrected her. “But most of them are elderly, or infants, or they already have compromised immune systems. It’s not supposed to happen to healthy high school football players who can bench 250 and run a three-minute mile. I think this is something else. I want to find out more about it.”

Glory sat in her pod in Tacoma and waited for her editor to decide whether or not the story was worth paying for. Three states away, Glory’s editor Jynette pushed away from her desk and chewed her glowstick. It was the preferred brand of white ladies with inspirational memes hologramming across the walls of their offices. The glowstick bloomed purple in the slanting light of her California office. Jynette exhaled matching smoke. It wreathed her face in temporary violets.

This wouldn’t be the first time she and her editor had tangled over the issue. But it might be one of the last: if she kept suggesting stories that Jynette didn’t think were really stories, she’d find herself out of a gig. This was the trouble with developing “hyperlocal” content with a corporation that spanned the entire United States. The corporation understood the role of local news: people tended to care more about whether traffic and weather were bad in their own area than in someone else’s. You didn’t care about speed bumps and road signs in someone else’s town. You cared about your own.

But try explaining the speed bump in context to a content director in another state, and it all went out the window. They wouldn’t know about the mothers, texting at midnight and getting coffee in the small hours of Saturday morning,

trying to organize talking points for the next city council meeting. They wouldn’t know about the kid who’d been run over at that intersection last year. They wouldn’t know that the nearest emergency room was understaffed, making even the smallest accidents all the more deadly. They didn’t know the whole story. So every single pitch was also a history lesson, and cutting that history lesson into a bite-sized piece that Jynette would eat took up more of Glory’s time than actually creating assets for the vertical.

Jynette looked doubtful. “Well, see if you can talk to the parents. Get the release on some baby pictures, if you can. Old video. Stuff like that. Watch the rights; the funeral homes like to copyright whatever they produce for the memorial.”

Tears rose in Glory’s eyes. She had watched Tyrone Weathers play since he was in junior high. She’d watched his cousin Jeremiah go All-State for Lincoln High and then go on to play for Oregon State. There was talk of a Seahawks scout. The same scout was interested in Tyrone, too. She’d met the Weathers family. She knew them. They knew her. They’d seen each other at tailgates, at bake sales, at car washes, at casino nights and silent auctions. They didn’t need the money, but the school did, and the family invested just as heavily in their community as they did in the Okanagan Valley vineyards that gained them their fortunes.

“Okay,” she said. “I’ll ask.” She cleared her throat. “But I think we can also turn it into a micro-column on preventing the flu. Getting the flu shot—”

“You know the content policy on discussing vaccines.” Jynette’s voice was flat. “Not just the flu shot, but any vaccines. We don’t bring them up. Bringing them up just brings up more drama. It draws the crazies out of the woodwork, on both sides. The last time we mentioned vaccines, we got ransomware.”

Glory couldn’t resist asking: “Isn’t that good for engagement?”

Jynette’s brows crept up her forehead as far as her most recent fillers would allow. “I’m going to pretend you didn’t just ask me that. You know

about the embargo. Vaccines are on the list. There are just some things we don't cover."

Jynette took another drag from her glowstick. "Make this a feel-bad story. It's a dead child. A dead athlete, from a good family. You have a big opportunity here. You could even turn this into a weeklong series if you're smart about it. A series of interviews, think pieces, maybe a profile of the team, the coach, all that. Really introduce the public to this team. There's a lot of our audience who doesn't know about this team, or these games, but they should. Isn't that what you've always wanted? Isn't that why you pitched this beat when you got that grant?"

Glory bristled, like she always did, at mention of the grant for minority women in journalism that had helped pay for her spot here. And, like she always did, she held the anger inside, imagining years and years of pressure turning it slowly into a diamond where her soft spots used to be. Jynette's style was toxic, but her instincts weren't wrong. This was a good chance to share more about what made the team special with the community at large. And that was partially why she had pitched the beat: Tacoma needed a win. It had served as the poor cousin to Seattle for too long, the butt of too many jokes, whether it was about the "aroma of Tacoma" or some bad sketch from the *Almost Live* revival on the pirate channel. By focusing on young athletes and their dedication to their teams, she could shine a light on all the things Tacoma was doing right: finding a way to keep kids healthy by sponsoring athletics and other after-school programs. So, she covered their fundraising efforts. She covered their injuries. When the girls' volleyball team went to the state championship, she made sure to go and share the photos from her drone with the team parents. When the marching band hosted a spaghetti dinner to raise funds for new uniforms, she donated her time and funds. She attended harvest fairs and winter carnivals and spring flings.

Her own experience of high school was terrible. She'd bounced between Lincoln and Stadium, kicked out of one and needing escape

from the other. It struck her each time she walked the halls: there were the lockers where her head had been slammed in, there was the water fountain where someone had pulled her pants down. Now she was an adult, and the halls seemed smaller, and the kids all looked so smooth and fragile, like tadpoles. And one of them was dead.

"You're right." In her experience, these were the magic words for dealing with Jynette. "You're right, it really is a good opportunity. It's a tragedy, but it's also an opportunity."

"Exactly," Jynette said. "I'm so relieved to hear you say that. Now see what you can get from the parents."



Glory ditched her pod once the rain started, to find better internet coverage at the community center. The weather always played hell on her receivers: the corporate mailing list at her building said it had something to do with humidity, how the cables weren't designed to take the rising temperatures. On Wednesdays the community center ran a killer deal on spicy teriyaki with macaroni salad and shredded cabbage for only ten bucks or three cans of food for the food bank. It only cost two cans if you got the vegetarian option, and Glory always did.

After she texted an interview request to the Weathers family, Glory started trawling the social feeds associated with the whole team. Remembrances from teammates were coming in fast, including photos and video. She sent form requests to a few of them, asking for permission for a quote. Jynette would encourage her to just post the quotes without permission, given that they were made in public, but the ethics guidelines around minors were, in Glory's opinion, fairly clear.

Beyond Mrs. Weathers, the biggest get would be Chastity Kane, Tyrone's girlfriend. Chastity and Tyrone had been together since the tenth grade. She was running for Homecoming Queen. Now the Homecoming game was canceled. Chastity had already posted one video, from the hospital where Tyrone had died. She was there, she said,

in the room with him when it happened. One minute he was there, the next minute he was gone. And now she was in the parking lot, crying her eyes out. There were already multiple offers to pick her up, so that she wouldn't have to drive. It was the kind of offer that Glory wished more people knew about when they considered putting their kids in one of Tacoma's public high schools: the friends one made there were actually nice and did things like offer rides to girls who had just watched their boyfriends die.

Glory had already interviewed Chastity last spring for her record-smashing work on the girls' tennis team. She sent what she thought was a thoughtful text: *Chastity, this is Gloryanna Parker from ____ Media. I want to say how sorry I am for your loss. I just saw your video. I know you'll get a lot of requests from other platforms to share it, so if you have any questions, don't hesitate to ask. I'm so sorry. Please take care of yourself.*

It was weird, at first, covering the activities of the rich and popular kids at her old schools. She had always been an outsider looking in, and now she was paid to look deeper. She tried to imagine what her adolescent self would have thought about texting the Homecoming Queen. She hadn't even gone to Homecoming senior year. She had been focused on making the hardest decision of her life, the one that had allowed her to pursue the career that brought her back to these halls.

On the team's pages, Coach Billings and the team manager, Casey Rodriguez, had put out a very brief statement detailing what a leader Tyrone was, what an asset to his team and his community, how hard-working he was on and off the field, and the fact that he would be missed by his team and his school, as well as the obligatory thoughts and prayers.

Glory sent Coach Billings a text: *This is Gloryanna Parker from ____ Media. I understand if you are spending time with the team and the Weathers family. However, I would really appreciate an interview later this week, as would fans of the team.*

It was the least smarmy thing she could think of. The district would be next, and then probably the Weathers family, via their social channels.

Combined with Chastity's video and the other updates, that left her with more than enough possible pull quotes to develop a basic piece about Tyrone's death. The rest she could build from background: she had Tyrone's stats, old video of game-making plays, even some clips from pep assembly skits. After obtaining one exclusive, she didn't—strictly speaking—need more today beyond a contact with the parents.

She worked up her first column, tagged it Urgent and Updating, and then filed it. The copybot hadn't flagged anything as she wrote it up in the corporate UI, but the legalbot would need to take a look too, since there was the death of a minor in there. It would take a few minutes before they processed it and posted it. And even then, Jynette might decide she didn't like it, that it needed more zazz, that it didn't adequately fulfill the corporate mandate.

Glory pushed the remaining spicy tofu around her bowl and looked around at the other diners. Many of them were homeless, or home-insecure. The men, most of them white, wore patches on their jackets from their tours in Iran or Sudan. In one corner, an Indigenous woman was leading an after-school program. As she watched, a woman sighed and got up from her table, and wandered over to The Wall beside where Glory sat.

The woman smoothed a sticker photo over a new patch of wall. She was Hispanic, mid-sixties, with a bad hip that was either sciatica or an old injury. At first, Glory thought the photo she'd posted was of a younger version of herself, like some sort of modern art piece about lost youth and lost self. But no. In the photo was the older woman. This was her daughter.

MISSING, The Wall read.

"Missing" could mean a lot of things. It could mean runaway. It could mean trafficking. It could mean hiding away getting high, or even hiding away trying to get sober. The analog photo wall—full of picture stickers and printed images—was a safer alternative for those who didn't want to—or couldn't—talk to the authorities or safely share their information

on the open internet. The Wall was a way to connect with community members who kept their eyes open. You never knew where you might see someone, in passing: a work farm, maybe, or cleaning someone's house, or at one of those places where you taught medical chatbots how to have a better bedside manner.

The Wall had expanded to multiple walls now. In fact, it had devoured the entire cafeteria. Faces, young and old, white and brown and black, men and women, smiled and laughed silently from the surface. Some of the images were live GIFs embedded into stereoscopic paper. They waved and kissed and danced.

The woman turned and caught Glory staring. "I'm sorry," she said, meaning that she was sorry both for this woman's loss and for having observed what should have been a private moment. She swallowed. The teriyaki didn't taste so good any longer. "Let me look closer," she said, trying to sound hopeful. "That way I'll remember."

Glory stood up, folded her device, and shouldered her bag. She walked up to the photo and gave it a dutiful stare. The girl was pretty in a wholesome way. She wore pajamas with little cartoon penguins on them. Glory nodded once to herself and once to the woman, and then began to peruse the rest of The Wall.

Some of the photos had been there for years. They were the most inert but also the best rendered: some of them were actual, real-deal photos, on actual photo paper. Some of them had been pulled from wallets and lockets. Some of them were even just keychains, hanging off The Wall from haphazardly placed thumbtacks. Some of them were photo sticker sheets that let visitors take stickers away. You saw the tiny stickers sometimes on devices: a whole communion of the missing, their faces filtered through whichever trend was hot when they vanished. Sparkles. Whiskers. Hearts. Palm tree backgrounds. Wizard hats.

Glory always wondered if she would even recognize these people if she were to see them. If she happened upon one of these faces, on the street or in a park or staring dolefully from the stoop of a building,

would she be able to connect the smiling face from the photo with the one she actually beheld? Had she already passed them by? What if she'd walked right past one of these people who had other people waiting for them, and she simply had no idea?

She resolved to look even more carefully at the images, and this is how she saw him: Tyrone Weathers, standing with his arm around a teenager that Glory didn't recognize. They each wore white T-shirts with an orange *X* spray-painted across the front over lopsided football pads. Whatever team they were playing for, it was ad hoc at best. Glory had never heard of Tyrone playing for another team—she had no idea where he would have found the time. But here he was, playing on the same squad as a kid she didn't recognize. A missing kid.

Glory plucked the photo off The Wall.

"HECTOR," the back of it read, in thick Sharpie. A name, and a string of numbers that looked like it belonged to a burner chat line.

Glory reached for her device. She was about to search the number when the device lit up in her hand. Coach Billings's name scrolled across the surface.

"Glory," he said, when she answered.

"Yeah," she said.

"You remember the piranha bar?"

Of course she remembered. The piranha bar had another name—the owner's name, maybe, or his wife's. But everyone knew it for the sign that promised you could FEED LIVE PIRANHAS FOR FIVE BUCKS, which was cheaper than a movie and more exciting than a lap dance since the city council had changed the laws regarding intimate proximity.

"Yeah, I remember."

"Can you meet me there?"

"Right now?"

"Yeah, right now," he said.

Glory stared at the photo. She really wanted to call that number.

On the other hand, Billings sounded rough. Like he was ready to tell her something he shouldn't. She remembered that tone of his voice as well as she remembered her head getting slammed into the lockers at Lincoln High.

"Gloryanna," he said, and for a moment she was back in high school, and they were in the back of his truck, back in the time when you could look up and still see stars at night. "Please," he said.



She found him at the back of the bar, in a booth doused in cough syrup colors by alternating Christmas lights. Now red, now green, now blue, now gold. He had the remains of a beer and a shot in front of him. When she sat down, he nodded at the bartender and held up two fingers.

"You think they do that because you're white, or because you're a man?" she asked.

"Do what?"

"How everyone just pays attention to you. Like they owe you. Like they can't help it."

It was part of what made Billings a good coach. It was what had made him a good team captain, once upon a time. People listened to him. They noticed him and they wanted to do what he said. He was magnetic like that.

"I think it's because I tip well."

They looked anywhere but at each other. Her thumbnail found a groove where someone had turned a swastika into an old Windows logo. She wished suddenly that her nail polish wasn't so chipped, that her cuticles weren't so ragged. She hid her hands in her lap.

"I'm sorry," she said. She felt like an idiot immediately upon speaking the words. "You've probably heard that a million times today. It probably sounds stupid by now. But I am sorry. He was a great kid."

Billings blinked hard. His eyes were bloodshot. She heard him take a deep, wet breath through his nose. "Yeah. He was."

Glory took notice of the napkin dispenser and thought of offering him some. Would that be weird? "For what it's worth, I think he would have gone all the way."

"Oh, hell yeah," Billings agreed. He wiped his eyes in a way that made it look like he was just pinching his nose to ease a sinus headache. "Definitely."

The server came with their beers and shots. Noticing their mood, she chose not to ask about food and merely left a laminated list of specials on the sticky table. They were well past happy hour. Billings picked up his shot, and Glory picked up hers.

"Black and gold," she said, toasting the team colors.

"Black and gold," he said. They threw back their shots. Glory had the sensation of cold amber relief rocketing down her gullet and into her stomach and her mind at the same time. It didn't taste like anything. She cleared her throat. The shot percolated through her blood and across her face. Now, she could raise her eyes to meet his. He'd already started on his beer.

"I can't interview you if we're drinking," she said. "Not really. Background only."

"Is that why you texted?" he asked. "An interview?"

"I sent you an interview request."

"That doesn't mean an interview was what you really wanted," he said. "I thought you just sent that so you were covered at work." He threw himself back in his seat. "My star player dies, and the first thing you ask me for is an interview? Jesus Christ, Gloryanna."

Her mouth opened and then snapped closed. "I thought I should keep it professional," she muttered. "I thought that was what you wanted. You said—"

"I know what I said. Damn it." He licked his lips. "That was years ago."

“Eighteen months.”

“Whatever. It *feels* like years ago. I didn’t know what to do when you came back. Seeing you there in those halls again. I freaked out. Okay? I freaked out. And I said stuff.”

Glory wondered if maybe he’d been here a while before he called her. Maybe he’d been here for happy hour and had taken full advantage. He was peeling the label off his beer. “I said stuff I shouldn’t have,” he added quietly.

“Me too,” she admitted.

He shook his head, working more diligently at peeling away the label. He had almost one whole edge free now. “No, you didn’t. You said what I needed to hear. You always do that.”

“That’s journalists for you,” she said. “Comforting the afflicted, afflicting the comfortable.”

Now his red-rimmed eyes rose to meet hers. “Did you think I was comfortable seeing you again? Did I seem particularly comfortable to you?”

Glory had no answer for that. He hadn’t seemed comfortable, no. He had seemed pissed off. Pissed off that she’d shown up, just like she had when they were in high school, to ruin everything.

“You seemed happy with where you were at. On the field, and in life. You seemed like you had things figured out.”

This was her way of saying that she knew he had somebody. That they had a place together and a dog and there was a cube on the desk in the coaching office that had smiling images of the three of them playing fetch on Alki Beach during a daytrip to The Floating Museum of West Seattle.

“I didn’t want to mess that up,” she added.

“Yeah, well.” He shrugged his shoulders and didn’t finish the thought. “What do you want to know about Tyrone?”

“How long had he been sick?”

Billings’s jaw set. “Three days ago, like I said.”

Glory tilted her head.

“Really?”

“Don’t look at me like that. He told me he was sick three days ago.”

“Players lie about being sick all the time, if it means they’ll get to keep playing. You had access to his wearable stats. It’s only a matter of time before the health examiner gets a warrant for them. Then

she can get a warrant for the whole team if she wants. If she finds out he had a fever and played anyway, it’s your ass on the line.” She sipped her beer. “Was he throwing up during practice?”

“It happens sometimes. During workouts. He seemed fine. No fever. I kept him hydrated. I took it easy on him once I noticed.”

“You let him in the locker room with the other players?”

He flinched. When he spoke, his voice was barely above a whisper. “Yeah. Yes. I did.”

“Is there a chance he could have passed whatever this is on to the rest of the team?”

His eyes rose. He said nothing.

“Mark,” Glory whispered. “Mark, you have to tell me. This is serious. We have to figure this out. We have to tell the kids. We have to tell their parents.”

“If the league cancels the games—”

“*That’s* what you’re worried about right now? The *games*?”

“If they cancel the games, it’ll screw the stats,” he said. “Half my players have wearables now. Implants. Haptic jerseys. It’s the new thing. They need to log in-game hours so the scouts can see their numbers.



Heart rate, blood pressure, eye-tracking, all of it. Any time they spend logged out during regular season play is suspect.”

Glory sank deeper into her seat. He was right about that. Fewer games and fewer practices meant fewer chances to prove themselves, whether it was to the scouts or the scouts’ algorithms. On the other hand, if what Tyrone had was in any way communicable, the odds were that he’d already passed it on to his fellow players. Anyone they came in close contact with—their partners, their siblings, even members of the teams they played against—would be vulnerable.

“This is crazy,” Glory said. “You have to tell them.”

“It’s fine,” Mark insisted. He pulled out his device and zoomed open a literal heatmap of all the players on his starting lineup. Beside their numbers were more numbers: temperature, resting heart rate, hours slept. “See? Perfectly healthy.”

“Is that from the devices they wear during game-time?”

“No. Those are mounted in the jerseys and helmets. It’s their decision whether or not to wear them and share that data. This is just from a free app that’s built into their watches, or their wristbands. Most of them got it as part of a community healthcare initiative, back when they were in junior high. It was part of a study on how insulin resistance impacts cognitive development. I tweaked it a little.” He paused and seemed to notice the expression on her face. “What? I’m more than just a pretty face, you know. I took App Development just like everybody else back when.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You were thinking it.”

Glory sipped her beer to hide her smile. She reminded herself to stay focused. She’d come here to talk about Hector and Tyrone, not the past. It was time to bring out her evidence. She withdrew the photo she’d grabbed at the community center and slapped it down on the table.

“Who’s this?”

Mark Billings stared at the photo for a beat too long. She watched

sobriety trickle down his face and through his limbs. He paled. The hairs on her arms rose. She had seen him this scared exactly once before. “Oh,” he said. “Shit.”

“Who is this other kid, Mark? Hector? The one standing next to Tyrone?”

Mark shook his head slowly. He dragged his gaze from the photo and rested it on Glory’s face. His eyes were strangely bright. “Please, Glory,” he said. “Don’t follow up on this. It’s not worth it.”

“Not worth what? Who is it?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know his name. I didn’t, I mean, until just now.”

“Do you know where this photo was taken?”

His eyes flicked back to the photo.

Glory insisted, “Do you know why I would have found this photo on a wall of missing people?”

“Don’t,” he said. “Please. Glory. Gloryanna. I’m asking. Please don’t investigate. You’ve got a good thing going with this job. And I can promise that whatever you find, your bosses won’t like. If you ever... If *we* ever...” He swallowed. “Look, I know what I said last time, and I know I was a prick, but honey—”

Glory flinched. “We’re done here,” she said. She felt herself stand up. “You had your shot, Mark. You blew it. I’m going to find out what’s going on here, and I’m going to publish it. If you have a problem with that, you’d better figure it out.”



Glory went to bed that night resolved to contact the number on the back of the photo. But a day later, she still hadn’t figured out the right way to do it. Finding the right device to even place the ping from was half the problem. Her usual contact for that sort of thing was busy and hadn’t texted back. In fact, she wondered if maybe the supplier was hemmed up in some way—maybe they’d gotten busted. And if

she wanted to protect her source—and sources who put photos of kids on The Wall needed protection—she needed to be careful. She would have to wait for a secure line of communication. In the meantime, she couldn't tell Jynette what she'd found. Not least because, if she was right, the story would wind up on the embargoed list.

There were certain things the company said its content developers couldn't develop content about. Vaccination was only one item on that list. Every year, there was at least one more. And if Mark's reaction was any clue, this was the kind of story that the company was just waiting to cross off the list—no matter how important it might be to the people of Tacoma.

"I think we're looking at a potential public health hazard," Glory told Jynette the next day. "Whatever Tyrone had, it was strong enough to kill him. And the rest of the team and school has been exposed."

"Did you talk to the hospital?"

"They released a statement, but they're not answering follow-ups. It's just the usual about getting vaccinated every year, washing hands, covering mouths, staying home. You know. But they still haven't mentioned exactly what type of illness it was. If it was a flu, what strain. If it was something else, they won't say."

"Did you talk to the parents?"

Glory hated herself for grinning. But she was right, and she knew it, and now Jynette was about to know it too. "I sent a request, and you know who answered with a pre-written statement, requesting privacy during this difficult time? It wasn't the parents."

"Who was it?"

"A crisis management firm. From Seattle. Why would Tyrone's family hire PR consultants to answer emails about their son?"

Jynette sucked hard on her glowstick. "Drugs?"

Glory thought of the heatmap Mark had showed her. "I don't think so. Tyrone never had an issue with that before. He certainly didn't need any performance enhancement to get into school—his parents

can pay for it. And during the regular season, he logged his wearable data for scouts. I doubt he was doing anything that might make the dataset look suspicious."

Jynette nodded. "Okay. Well, let's focus on the process of elimination. How are the other players?"

Glory didn't always like Jynette, but she liked it when they could get into a groove together, thinking along the same lines.

"Tyrone's girlfriend is sick," she said. "The one whose video we posted. It's possible that's why Tyrone's parents hired a crisis management firm. They might be sick. The other players might be sick. Their siblings and friends and neighbors might be sick. Maybe Tyrone was patient zero. I think we're looking at something really big here."

It was possible, Glory thought, that the only reason she herself wasn't sick was because she worked mostly from home and mostly alone. With a pang, she wondered about Mark. After all, he'd been in the same locker room with his players. He was just as exposed to whatever had killed Tyrone as the others.

"So you think this media organization should be spreading a panic. That's what you think?"

"No," said Glory. "I think we should report the news."

"Well, I think you should watch your tone," Jynette said. "Call me back in an hour. I want an interview with those parents. What I don't want is to alarm people."

Glory had seen enough of her company's coverage of other events to know that alarming people was in fact exactly what they wanted to do. It was their bread and butter. They thrived on it. But the presence of a crisis management firm also meant the presence of lawyers. If Glory insinuated the wrong thing about Tyrone or the team or the school, it might mean a libel suit. That meant she had to get the parents on record first. She had to give them a chance to say something newsworthy.

"Just because it's in the public interest doesn't make it interesting," was how Jynette sometimes described stories like these. They were the types

of stories that small local papers used to cover before companies—like the one currently employing Glory—bought them all out and destroyed them. Once upon a time, there was competition for information surrounding stories like these. Now, it seemed like Glory was the only one interested in a public interest story.

“Just do it like we talked about,” was what Jynette said now.

Frustrated with herself and Jynette, she pinged a former coach from Tacoma High—Paul Krause, who had a killer handshake and a meandering interview style. He always gave up too much of the goods when she asked him about his own players: maybe he’d heard something and would have too much to say about it now. Moreover, he’d coached Tyrone over summers in his Pop Warner years. He had a personal connection to the story. On both counts, he would want to talk. If nothing else, he could lend her some local color on whatever she wrote up next.

“I wondered if you would call,” he said. “I’ve gotten so many requests for Tyrone’s game tapes, you wouldn’t believe.”

“Game tapes?” she asked. “What game tapes? Tyrone’s old ones?”

“Anything I have,” Krause said. “This events management outfit called me asking for them.”

“For the funeral?” Glory asked.

“Man, I guess so. What a thing. I edited those clips to hype people up, you know? They’re not exactly what you’d call solemn.”

“Do you think the other players will ask for the clips, too? I mean, if they have to cancel more games, then they’ll need as much video as they can get to show scouts.”

“Why would they have to cancel more games?”

“Well, if what Tyrone had is contagious, the school board might decide to wait. I mean, if Tyrone’s team plays teams from other schools, the kids from other schools might get it, too.”

“Good Lord. I hadn’t even thought of that. I thought he just had, you know, stomach flu. Food poisoning. Something like that.”

Glory crossed her fingers. Not only was she about to lie, she also needed a lot of luck. “Well, I know that they’ve already canceled the volunteer league games Tyrone was involved in.”

Silence. Glory stopped breathing. She shut her eyes. Her fingers locked together painfully.

“Oh, I didn’t know it was a league. Is that for Shenandoah Baptist? He pinged me about a donation last year for their annual auction: just some of my time for one-on-one coaching. His mother is on the church council. He didn’t say anything about a whole league, though.”

She let out her breath as quietly as she could manage. “I guess I must have misheard something. Maybe it was just the one game.”

They hung up, awkwardly, and Glory stared at her little lunar module of an apartment. It was really just a bedroom: in her building, the kitchens and even the showers were communal. It was the only way to deal with the real estate crisis. Now all she could think of was the epic viral load waiting in any of those spaces. How long would it take something truly dangerous to make its way through the complex? Through the neighborhood? Through their town?

And where had it come from?

She looked at the image. She had a sick feeling she knew where it was taken. But she would have to verify that hunch on her own before jumping to conclusions. She needed that burner device, and she needed it now.



Glory sat outside a gaming den waiting for her contact while she scrolled through the Weathers family media profiles. Rain slithered down the walls of her auto, blurring the pulsing lights advertising this particular offshoot of the Museum of the City of Seattle. Beyond the lights, and inside the converted shipping containers, tourists could see what the cities were like before the quake.

There had been a big public health scare then, too. After Cascadia, *E. coli* leached into the water supply when the sewer lines broke. In response, local communities had organized drives for water purifiers, and the universities open-sourced their research into bacteriophagic water additives. But those solutions arose only because an informed populace had the know-how to ask for and develop them. They understood the risk and acted appropriately. The knowledge that *E. coli* wasn't at all politically controversial—at least, not at the time. It was a bad mark on the lobby that had pushed to privatize the sewers entirely, but that story came later. No one actively tried to suppress the information as it emerged. At the moment, another public health crisis might be brewing right under Tacoma's nose—and if someone didn't break the story, then no one would be the wiser until it was too late.

Someone knocked on the window of Glory's auto, trying to sell her soup out of a massive barrel on wheels. She waved them away and refocused on the Weathers family. Tyrone Weathers's mother was indeed a member of the church council at Shenandoah Baptist. She was right there on the church's website and in its social profiles. Her signature project was the church auction. The money it raised was split between improving the church building and funding a community health clinic with a clean needle site. Tyrone himself had, according to his profiles, been active in the church's youth group. It met on Wednesday evenings from seven to nine.

There was no mention of volunteer football coaching, but there was mention of mission work. And right there—right under the missionary headline—was a single bullet point: *detainee outreach*. She could guess the rest: Tyrone had played a nice game of touch football with kids up at the detention center on the other side of the Puyallup River. It was exactly the type of service day his church would approve of him leading. But he'd caught something that was going around, just like any other kid might while playing an innocent game of catch. And now he was dead. And probably so were a lot of other kids—kids who had never had a

shot at a starting lineup, who had never had a shot at anything.

Glory still hadn't been able to reach Mrs. Weathers, or any of Tyrone's other family members, to confirm his participation in that outreach. The family had locked all their accounts by now and issued only a single statement from the same crisis management firm, thanking people for their condolences and asking for privacy. There would be no interviews, no appearances. On their respective walls were messages from local parents and other community members, expressing their concern and sympathy, and saying that they were considering pulling their own children from school until more was known about whether the stomach flu was contagious or a case of extremely violent food poisoning combined with a hard-working athlete's unique case of dehydration. But no one from the Weathers family had responded.

As far as Glory was concerned, it was a little weird. The last time a major flu outbreak had hit the community, the PTA was up in arms about it, and social feeds were alive with mommy bloggers hawking raw vinegar cures. But Mrs. Weathers hadn't fed into that at all, and neither had Chastity Kane's parents. They too had locked all their accounts. Even Tyrone's and Chastity's accounts were locked.

It was almost as though they had all agreed to keep quiet. Or as though they had been made to agree by a firm in Seattle's most expensive office building. Almost as though the information about Tyrone's illness and its possible spread was embargoed.

When Glory refreshed the team pages, more accounts had followed suit.

She pinged Billings. <<Are any more of your players sick?>>

<<I have no comment at this time.>>

<<So they are sick.>>

<<I have no comment at this time.>>

<<Are you sick? How are you feeling? You were in contact with them, too. And I saw today you had to cancel another game.>>

<<Where are you???>>

Glory didn't answer. Let Billings sweat a little. The longer Mark worried, the more likely he was to give up something good. She deliberately turned her device over and folded her arms. Not since high school had she worked so hard to avoid texting him back. But the old skills were still there. She could remember what that particular strain of self-discipline felt like; dealing with him always meant finding hidden reserves of it. She didn't need him, she reminded herself. She had other sources. She could break the story without him.

Their son would be in high school by now. The same age as Tyrone. He might have played football. Or maybe not. Maybe he would have been "not much of a team player," like his mother. Or maybe he would have surprised them, been someone totally different—some chess prodigy or programming genius or one of those creepy kids who developed his own particular color of mold. Now they would never know. The adoption was private, and closed. It was that fact which Mark could never forgive. It wasn't the decision to give up their son, it was the choice not to leave a trail of breadcrumbs behind. At least, that was what he'd said at the time. But Glory had her doubts.

Another knock jolted her out of her thoughts. Glory recognized the kid on the other side of the glass and popped open the door. A kid with leopard-print hair and a shiny red jumpsuit slid into the auto.

"Sorry about that," Jag said. They smelled like bubblegum vapor and new shoes. The jumpsuit squeaked as they wriggled down into the seat. "Took forever."

"It's fine," Glory said. "Short notice." She held out the photo. It looked so ludicrous and antiquated in her hand, like holding out a fax still warm from the machine. "What can you tell me about this number?"

"It's a chat line," Jag said. "The prefix looks like Telmex. But it could be spoofed. Sometimes you can get bounced around. But I bet the end user is somewhere else down south."

Glory flipped the photo over. "Is this what I think it is?"

The kid shrugged. "Probably." They rolled their neck until it popped,

audibly. "You ever been out there?"

"Once. A year ago. To cover a protest. I couldn't breathe through my nose for a week. You?"

Jag shook their head. "It's a bad idea for someone like me. I'm on enough lists as it is."

"Right."

"What are you looking for out there?"

Glory fingered Tyrone's face on the photo. "Something I hope isn't there."



Glory paid cash for an off-license bus to take her to a casino where she could ping the number as anonymously as possible. Since the pipeline agreements, the reservation internet had the best privacy—the NSJI-net, loosely named for the helpful Spider Grandmother, was a lot more stable and secure than its colonial competitors. It was built

to withstand sudden and prolonged outages. It also had a rather prickly relationship with the NSA based on a very specific Supreme Court ruling regarding both the fourth amendment and Native sovereignty. It was, in short, the best network from which to access a source. And the price of the call was the cost of a bus ticket and an all-day breakfast buffet.

Glory plowed her way through a bannock taco and a raspberry tea latté before digging out her burner. She scoped the restaurant before punching in the numbers. It was mostly empty: people pre-empting their hangovers, a crew of bachelorettes, an



elderly couple of Vietnamese night owls who had long since lost their perception of diurnal time.

She waited on the line. It rang and rang. The tones sounded far away, underwater. She imagined all the cities the call was hopping through, leapfrogging from place to place, dialect to dialect. Finally, a chime sounded and a voice sounded. It belonged to a woman. She spoke in Spanish.

In Spanish, Glory said: “I found a photo with this number on it.”

On the other end of the line, the woman burst into tears. “Where is he?” she asked. “Where is my son? Where is Hector? Is he still there?”

“I’m in Tacoma,” Glory answered. “When was your son there?”

“He’s been there all year,” the woman answered. “But then he got sick. And now they won’t let me talk to him.”

Glory’s heart sank into a pit in her stomach. It sat there, rock-hard and cold. “When was that?”

“The last call was last month,” the woman said. “Have you seen him?”

“No, I haven’t,” Glory said. “I’m sorry.”

“Do you know if he’s all right?”

“I don’t.” It was an honest answer. Or so she told herself. The truth would be too hard to explain in another language. The truth would be too hard to explain in any language. How could she explain that Hector had been photographed standing arm in arm with a boy who was now dead? That Tyrone had been the picture of health, and now his funeral was being planned?

“What was he sick with?” Glory asked. “Did they tell you?”

“Hector said they called it The Broom,” his mother said.



When Glory arrived back home, Billings was waiting for her. He sat in the little lobby in front of a fire that had long since stopped working. The weird blobs of furniture looked vaguely like macro close-ups of bacteria. He perched in a lime-green puffball that didn’t seem to want

to let him go when he tried standing up.

“She know you’re here?” Glory asked.

“Don’t,” he said.

“Probably bad for you to show up,” Glory added, as she fished in her bag for her fob. “We’ve got facial recognition in this lobby. And you’ve always been very searchable. Wouldn’t want anybody getting any ideas. The school board. Your wife.”

“We’re not married.”

“Oh, that makes it all better.” Glory fobbed herself into the elevator. She turned to him. “Well? Are you coming?”

They didn’t speak until she’d let them into her place. It wasn’t much more than a container with a sleeping bench along one side and a set of small kitchen appliances on the other. The books provided all the insulation.

“Still smells the same,” Billings said. “Like your room, I mean. It smells like your room used to smell.”

“Yeah, well, I’m lucky they still make my conditioner.”

Glory poured them drinks. It was the condo’s very own brand; the cheap kind the store downstairs got in bulk. Apparently the real estate developers also owned some distilleries. Lately it was like no *one* company did any *one* thing any longer: the dating services sold makeup, the makeup companies sold playlists, and the condos sold booze so you wouldn’t leave the house. She handed a glass to Billings.

“Where were you?” he asked.

“Casino.”

“Did you win anything?”

“Some information.” She collapsed onto the bench and swirled her drink in its glass. If she let the ice cubes melt out a little, it wouldn’t taste so cheap. She brought the photo out from her bag and held it up.

“When did he visit Kidmo, Mark? How long ago was it? Do you know?”

“Don’t call it that.”

She tucked the photo into her shirt. “I think that’s what the kids themselves call it. Or so I’m told. We’re not really allowed to talk about it at my place of employment.”

“Is that why you haven’t published your piece?”

“That’s one reason. The other reason is that if I breathe a word of it to my editor, she’ll probably fire me. The company that owns and operates the nearest center? Well, its affiliates are a big source of ad revenue. Which means I need all the facts.” She sipped her drink. “Did you know that during the Japanese internment, dysentery was so common at the Jerome Relocation Center that they called it Jerome Disease?”

Billings hung his head. “No. I did not know that.”

“Did you know that by 1947, only 25 percent of Israeli citizens were concentration camp survivors, but those survivors accounted for over 60 percent of all tuberculosis cases in the entire country?”

“You’ve been doing your homework.”

“Twenty percent of the survivors at Belsen had TB—one-fifth! Those who lived had it for the rest of their lives. And the armed forces that liberated the camps took TB all over the world when they went home. And that’s just one disease. There was dysentery, scabies, typhus, malaria. They didn’t have those diseases when they went in. And it wasn’t some big experiment, either. The conditions made them sick.”

Billings held his hands open. “I don’t know what you want me to say, Gloryanna.”

“I want you to help me get my foot in the door with Mrs. Weathers. She can confirm everything. Or she will. Eventually. Especially once it starts happening to other kids.” Glory’s head tilted. “You didn’t just show up here out of concern for my well-being, Mark. You saw something that scared you. And I bet it has to do with the wearables your starting lineup has. Any of them feeling feverish lately?”

Billings raised his gaze to meet hers. “If I tell you, will it be off the record?”

“People are dying, Mark. Kids. Your kids.”

He ran a hand through his hair. She had never noticed, until now, just how much it had thinned in recent years. “They haven’t let a reporter in one of those places in years. It’s a big deal that Tyrone and his youth group were even allowed in. He was proud of it. He said they had to sign a million forms. That’s probably why Tyrone’s parents hired PR people.”

“You heard about that, huh?” She pulled the photo back out of her shirt. She held it in front of his face. “His name is Hector. I talked to his mom today. I don’t know much about her, but I’m willing to bet she can’t afford some big fancy crisis consultant to help track down her son. And I didn’t have the heart to tell her that what happened to Tyrone had probably already happened to her boy. And that it was probably going to happen all over again, to some other kid. Other kids.”

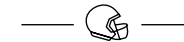
Billings stared at the photo. Occasionally his focus would break, but inevitably it would always return. There was his star player, his great shining hope, standing next to a stranger.

“Do you know what it is?” he asked. “Flu? Something else?”

“No. I don’t know. But I think you and I are sitting on a story that’s big enough to get the CDC to investigate that center.”

“Me and you?”

“You and me.” She nodded at his jacket. “You’ve got the wearable data from your players. You know who’s sick and who isn’t. You’re the difference between somebody paying attention to this story because it hits people locally, and everyone forgetting about it because it happens to people with numbers instead of names.”



A month later, after some of the dust had settled, she showed up at the Weathers family home. It wasn’t quite a McMansion—more like a fast-casual castle. She brought a burner device and a box of Entenmann’s. Mrs. Weathers answered the door. She still wore black. Glory heard

Mrs. Kane's voice in the house. The two women had been spending time together, mourning their children.

The Tacoma Titans—the name the mothers had chosen for themselves over the past few weeks—had been doing a lot of that.

“Gloryanna,” Mrs. Weathers said. “We were just talking about you.”

“Uh-oh,” Glory said.

“Mark was telling us some of the stories from when you were growing up together.”

“Double uh-oh,” she said, as Mrs. Weathers took the box of pastries and ushered her into the house. It smelled of flowers. Real ones. A portrait of Tyrone hung

over the fireplace. His trophies sat on the mantel beneath. The last time Glory had been there, she'd been sitting on a couch in full view of that fireplace, answering questions about her investigation of Tyrone's death for the video component of her own local news team. She and Mrs. Weathers had spoken into the same drone, sharing a live feed across relevant platforms, reaching other mothers in other cities, telling them about the dangers they thought could never reach them.

“Did you sign with those movie people yet?” Glory asked.

“They won't give me a producer credit,” Mrs. Weathers said. “I can wait.”

“That's the spirit.”

“Thank you for walking me through that contract, by the way.”

“It's no trouble. I've had to read my share of predatory content agreements. Might as well put the experience to good use.”

“I just want to make sure the story gets out in the right way,” Mrs. Weathers said. “The rumors that flew around, after...” She trailed off. Glory nodded. The other woman didn't have to say more. A huge



amount of disinformation had accompanied the arrival of the story. Mrs. Weathers and all the parents suddenly had to deal with people questioning the very roots of the story—whether or not they even had children, much less dead ones who'd caught an entirely preventable ailment spawned by close quarters, bad food, and lack of hygiene. Taking control of the narrative meant processing their loss over and over again, in public. Until now, their privilege had insulated a number of these women from the worst the world had to offer, but the pain of losing a child was the closest thing to a universal human experience Gloryanna could think of. It hurt just the same no matter who you were. The only thing money bought was better strategies for coping.

“It's almost time,” Glory said.

“Right,” Mrs. Weathers said. “Ladies,” she called into the kitchen. “We're almost ready to go.”

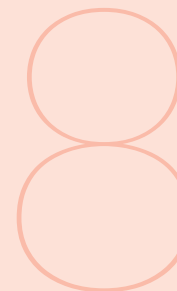
They gathered in the living room. There was iced tea and deviled eggs and smoked salmon and Nanaimo bars. It looked like an afternoon tea, or a book club meeting. It did not look like what it was. It did not look like the opportunity to reach out to the one boy these women had worked so tirelessly to find. The one whose face smiled next to Tyrone's, the one whose name lived on their lips. The one who had survived, and testified, and gone home.

Glory put the device in the center of the coffee table. She watched as Mrs. Weathers punched in the number.

A moment later, Hector answered. “I'll get my mom,” he said. “She's been waiting all day.”

“So have we,” Mrs. Weathers said. “But why don't we catch up with you first?”

Across the room, Mark raised his glass of iced tea. Glory did the same.



STORY 8

BRIEF EXERCISES IN MINDFULNESS

CALVIN BAKER

ILLUSTRATIONS BY NATHAN MOTZKO

One morning, after waking from an anxious dream, Harry Sampson heard his roommate, Dean, at the door of their apartment squabbling with a bill collector. “I already told you, he doesn’t live here anymore,” Dean insisted with rising annoyance as the overweight stranger stared at him implacably from the other side of the doorway. “Well, if you do happen to see him, let him know there’s a summons out for him to appear in court.” The bill collector’s round face remained perfectly serene, but his voice betrayed his disbelief that the previous tenant had moved away without a trace. He was used to hostility.

“Do I even look like I know anyone named Raquin?” Dean asked too loudly, turning the palms of his hands skyward with exaggerated insouciance.

The collection agent sized up Dean’s clean-cut, all-American look. Dean exuded the sense of someone who had never missed a payment, failed to remember an appointment, or had a bad night’s sleep his entire life. But the man knew appearances lied as much as words, and over time had found actions often held multiple meanings, even eyes were not always readable. He prided himself on being, what was the word he had heard, empirical, and remaining professional, if you could call chasing people down for money a profession. He pressed a copy of the summons into Dean’s hand. “Just in case you do.”

“I feel unclean,” Dean reported to the air of the apartment, after closing the door. He walked the few steps into the kitchen and raised the lid on the stainless steel trash can with the foot pedal.

“Hey you can’t throw that out,” Harry protested. “The guy’s in trouble.”

“Not my problem he doesn’t pay his bills. Here, you take it, if you care so much.”

Harry claimed the summons hovering over the mouth of the trash can and settled it in a pile nestled on a shelf in the cabinet next to the refrigerator, where he had a foot-high stack of Raquin’s accumulated mail. “Maybe I should just open it and see if there’s a phone number for him somewhere.”

“Opening someone else’s mail is a criminal offense,” Dean protested. “Besides, I bet the guy doesn’t even have a phone. Or if he does, he doesn’t answer it.” He pointed to a redlined envelope from the mobile company tucked into the stack with a bunch of other redlined envelopes that told in a glance the story of a man drowning. “Why else would they send someone here?”

“We don’t know what his story is,” insisted Harry, who remembered hearing someone on television once saying everyone has a story, and if we could only open ourselves to listen, really listen to the stories of others, how it would trigger the most profound sense of empathy, and how this was what all the dead religions and dead saints taught, and that it was the key to human connection, to everything really. He repeated what he remembered of this to Dean.

Dean chortled loudly, reeling his head back like a racehorse choking on dust. “Harry, for someone so intelligent, you’re the biggest fucking moron I know,” Dean spat out. “If it’s that simple, why doesn’t everyone just goddamn listen and trigger this allegedly profound cure to all our goddamned problems? Idiot.” Dean could be cynical like that. “The guy could be dead for all we know. Maybe he decided to take a dive off the fire escape because of all the pressure. A straight dive, like the kind they teach you when you’re a kid. Simple and perfect. It’s what I’d do if I couldn’t do something as basic as pay my bills or feed my family.”

“Don’t be morbid, Dean,” Harry said, going into the bathroom to shower and take his antidepressants before heading out to meet

friends. “What are you so angry about anyway? They’re not your bills. If everyone who owed money offed themselves, 80 percent of the country would be dead.”

“It’s not morbid, and I’m not angry about anything,” Dean said to the closing white, plastic door, which had been molded to resemble the softly petaled striations of rosewood. Despite such handsome design, it still didn’t insulate sound between the rooms, failing in one of the primary tasks of basic door-ness as Dean once observed. “Because things like that don’t happen to people like us. If they did, though, that would be the rational solution.”

On the other side of the door, Harry’s chest clenched with anxiety at Dean’s cavalier mention of suicide. In the interior hall, Dean listened in disgust to the sounds of Harry’s brushing, gargling, rinsing, flushing, before turning back to the kitchen, which was on the other side of the bathroom wall. Harry heard him open the refrigerator and chug the last drops from their communal water pitcher, before leaving the apartment. Harry finished getting dressed as he tried to understand why he still lived with Dean. They had been roommates since sophomore year at Regent’s. He hated change more than he was bothered by Dean drinking from the pitcher, or any of the other grating things Dean did. He lived with Dean out of habit, he decided. Harry started telling himself, as he left for class, he endured Dean the way you endure a bad Thanksgiving dinner, until he forced himself to remember that Dean deserved empathy too.

When he returned home, Harry found Dean splayed across the sofa in the late afternoon light, entertaining friends from college. It was a scene he had endured nearly every week of living with Dean, as though Dean were afraid to be alone, or none of his friends had apartments they were willing to wreck every weekend. The television projected old episodes of *Game of Thrones* as Dean, Kyle, and Judy, who had all been on the swim team together, passed a bong lazily among them, adding

commentary to the action on the TV and trashing everyone they knew from Regent’s for being such a competitive asshole.

Kyle and Judy had been together since he first met either of them, which was the same time he had met Dean. The housing office randomly assigned them to live together after they both turned in their housing forms late at the end of freshman year. In all that time, he had never known Dean to be in a relationship, not a real one.

As Harry scavenged the cupboards, trying to decide whether to cook or order in, he heard Dean and Kyle singing along to Migos, including whenever the rappers used the n-word. He cringed every time he heard them say it, before calling out to the other room that you weren’t supposed to say the n-word, even if you were repeating a black person saying the n-word. Harry was head-dancing to the beat, while mentally trying to block out the n-word, when Judy entered the kitchen for a glass of water.

“Cotton mouth?” he asked. Harry didn’t smoke or consume mood-altering substances of any kind since freshman year after discovering how much the effects disagreed with him.

Finding the water pitcher in the refrigerator desperately empty, Judy shrugged as she filled her glass from the tap. After quenching her thirst, she let the water from the tap stream into the top of the pitcher, watching the slow trickle with complete absorption.

“Judy, it’s just water,” Harry said.

“Not just water, Harry.” She turned her glassy eyes up from the pitcher. “It’s a record of everything in the environment. Everything in the city, in this moment in time. It’s not just water. It’s history, Harry. Do you know there are eighteen different types of water, depending on the isotopes of hydrogen and oxygen? Not to mention the trace elements that tell you where it came from, which ocean or river, or pond, or even puddle. Protium, which we drink in seven different forms, and deuterium, that’s the stuff they use in nuclear reactors, are only the most common.”

“Judy, how do you know this,” he asked absentmindedly. Judy could be a know-it-all, and he had to try extra hard sometimes to stay in the moment when she started talking, which he did as he decided to order from the sushi restaurant that had just opened on Nostrand. When he walked past on the way to the train station, he wondered why it was always empty. Was it because it was new or because it was bad? Or perhaps people in their neighborhood didn’t eat sushi, or maybe they always ordered in like him? His mind was starting to race when he remembered to be mindful—to stay in the moment. His mind raced a lot, and he reminded himself to be mindful a lot. He was usually successful enough that he couldn’t remember his last panic attack.

“Harry, I’m a swimmer. I live for water. Listen, Harry, can I ask you something?” Judy pointed to the stack of Raquin’s correspondence that was still on the kitchen counter from earlier in the day.

“Sure, Judy.” He always liked the way she said his name, like she was giving him all her attention.

“Why don’t you open your mail? Are you depressed or something?”

“It’s not my mail. It’s the guy who used to live here. I don’t know how to reach him, so I’m saving it in case he ever comes by to get it. It seems like the decent thing to do.”

Judy started flipping through the envelopes on the counter. “Oh, that’s really nice of you, Harry. I sometimes wish some of your niceness would rub off on Dean.” Harry hated it when girls called him nice, especially pretty girls. It meant they found him undatable. He wondered briefly if he could learn to be an asshole but decided it was something you learned when you were a kid, like playing piano well or speaking Spanish without an accent, both of which he did. “Here, the number is right there.” Judy pointed to the black bars running along the face of a package.

“Where?” Harry looked blankly at the random series of horizontal black bars. “It’s just a UPC code.”

“Actually, a UPC is a universal product code. This is an IMb, Intelligent Mail barcode,” Judy explained. “It’s a system containing a

great deal of information. That’s why they always tell you to rip the labels off before you throw anything out. If you knew how much information was in one of these codes, right out in the open, you’d be paranoid.”

“Is that what you learned working in the mailroom?” Harry mocked. Judy was interning for a talent agency, and most of her job consisted of sorting and delivering the partners’ mail until she worked her way up, as she always reminded them.

“Partially. His phone number is 917-555-0077.”

“How can you read that without a scanner?” He couldn’t imagine how even Judy, who was so obsessive about things, learned to decipher a barcode.

“Because it’s printed right there.” She traced a series of numbers in microscopic font, before returning the package to the counter, the water pitcher to the refrigerator, and herself to the sofa. “You know, you guys should really change the filter in that thing once in a while.”

As she went back to the living room, Harry looked at the number that had been staring at him all along, feeling foolish he didn’t know it was there and reproaching himself for not being more mindful, underestimating Judy as much as he did just because she was one of Dean’s friends who always talked about how they were one day going to run the universe, while always being high on his couch whenever he came home. That’s what happens when you judge everybody all the goddamned time, including yourself, he muttered under his breath. You miss things staring you in the face.

Dean returned home unusually late Monday and was still preoccupied with his day when he inserted the key in the front door at ten o’clock that night, only to have the knob turn from the inside knocking him temporarily off-balance from the momentum. As he was about to enter, a statuesque dark-skinned woman in a fitted blue dress brushed past him. “Hi, you must be Harry’s roommate,” she said, stopping to introduce herself.

“Dean.” He introduced himself with a confident handshake, masking how unnerved he was to see Harry had scored such an attractive date.

“Raquin,” she replied. “Thank you for keeping my mail.”

“You’re Raquin?” Dean stared at her uncomfortably long before catching himself. “It’s just, I thought Raquin was a guy.”

“Amazing how they’ve transformed the apartment.” She waved goodbye lightly, slipping down the stairs familiarly instead of waiting for the lumbering old elevator. Dean didn’t know which was more unexpected: her looks or how normal she seemed. Not like his idea of a Raquin at all.

“Holy shit,” he called out to Harry, walking through the apartment to his bedroom. “That’s Raquin? She’s hell a fine for a black girl, otherwise...”

“Jesus H. Christ, that’s hell a wrong,” Harry snapped, taking the chance to dig at Dean’s annoying San Francisco slang, which he had picked up from Kyle, along with his attitude. “You can’t go around talking like that, Dean.” He had taken a feminism class as part of his humanities requirement in college, and it had completely changed the way he saw things. He understood standing by silently was the same as actively endorsing. It felt good to say something and not be part of the problem. “How would you feel if it was you?”

“You’re right.” Dean cut him off angrily, going into the bathroom and slamming the door behind him as his last words met Harry’s in the empty living room. “I’d still do her.”

Harry tried to breathe, but couldn’t. Instead of the panic that usually welled up when his emotions overflowed, he found anger. “You’re a complete and utter jackass. I used to think, Oh, it’s just Dean: he’s harmless, or he was never taught better, or who am I to judge him. But you’re the biggest jerk I know.”

“Fuck you, Harry. I say whatever I want to say in the sanctity of my own home. That’s the point of privacy. I am in private, and in private I do what I want, say what I want, so long as it doesn’t harm anyone.”

“It does harm people,” Harry said. “It harms me. It harms her. It harms you.”

“What the hell do you have to do with it? You’re not a fucking saint, Harry. Oh, I get it,” Dean said abruptly. “You want to fuck her.”

“It makes me uncomfortable when you say shit like that.” Harry reddened.

“So what the fuck makes you think anyone has the right to comfort, you smug prick.” Dean held his hands in air quotes around the word *comfort*, tense enough to strangle it, before withdrawing a finger on either hand, flipping his wrists, and throwing his forearms in a short, violent burst to emphasize the double bird he’d just shot at Harry. “You think I’m comfortable, Harry?”

“No, Dean, I think you’re the most miserable son of a bitch I know.” Each retreated to his respective room, like boxers after the bell or the passengers of a subway car when a homeless person is sleeping across three seats. They remained in their separate corners of the apartment for the remainder of the week, each going carefully about his business, avoiding the other. Silence charged the air, and their mutual avoidance altered their normal rhythms of life. They no longer ran into each other in the kitchen at mealtimes, in the living room when they relaxed, or in spare moments of boredom when the human thing to do would be to engage in chat, gossip, share interests, even if, as they often did, in mutual antipathy.

Raquin walked down Pacific through the streets she had traced every day of her life until thirteen weeks ago. They were as familiar to her as her own nervous system, and she felt her body relax: it released the stress of moving, of seeing new people in her old apartment, of the new environment she found herself in that she had not even realized she was carrying until she felt the ease with which she inhabited the streets she had been raised in. She felt herself again.

Her sense of ease was upended by the subtle differences she began

to notice when she turned onto Nostrand. Details, she thought, the newcomers would never see because of the way they walked through the streets without looking at anyone, or at least not at the people they were slowly drowning, like water seeping into a cave.

There was a fancy restaurant on the corner near Atlantic filled with people who looked like they had come from Manhattan, white faces streaming up from the subway with their eyes averted, even a handful of commuters on bicycles like on the other side of the park. What struck her most, though, was the way the apartment had been renovated: the busted old walls smoothed over, repairing the water damage from where the upstairs neighbor's bathroom always flooded and rained through yellowed plaster, the old kitchen cabinets and appliances replaced with sleek new ones, and the entrance lights now actually working because the hundred-year-old electrical wiring had finally been repaired. Only the windows and floors were the same. She wondered if the new tenants had to call the landlord every day for months to have the exterminator sent, or whether the management company sent someone over automatically so the new people would be happy.

Everything in the air that had felt soothing turned sour as she ran to catch the bus quickly approaching on the other side of the avenue. At first she had looked at the changes in the neighborhood like one of those spot-the-difference cartoons in the Sunday paper she looked



at when she was a girl, but as she sat down behind the driver, she understood the real transformation in the picture: in one panel you were there, and in the next you were gone.

By the time she transferred to the subway, she felt tired and was grateful for an open seat, but as the train sped toward the ocean, she wondered if eventually she would be pushed out into the sea. To distract herself, she began thumbing through the old mail weighing down her purse and decided against opening it. It was nothing but bills she couldn't pay. Her salary barely let her pay the rent where they lived now, forget about the back rent she was being sued for, forget about the past due and all the other bills she had inherited when her mother switched everything over to Raquin's name because they had closed all the accounts in her mother's. "It's going to be your apartment one day anyway," she had said, to hide her shame.

When she descended the stairs at Coney Island, she felt her nervous system tense as she navigated past all the strange shops and foreign faces, her nostrils picking up the smell of trash, and in the distance the salt of the ocean, trying to imagine her future and map a way to pay all those delinquent bills. She was on the edge of Brooklyn, and if she didn't figure something out soon, she knew there was no place left to go but fall off the world.



Harry returned from yoga Saturday afternoon to the familiar sound of the television blaring in the living room and to the wafting odor of marijuana in the hall. He knew Dean and his friends had, once again, commandeered the house for the weekend. He made the quick decision to act as though nothing had happened, even though he knew Dean had inevitably reported the details of their fight as he and Dean had had disagreements before.

He was relieved to find the living room empty when he entered.

Seeing that he had the apartment to himself, Harry searched the room for the remote to turn off the television, opened the windows to air the place out, and sank down on the sagging, beige sofa to enjoy the meditative afterglow of savasana. As he stared into the darkness behind his eyelids, he heard Dean's bedroom door open and looked up to see Dean and Judy standing across the room.

"Can we talk?" Dean asked.

"What's up?" Harry pulled himself upright as Dean sat down in the mismatched upholstered chair on the other side of the coffee table, and Judy stood behind him. "I know, I'm sorry about Monday," Harry said with real remorse. He had let his emotions get out of check and regretted calling Dean the most miserable son of a bitch he knew, which he thought it best not to repeat.

"Forget it." Dean washed the air with his hand. "Friends fight sometimes."

"I know, but I didn't mean the things I said."

"Don't worry about it. Listen." Dean looked at him searchingly, then decided to simply be direct. "I think you should move out."

"Move out?" Harry was stunned. "I thought you said you wanted to put the fight behind us."

"It's not that," Dean assured him. "Judy and I are moving in together."

"What?"

"I know how it looks, but it just happened," Judy said. "Harry, Dean and I are in love."

"What about Kyle?"

Dean chortled. "Survival of the fittest."

"Dean, you don't need to say things like that," Judy said softly. "It's done. Now stop it, please."

Harry thought about how he might have expected something like this from Dean, but he looked at Judy incredulously before remembering to smooth any appearance of judgment from his eyes.

"When? How?"

"It just felt right," Judy said. "Kyle and I grew apart until I couldn't imagine spending the rest of our lives together. It may have looked different from the outside, the way some things look right on paper, but inside I knew better: I didn't feel it."

She and Dean had been going out for months, which was why Dean came home late so often. After knowing each other so long, they both thought moving in together was the next logical step.

Harry had always thought of Judy as the kind of woman who would be married early. She was serious and confident about herself. He hadn't expected Dean to ever make a commitment. The words *Dean* and *love* did not rest easily in the same sentence. Kyle must have been crushed.

In a panic, he stopped thinking about Kyle or Dean or Judy and thought about himself: Where would he move? "Why should I be the one to move out? You can move into Judy's place."

"Because I found this place, and you know Judy lives in a studio," Dean snapped.

"Harry, why don't you take over the lease there?" Judy offered, trying to be helpful.

"I can't afford that," Harry argued. Judy couldn't afford it either; her parents helped with the rent. There was no way he was going to ask his own parents for help with his rent. He was a man. He felt his breathing quicken and tried to still it with the pranayama exercises he'd learned, before giving up and going to the bathroom to find his anxiety medicine.

Harry felt out of place and apprehensive whenever he came home after that conversation. He never knew whether it would be just Dean in the apartment, pretending nothing had happened, or Dean and Judy cooking, having sex, or doing other couple things you could hear.

She hadn't moved in, not officially, but already the changes were apparent, as he watched himself being displaced. Instead of the smell of weed on Saturday mornings, when he returned from looking at apartments, he was greeted by the smell of brunch being made and

the sound of the television broadcasting cooking shows in the other room. Dean even made the effort to clean the kitchen and bathroom, scrubbing the black gunk from the sinks after determining it was dirt and not mold. He ordered a bulk shipment of filters for the water pitcher, stopped smoking, and deleted the dating apps on his phone. Harry was amazed to see how easily Dean seemed to change. Everything he had read about how people transformed their lives made the point of underscoring how hard it was, the year-over-year effort, but for Dean it seemed as simple as falling in love.

Harry was equally amazed by how seamlessly he accepted it—moving from thinking of Judy and Kyle to thinking of Dean and Judy. He supposed it must have been there all along and he had simply missed the signs. His only consolation for being so blind was thinking Kyle must have too.

The neighborhood seemed more expensive than he remembered. Each apartment he looked at seemed more out of reach and depressing than the last. Even the interior studio, filled with the smell of grease from the Chinese joint in front and trash from the courtyard, was unaffordable on Harry's salary as a fifth grade math teacher. After viewing it, he popped an anxiety pill into his mouth, dry swallowing without waiting for his saliva to pool.

He never day-drunk, on account of his



grandfather, whom he didn't remember, and uncle Chad, whom he did, but as he headed toward the subway, he decided to walk into a dim bar, take a seat near the window, and order a pint of Brooklyn Lager, which was the happy hour special, and considering his circumstances, all he could afford. Since all he could afford was happy hour in a dive bar, he asked for a bourbon to go with the beer. He was going to have to move back in with his parents. That deserved a drink. He decided it might as well be a real one.

As his thoughts started to lap darkly in the gloomy room, he reminded himself to try to be grateful for the fact that he could move back home, because not everyone had parents who would be happy to have them. He drained his whiskey, sipped the beer, until he could see the light from outside through the bottom of the glass, then ordered another day-drink. It tasted like failure.

Dean came home to find Harry sitting on the sofa in his underwear, shit-faced, and texting furiously. "That," he thought to himself, waving briefly before heading to his bedroom, "is not good." Dean prided himself on having more self-control than Harry, who had to take medication and classes between trips to a therapist simply to be a functioning person in the world. He shook his head knowing that none of his friend's yoga classes or therapists had ever taught him that a half-empty six-pack, an open bottle of Ativan, plus sitting alone at ten o'clock in the evening with a brightly illuminated cellphone was the first stage of regret.

"Poor Harry," Dean thought. "He's turned into a loser." Dean's boss had been fired, and he had a meeting scheduled with his boss's boss the next morning to discuss taking over the job as product manager. Start-up culture was evolve or die, so his manager's firing wasn't exactly a failure. He would do fine as a consultant or manager at an old-growth company; he just hadn't evolved fast enough for a tech firm.

Dean wished he had something nice to say to Harry, time to sit with him a while, patience to build him back up, and empathy to learn what

was on his shit-faced mind. Hopefully, he had found a new place and was celebrating because, in truth, Dean was sick of Harry. Sick of his lectures. Sick of him slacking through life, while thinking he was better than other people. They had been thrown together randomly, and he realized how little agency he had taken in that part of his life, assuming one roommate was the same as any other. It's not that he disliked him, Dean told himself, turning on his computer to research how much his boss had been paid and what similar positions paid elsewhere so he'd be prepared for the morning conversation. It's simply that Harry wasn't evolving and he was.

Dean was right. Harry had betrayed himself. In one of his text threads, he was trying to convince his mother of his prospects in the city and alleviate her concern that he, in her words, "seemed unsteady."

"Never been better," he replied.

"Harry, are you in a healthy place?" Mrs. Sampson wanted to know. In her Westport bedroom, Mrs. Sampson wondered whether she should get in the car and drive down to the city, or whether that would only make both of them feel foolish. He's a college graduate and a grown man, she tried to tell herself, which is what her husband had said after taking the phone to look at the stream of texts from their son.

"Well, what do you think is wrong with him?"

Mr. Sampson was the kind of attorney who prided himself on understanding the nuanced motivations of human behavior and language. He took the phone again, scrutinized the back-and-forth bursts silently for a moment, and returned the phone to his wife. "I think," he said, kissing Mrs. Sampson on the forehead then turning over on his side of the bed to go to sleep, "our little Harry has been drinking."

This alarmed Mrs. Sampson all the more. She had read carefully all the side effects of Ativan when he was originally prescribed it junior year, as the PSATs approached. Drinking was strongly contraindicated. "Harry," she typed, "have you been drinking? Are you drunk, Harry? Are you alone?" The thought of him drunk saddened her. "Well,

shouldn't we do something?" she said to Mr. Sampson. "We're not just going to go to sleep, are we? Harry shouldn't be home alone drinking."

"We will talk to him about it next time we see him," said Mr. Sampson. "Harry's no idiot."

Harry ignored his mother's questions. He was an adult and could do what he wanted, which at this exact moment was taking a photograph of his flaccid phallus and sharing it using the connective wizardry of his smartphone, telling himself it was something guys like Dean did all the time. Besides, he was horny. Immediately after he tapped the send button, he felt a sobering sense of mortification flood through his body. "I'm so sorry. I can't believe I did that. I'm truly sorry," he tapped. "It's not like me. I don't know wtf just happened."

He awoke at 6 a.m., splayed across the sofa, and immediately picked up his phone. He was anxious that the text had gone unanswered. He typed another apology, appalled he had done such a thing and wondering whether he had ruined his entire life. Thinking of all the effort he had put into getting into Regent's, into being good at things, including trying to be a good person, and the allegedly bright future ahead of him. He feared he had ruined his life, and he feared perhaps it was an action he deserved to be ruined for committing. He saw the disappointment on his mother's face and heard his father's voice in his head telling him, "Sure, maybe a Sampson here and there liked to have a few more than he should. My brother Chad had even gotten a DUI before he pulled himself straight." But this was all new territory since, so far as he knew, no man on either side of the family had ever before sent a photograph of a penis, whether his own or that of someone else, to a woman he did not know over the internet.

He could still hear his parents' squinting rumination on what had become of him as he called in sick to work. Too agitated to fall back asleep, Harry, who had gotten a perfect score on the verbal section of his GRE the summer before, took another Ativan and exchanged the

sofa for his bed where he pulled the covers over his head thinking of all the synonyms he knew for *shame*.

There were nicer ways to put it, which his manager did, but what the conversation amounted to was that Dean was fired from his job. The company wasn't making its numbers, and the founders needed to cut the burn rate in order to raise a new round from investors without diluting themselves. Dean still had his stock options, of course, and a month's severance, plus unemployment, but wasn't from money like everyone else at Regent's. He had never been fired before, never failed, never was relegated to the pile of people who failed at basic being-ness.

He left the office in the Flatiron building—no longer his office—and started walking through the city without direction for the first time in his life, watching all the people who belonged, who went about their business with a sense of purpose. “With your credentials and network and the experience you’ve gained here, you’ll have a new job by the end of the week,” his old boss’s boss had told him, not even bothering to try to make it sound like more than a platitude. What was he even thinking? Was Dean supposed to tell everyone he knew he’d been fired? He was Dean Lee, the smartest boy in New York City since he took his first Gifted and Talented exam when he was three years old. Dean, who had graduated summa from Regent’s, had been a good enough diver to win an invitation to the Olympic trials. If he had put more hours in at the pool than the library, who knows? He had his priorities. Dean did not fail, and everyone knew that. He wondered what he had done wrong. He hadn’t done anything wrong. He must have done something wrong. He walked the streets of the city oscillating between rage at the world and rage at himself.

Raquin stood in the doorway of the apartment, waiting for Harry to bring her mail. She had refused his invitation to go in. “I don’t think that’s necessary,” she said, enunciating each word with such exquisite

precision each syllable was a blade, knifing his conscience. Harry tried again to apologize for his stupidity, as she looked at him with the silence of an unanswered text.

“It looked important.” Harry returned from the kitchen and handed Raquin the envelope that had turned up in his mailbox earlier that day. She was wearing her work clothes, which was a cashier’s matching uniform, and looked like a regular person you interact with a dozen times a day. “A check or something, and I just thought—”

“You just thought I could use the money,” Raquin shot back. “Well, I can use the money, because all you frat boys keep moving to Brooklyn, driving up the rent. The landlords see a bunch of white faces, then fall over themselves to fix everything so the frat boys will stay.”

“I’m not a frat boy,” Harry protested. “I can’t even afford the rent around here, so I know how it feels.”

“You know how what feels?” Raquin twisted her face. “Tell me how it feels, since you know.”

Harry was at a loss for words. He felt he deserved whatever she said about him, and probably worse. He couldn’t stand frat boys and didn’t want to gentrify the neighborhood. He knew she was right. Harry realized he had even helped to price himself out. And he had sent a dick pic, so he was guilty of whatever she had to say about him. As the deluge of thoughts tumbled around his head, he stopped thinking of his shame for a moment; instead, he thought about the observer effect: how just by trying to measure something you changed the state of the system, how you were part of the system without even knowing it. Harry wondered what would happen if he asked how she felt, but his shame returned, and with it fear that he would not know how to respond if she did.

“Listen, Raquin, my roommate kicked me out so his girlfriend could move in, and I got depressed and went day-drinking and then ate a bunch of my anxiety medicine. I’m sorry, that wasn’t me.”

“Do you know how it feels to have someone shove their dick in your face?” She ignored his excuse. “The fucked-up thing is you

learn not to even see it. You know what that means when you get so used to something fucked-up you just ignore it?” She shook her head slightly, deciding it wasn’t worth it to get herself worked up. She had more important things on her mind.

As Harry wondered whether Raquin hated him or not, she stared at him like a stone mask. The longer he looked, the more the mask turned to mirror, reflecting his shame and fear, which in turn began to morph into anger. He may not deserve to have his apology accepted, but he had tried, and now she was berating him. The two of them stared at each other defiantly a moment as the elevator opened, and Dean and Judy emerged. Raquin called for them to hold it for her, looking straight ahead as the doors closed.

“Is it raining out?” Harry asked, when he noticed Dean was dripping wet.

Dean ignored Harry and headed for his room to change.

“Dean was in an accident,” Judy replied.

“What kind of accident?”

Judy wondered whether to tell Harry what had happened or not. “I think he tried to kill himself, Harry.”

“What?” Harry asked, forgetting for the moment the exchange that had just taken place.

“He hasn’t told me everything, but apparently he jumped off one of the piers down near the Seaport and was fished out by one of those police patrol boats. They took him to Bellevue for observation, then arrested him.”

Dean listened to them from his room. In the hospital he had thought about whom to call, after they told him he couldn’t be released unless someone came for him. He’d first thought of his parents, but knew the distress and shame they would feel that their perfect son had proven weak. If he had succeeded, they would have felt sadness and heartbreak, but this was his second failure in a day, and they would worry it portended a lifetime of failure. He had thought

about Harry. He knew Harry wouldn’t refuse, but could not stand the shame.

When he thought of Judy, his first reaction was fear: she would think he was damaged goods and break up with him, which is what

he would have thought and done if she had jumped off a pier with a backpack loaded with used books she had bought at the Strand for the express purpose of sinking to the bottom of the East River. Then he remembered something he had heard somewhere, and thought if Judy was the person he wanted to be with, his person, maybe it was okay she saw his weakness, maybe it was important she saw it. He knew even if she didn’t understand, she would come to take him home. It was Judy he called, and Judy who came.

“That’s more or less it.” Dean came into the living room, wearing sweatpants, and slumped down into the sofa. “Except the part where I’m such a dumbass I couldn’t drown myself. I thought if I aimed right for the rocks, it wouldn’t matter how well I swam.”

Harry felt ill at ease and got up to lock the door for something to do. Judy went to sit by Dean on the sofa and waited for him to tell her the rest of what happened.

“What’s the matter, Harry?” Dean asked, agitated that he had left the room. “I thought you said if you listened to everybody’s story the whole goddamned world would be right again.”

“It’s hard, Dean. That’s the part I forgot. It’s why we do everything we can to distract ourselves, and monks retreat into the woods: people who try to do it in the world get killed. I forgot that part about how it’s like the hardest thing there is.”



Judy waited to hear if Dean would tell her the rest of what happened. Harry wondered if he should be there at all. Dean still didn't know whether he could tell them all he wanted to say, whether they would hear him if he did. Raquin walked down Nostrand to wait for the off-hours bus that would take her to the subway, which would in turn ferry her to the edge of the island, where she would watch the swell of the Atlantic, threatening and failing, as it had for generation after generation, to swallow them whole.



9

STORY 9

THE PLAGUE DOCTORS

KAREN LORD

ILLUSTRATIONS BY NIV BAVARSKY

Wednesday 9 August 2079 was an extraordinary day. It was Memorial Day, and it seemed like half of Pelican Island's population was swarming the beaches to take advantage of the midweek break. Beautiful weather was to blame no doubt, that and the lure of gentle swells of blue-green water and white foam. Colin Lee brought his daughter to his favorite spot on the western coast, where a broad, bright highway of sand stretched uninterrupted along the shore of a curved, sheltered bay, its four flat kilometers granted by the low water of a spring tide and the protection of a rocky cay not yet diminished by storms, shifting currents and rising sea levels. Such a combination was a gift to parents, a party to young children, and a mixed blessing to lifeguards trying to keep an eye out for dangerous play.

Colin's daughter, Maisie, had already decided that such shenanigans were not for her. The crowd and tumult bored her, and soon she wandered to the quiet southernmost end. There, the beach grew narrower and terminated in a cliff wall, a slight overhang that shaded rock pools filled with shy crabs, spindly and translucent gray amid the moss and seaweed. Maisie spent her time stooping over a pool for long, fascinated minutes, then she would spring up with a hop and a skip to dash to a new pool.

Colin scanned the area, set a blanket down between his daughter and the water's edge, and took out a book to read. With five-year-old Maisie, sharp hearing and good peripheral vision were all he needed to keep aware of her doings: now she was singing a counting song from school, now she was testing the depth of each pool with a jump, a splash and a giggle. She was used to amusing herself; she

got that from him. Always looking out for the new, every day seeking some small adventure—well, that *had* been him. The world changed; he changed. All the adventure he needed was right here...a quiet day at the beach with a crime novel and enough free time to enjoy both.



Everything was comforting and familiar, the background murmur and movement of home. He noticed the curve of the waves as they refracted around the rocky point, the occasional glimpse of a diligently patrolling coast guard vessel, and the sails of a few colorful paragliders swooping across the blue sky. His ears registered the constant susurrant of water surging in and drawing out, and the nearby human and animal sounds of play—shrieks, barks, and sometimes a snarl or wail. He absorbed it all without concern, with even a little gratitude, as he concentrated on his book and let time pass without guilt.

He blinked, distracted from his reading as a certain quality of the quietness set the parental super senses on high alert. Maisie had been crouched over in one place for too long. He put down his book and looked up. There she was right against the cliff face, sitting on her heels, watching the crabs scuttle over a thick log of driftwood. He slowly walked over to see what she was finding so interesting.

She turned her head to look at him over her shoulder. “Daddy, why is it all polka-dotty?”

Parental super senses also came with super powers. In one long, slow second, Colin's eyes realized the log was not a log, but a body. His blood ran hot, cold, electric—spurring him at top speed to grab the back of his daughter's shirt and shorts, snatching her away from the air that surrounded the corpse. Holding her tightly, he raced into the

water and triple-baptized her with mindless instinct, as if contagion could be washed from her skin and flushed from her lungs with a dose of drowning. The nearest lifeguard came running at the sound of her choked screams.

“Plague doctors!” he yelled as the lifeguard ran toward them. “Get the plague doctors!”

There was a protocol. Everyone knew the protocol, everyone practiced the drills, but not everyone had experienced real-life action. Colin was one of the few who had, and terror, not duty, raised the volume of his voice. The lifeguard planted a foot down hard and braked in the soft, heavy sand. He was close enough for Colin to see his passing expressions: disbelief, fear, realization. After a moment of brief indecision, he unfroze and started running north.

Was there enough salt in the water to save them; was there enough water in the ocean to wash them clean? Colin waited in the shallows, holding Maisie and soothing her as she sobbed. “Daddy’s sorry, baby. Don’t cry, hon.”

He glanced over at his blanket and his unfinished book. Gone. They’d be burned along with the body. He turned to watch the lifeguards clear the beach with disciplined swiftness. He heard the sound of distant sirens coming closer.

“Don’t cry, sweetie. Daddy’s here with you. Don’t cry.”

Memorial Day Wednesday 9 August 2079 was an extraordinary day. It was the day of the first recorded incidence of plague on the soil of Pelican Island.

Monday 26 February 2080 was an ordinary day. On Mondays, the plague doctors cleared the beaches. All the island’s beaches, not only Tempest Bay, were now largely deserted with no holidaying families and no need for lifeguard stations—only watchtowers for the corpse-spotters.

Audra Lee had been assigned to beach-clearing duty for almost

three months. She was more than competent, she knew the process by heart, but she refused to get so accustomed as to call her Mondays *ordinary*. A steady ocean current had taken to dumping the remains of refugees from the mainland into the southern crook of Tempest Bay. The current had been there for some time; it was the bodies that were new, and the number was slowly increasing.

Monday was the busiest day of Audra’s week. Besides herself, she counted one other plague doctor to carry out field autopsies, four orderlies to seal and move the bodies, and one registrar to witness the process from discovery at the beach to disposal at the crematorium. Every person on beach-clearing duty wore full personal protective equipment in the form of bespoke suits designed by a specialist on the mainland and constructed on the island using imported and local materials and a 3-D printer. Standard suits were fine for occasional use, but the nature of their work demanded tech that was up to frequent dedicated use.

Their team leader and senior doctor for the district, Dr. Jane Pereira, was maddeningly philosophical about their situation. “Only a matter of time,” she said. “We had a good run. No such thing as an island in this day and age. Let’s do what we can.”

Beneath the calm words was the unspoken, unsettling truth—they could not do very much. If the mainland, with all its resources and expertise, had not solved the problem of the plague; if the Navy of one of the world’s largest countries could not keep the desperate from seeking help elsewhere; and if the ocean itself had started to conspire against those formerly favored with isolation and health...what could the medical team of a small community clinic do?

“Our job,” was Dr. Pereira’s brisk reply when Audra spoke her fears aloud. “And part of our job is to ensure there will be no panic in the community. Please remember that.”

Audra returned to her lab in a fury. Grimly taciturn, she had borne the usual off-site decontaminating scrub down with her colleagues and

said a curt farewell to Dr. Pereira, who was leaving to do the afternoon's rounds for the community clinic. Perhaps it was her bleak expression, or the white square of her mask, or the severely monochrome scrubs that hinted at non-patient duties. Perhaps it was just that everyone in the district knew by now that Audra Lee, doctor in charge of the diagnostic lab, was also one of the plague doctors. Either way, she spent the twenty-minute bus journey back home along a busy route with no one showing the least interest in taking the empty seat beside her.

She looked forward to slamming her front door, but that tiny indulgence was denied her. Colin was already there, standing at the threshold, his face stern with suppressed and weary anger.

"You're late," he stated.

"It's Monday," she told her brother impatiently.

"You're usually back before three." He looked exhausted. She should have been kind and understanding, but she was tired, too, and her fears were larger than his, and heavy with the secrecy of professional confidentiality. *Ensure there will be no panic.* She chose something simple to shout about, not a lie, but not the full truth. She would cry over the full truth with her colleagues later.

"We had fourteen bodies today, Colin. *Fourteen!*" She pushed past him into the house and went to check her messages. "Hi, Maisie," she greeted her niece absently before she sat at her desk.

"Hi, Auntie Audra," the little girl replied after a slight pause to make sure the adults had finished arguing. She sounded subdued.

Audra looked up immediately. "Oh. Okay." She didn't say anything more.

Promises were impossible to keep, so she didn't make them. She merely put her work down and walked over to the translucent boundary that had separated Maisie from the world for more than half a year. From a distance, the room glowed white and warm, like the sick bay of some futuristic space station, but with a closer look the painted plywood and plastic sheeting became obvious and the coolness

factor evaporated. The main lab was also white-walled, but with tile and aged grout instead of plywood. No illusions there, no glow or pretense at coolness.

Audra kneeled, set her hand against the plastic, and leaned her face beside it. She waited patiently until Maisie approached and mirrored her motion, answering the warmth of hand and cheek with her own.

Colin ended the moment by entering the quarantine area in gown, gloves, mask, and goggles. He carried a tray with a cup, a mini teapot, and a small plate of sweet biscuits. Maisie ran to him, laughing. Audra went back to her desk, blinking tears away.

Three days after her exposure to the infected body, Maisie had showed the usual progression: mild fever and a slight rash on her chest, eruption of a few oozing blisters, and then those blisters dried, scabbed, and healed within a fortnight. Colin hadn't even had a sniffle, far less a blister, and his immunological tests remained clear—which was a great relief to everyone but Colin, who would have gladly gifted his luck to Maisie instead.

Instead of strictly following the official procedures, which would have meant sending both Colin and Maisie away to Salt Rock Quarantine Center, Dr. Pereira had suggested setting up in an unused storage shed next to Audra's house, behind the diagnostic lab. Audra wouldn't have dared ask for that privilege, and she was terribly grateful for it. She was also guiltily relieved that her colleagues were both willing and able to spare her the burden of counseling Colin and Maisie. After Maisie's skin had healed completely, Dr. Pereira and Antonio Williams, the clinic's pediatric nurse practitioner, sat down with father and daughter to discuss the disease, its consequences, and future steps—Antonio and Audra in their protective equipment within the quarantine section with Dr. Pereira and Colin sitting close on the other side of the barrier.

"Maisie, I know you feel much better now, but you're going to have to stay in your aunt's sick room for a little longer, okay?" Antonio told her.

"Why, Mr. Williams?" Maisie's voice was very soft and a little scared.

“Because you got the gray pox, that’s why. It hasn’t really gone away. It went to sleep, but it can wake up any time.”

Maisie nodded.

“We all want to keep you safe, especially your father. He was very lucky: he didn’t get sick. Problem is, if you leave quarantine, he could catch it from you, and it would make him a lot sicker than it made you. It’s kinder to children, you see. And when it gets into you, it doesn’t want to leave. If something else makes you sick, or very tired, the gray pox will wake up again, and this time it could make your father sick, or anyone else you might sneeze on.”

“I don’t sneeze on people. That’s rude,” Maisie crossed her arms, frowning.

Audra watched her niece’s face intently. Maisie was paying close attention to Antonio’s story of the gray pox, but did she really understand?

“Of course you don’t. But you wouldn’t have to be too close for the germs from a sneeze, or a cough, to reach them. That’s how germs are; it’s not your fault.”

Maisie began to look doubtful about the direction this was heading.

“But you have to stay here so your aunt and your father can take care of you and make sure the pox stays asleep. You’ll see your friends and take your classes on the island school intranet. Our nutritionist, Mrs. Bishop, will check in on you regularly and make sure you’re getting all the good food you’ll need to stay strong and healthy.”

Antonio leaned closer, his eyes warm but stern over his mask. “But Maisie, you must do what your aunt and your father tell you to do. Otherwise, people could die. Your father could die. And Maisie, if you get sick a second time, the pox won’t be kind to you anymore. It will be a plague, then.”

She gulped and nodded, tears welling up. He gathered her up in his long-gloved, long-sleeved arms and hugged her with as much comfort as a gown and apron could provide. Audra gripped her own apron

with shaking hands and breathed deeply. She would not let Maisie see her cry.

At the time, Dr. Pereira had estimated only another month or two of isolation for Maisie while she contacted friends and colleagues connected to institutions and clinics on the mainland. No one wanted to send Maisie away, but even Colin agreed that permanent quarantine was no place for a child to grow up. In a country where the gray pox was fairly widespread Maisie could at least live openly among others who had survived that first phase of the disease. And, if the worst should happen, if she progressed to the second phase, she would be near resources for her care—far better resources than Pelican Island could offer.

A sensible plan that should have worked...but Dr. Pereira’s contacts did not bear fruit. Instead, communication grew exponentially worse. Messages arrived truncated, or stripped of attachments, or did not arrive at all. “It’s like we’re in the middle of a war, and the mainland is one of the front lines,” Dr. Pereira had said. “No one can give me a straight answer. We can’t send Maisie there.”

“Is there anywhere else she can go?” Audra asked. Her voice faltered; she already knew the truth.

Dr. Pereira had only given her a sympathetic look, and they did not discuss the possibility further.

Now it was almost six months later, with one birthday and several holidays celebrated—or endured—in quarantine. The island’s sole hospital struggled with the reduction of key imports; the quarantine center was about to reach maximum capacity; and more and more bodies were appearing in spite of the best efforts of the Navy and Coast Guard to keep the beaches clear.

Audra forced herself to focus on her work. Her screen showed messages from Gilles Caron in Seychelles, Jennifer Tuatara in Rakiura, and Tom Isaac in Woleai, and a general mailing with the monthly newsletter of the Community Clinics Association of Raja Ampat. She

still wasn't sure how she'd ended up on the mailing list for that one. Why was it so difficult to receive emails and news from established hospitals and universities on the mainland, but personal messages from the staff of far-flung community clinics on distant islands and mountain retreats constantly filled her inbox?

dbauerbadgas is available to chat, her screen prompted her.

She typed a greeting to her colleague, Dagmar Bauer.

No audio? Dagmar's response came back instantly.

Brother and niece having tea party. May get noisy, Audra explained.

Niece still in lockup?

Audra bit her lip. They'd had that argument by audio months ago, when Maisie was first confined to one of their examination rooms.

"Why do you keep her in a sealed room?" Dagmar had demanded. "It's contact transmission in the first phase. Droplet transmission occurs only later in the second phase. That's been confirmed over and over. You're making the trauma and stigma worse."



Audra had pushed back immediately. "She's six. She can't defend herself if some paranoid ex-mainlander decides she's the island's patient zero. It's not necessary for the plague bacterium; it's necessary for us. It's a visibly reassuring abundance of caution."

Today, she had another answer for Dagmar.

Help me get her out, then,

she typed back. Impulsive, unplanned, the words on the screen looked as strange to her as if someone else had written them.

Dagmar must have thought the same. After a slight delay, a line of

question marks popped up.

Audra continued, feeling bolder, pulling the words out from some deep place of rebellion and discontent. *Fourteen bodies washed up today. Dr. Pereira says we're due to miss one. The ocean currents could change and the beach might stay clear. But the bodies might just wash up somewhere else, and we'd have another case like Maisie's. Or several cases.*

Again, Dagmar's reply was delayed. She was busy—multitasking in her clinic or thinking seriously about what Audra was saying. *You have quarantine stations, of course?*

Yes, on Salt Rock Island, just 2 km west of the main port. Navy directs mainland boats there. But some refugee boats don't survive the trip.

Another pause. *Things are changing here too. We see more restrictions on movement in and out of town. Media control. I haven't seen a journalist in months. Can't rely on email, and even letters go missing.*

Audra started to type a reply. *Sounds like what's happening on our mainland...* but then her fingers froze at the next line she saw.

Death toll is increasing in Bad Gastein and the rest of the country. Secondary disease phase is now established in population, I think. Authorities must be afraid to tell us the truth. So—censorship.

"Oh no," Audra said softly. Dagmar, with characteristic bluntness, was setting out all their unspoken fears in permanent text for the world to witness. She glanced furtively at Colin and Maisie to make sure they hadn't heard her, and then returned to her conversation.

We have to get a cure to human trials. Need your help, she insisted.

Dagmar sent a laughing face. ***We're*** going to find a cure, after all the big labs and hospitals failed?

They failed because they focused on the first phase of the disease. We know better now. And maybe we're all that's left. Audra's fingers shook as she typed the last sentence.

She had discussed the lack of response from the mainland with Dr. Pereira, and what that suggested about the progress of the plague there. And yet she felt such talk should remain a bleak mutter behind

the shelter of a face shield, witnessed only by decaying corpses.

You are saying that help may never come.

Dagmar meant it as a statement, not a question, and Audra doubted it was a mistake. The question mark was nowhere near the full stop on a German keyboard. Audra was less brave, so she chose the question mark and batted the problem back to Dagmar.

What do you think?

I think you are right. I think that I am gaining far too much experience with autopsies in far too short a time. I often have to stop myself from thinking because it never looks good when the doctor has a panic attack in front of the patients.

Audra's spine straightened as Dagmar spoke, and she almost laughed at the last words. Almost. *Let's make a start, then. Let's reach out to the others. We need a team.*

They needed more than a team—they needed data, resources, and a plan. Gilles had access to a vast library of medical statistics, clinical summaries, and experimental results from hospitals, labs, and institutions worldwide. Jennifer was involved in a project that collated similar information from community clinics, herbalists, and healers in the Rural and Emergency Medicine Network. Audra knew that the lab reports and autopsy summaries she submitted to Dr. Pereira ended up with the REM Network along with all the work of the community clinic team, but visualizing their drop of data as part of an ocean of knowledge was both humbling and heartening.

Best of all, Dagmar had secured *funding*, the result of a personal connection to a ridiculously rich philanthropist with the ridiculously aristocratic name of Alexander Esterházy-Schwarzenberg. "He will take care of our communications and logistics, including security," she told them on their group call.

"Why security?" Jennifer wanted to know.

"Just in case," Dagmar said. "We don't want to draw attention to ourselves, but right now, if someone wanted to shut down our

communications, or take over our data banks, it wouldn't take much."

Jennifer scoffed. "That's a waste of money. Why would anyone want to shut us down?"

"You have to ask?" Gilles said. "Don't your patients—hell, your *colleagues*—tell you the conspiracy theory of the day? The plague is a weapon of biological warfare. Sent by aliens. No, created by the rich to cull the poor. No, it's Gaia; she's trying to wipe out our species. It's the Rapture, you *think* they're dead, but they're in another dimension. There's no information from the authorities, nothing from the media, so people imagine the worst."

"You sound a little tired, Gilles," Audra noted gently.

"Exhausted!" Gilles confirmed with a massive grin. "Our electrical grid finally collapsed last week, did you know that? They say it's due to a lack of personnel to carry out maintenance. We have too many dead, too many sick, and those who still live are stretched to the limits of mind and body. I would love to have security here. People break in—they think we're hoarding medicine. They try to tap our solar generators. They hack into our WiFi to get news from outside. Information is precious now. We have to protect ourselves."

"Yes. Exactly. Just in case," Dagmar said again, but softly, sympathetically, as Gilles trailed off into an incoherent and weary grumbling. "But we can't protect everyone everywhere, so we'll have to rely on redundancy. Duplicate our effort with three, four clinics working on the same thing. If one is lost, the others continue. No one is indispensable. And we must hold nothing back. We share all our work straight to our network, and Alexander will protect the network. The work is all that matters."

With Dagmar's friend throwing money at the project, everything became startlingly real. Audra told Colin, in the spirit of cautious encouragement, that she was researching every possible treatment that could help Maisie leave quarantine, but she said nothing about

the Network and their project to find a cure. Her colleagues were a different matter. Dr. Pereira, at the very least, would demand details, and Audra was afraid of being quietly mocked or silently pitied.

The day after their group call and Dagmar's revelation, Audra finally met with Dr. Pereira. The team leader's reaction was completely unexpected.

"Good," she said. "Try. Try something. *Anything.*"

Audra stopped, blinked, and passed over the mug of coffee she had offered Dr. Pereira on arrival. "Not a waste of my time...*our* time?"

Dr. Pereira took a long, grateful sip before answering. "Dr. Lee, let's consider what we can control. We can't control the number of refugees from the mainland. We can't control the ocean currents, or the chance that a survivor of phase one might slip past testing at the entry port and make us all vulnerable to a sudden explosion of phase two. We can control our own clinics, labs, and procedures. And—worst case scenario—we might be the only ones left to work on a cure.

"This island has been in a state of tension for almost a year, waiting for the infection to reach us, waiting for the inevitable descent into pox and plague. We can work on a protocol of trials with the Salt Rock Center staff, and get them to start the pre-consent counseling process for volunteers. Being proactive makes our medical staff look good, and takes all our stress levels down a notch. A slight notch, perhaps, but I'll take it."

Dr. Pereira pulled out a stylus and began to handwrite notes for sending to Audra's screen. "I've been following the work of Zhang, Trevor, and Ali. Nothing more recent than eight months, unfortunately. Most of the forums I used to read aren't allowing new posts, and I don't need to tell you how chaotic and unpredictable email has been. None of the immunology has been promising—neither vaccination work nor curative immunotherapy. Our best hope lies with research on genetically engineered phages that directly target the plague bacteria. Let every community clinic on Earth break out their gene splicers and

tackle the problem. Dear God, someone *has* to get a result in time."

Audra kept her head down, busily collating Dr. Pereira's notes and references, and did not voice her thoughts. *What if we do run out of time? What then?*

Various diseases had wiped out almost ninety percent of the pre-Colombian North American peoples. The Black Death had halved the population of Europe. The Spanish flu killed more than the World War that preceded it, and the new avian flu of 2049 had taken only (only!) five percent of the global population, but had been the final push that changed the tourism industry from fast, fossil-fueled flight to slow, solar fleets. Now, in 2080, the world was already irrevocably changed by this plague. Did this plague have a point of no return, leading inexorably to the end of human civilization, or even of humanity?

That possibility was too vast for Audra to contemplate, but the face of her niece appeared clearly in her mind.

Three days later, a battered off-road vehicle, booming with unfettered bass and with wheels stinking of well-manured farmland, rattled up the driveway of the diagnostic lab and screeched to a halt across three clearly marked parking spots. A pair of youngsters—one tall and cord-thin, the other small, round, and shy—bounced out and began unloading boxes from the rear.

Scowling in irritation and bemusement, Audra went out to see what they wanted. The tall one paused very briefly to shake her hand in greeting and kept a running explanation going as he continued to gather his equipment. "Good morning—no wait, it's afternoon already. Good afternoon, ma'am. We've been tasked to set you up on a private network. How's your solar? Good system, good. But we'll have to boost it a bit so it won't suck resources from your other work. You have a nice, flat bit of roof there over your lab. Can we use it? Oh, and do you still make that ginger lemongrass cordial with the special ingredient? No?"

Audra breathlessly summarized the capacity of her solar grid, showed them the roof access ladder, and explained to them that they needed to speak to Ms. Roberts, the pharmacist and herbalist, who used to work out of her lab until they decided to completely separate diagnostics from pharmaceuticals after the plague. And was that special ingredient coca or cannabis? Because there were two popular lemongrass cordials brewed by Ms. Roberts.

“Coca,” said the shy one, speaking at last in a soft, husky voice. “We work very long hours.”

“Oh. And you are?”

The leader seized the reins of the conversation once more. “Call us the Guerrilla Network Unit—that’s who we are, that’s what we do. Fighting the good fight against ignorance and misinformation in this plague-ridden apocalyptic landscape. Whoops, I’ve said too much. By the way, greetings from Bad Gastein.”

His laugh was infectious, and before Audra could ask any more questions he was on the roof shouting directions to his assistant, moving with professional haste to construct and connect a medium-sized satellite dish.

It took Audra a full hour after they’d left to realize they had never given their names, and the vehicle had no license plate or other visible identifying numbers. And it wasn’t until later that night that she fully understood what they had done. The free but limited voice-and-text chat app their group previously used had spontaneously upgraded into something less familiar and far more expansive. Dagmar appeared on her screen, ruddy and blonde with flyaway hair and buckteeth, and proclaimed to Audra and others pinging into the group chat, “Oh, isn’t Alexander *wonderful*?”

“He certainly is,” Audra said, looking in admiration at the crisp detail of the transmission. Dagmar’s lab, though not much bigger than hers, was bright with the reflected light of stainless steel and glass.

In contrast, the white ceramic tiles of the interior walls of Audra’s lab made the rooms look like the showers for a sports team, and the concrete floors and tables were muddy gray and untidily covered with that same plastic sheeting used for Maisie’s quarantine. The effect was that of a slightly unmade bed, or a lived-in set of clothing...i.e., nowhere as tidy and spare as Dagmar’s surroundings.

Weekly conferences with Dr. Pereira and the rest of the team in her clinic continued, while online meetings both formal and casual with overseas colleagues expanded from daily to almost hourly. Video meetings improved communication and companionship. It reminded Audra of her earlier days of working with the community clinic team, before the plague and regular Monday autopsies. They’d shared the same building, taken tea breaks together, *bonded*. The plague had fractured that, and now the plague drew her into a new community of colleagues. She wasn’t sure how to feel about that.

dagmar_bauer is available to chat.

No audiovid today? Are you all right? Feeling fine?

It had become a running joke in the slightly macabre vein common to stressed doctors everywhere that if any of them were to suddenly default to no video with no explanations, it was time to write a nice eulogy for a colleague, because clearly they were hiding a freshly pox-covered face.

Thank you I am fine. What is the schedule for today?

Audra leaned in closer to her screen, frowning deeply. She began to type *are you all right* then hastily backspaced the words into oblivion. *Same as yesterday.*

They hadn’t done anything in particular yesterday.

Dagmar’s cursor blinked in silent reproach. Audra watched it in stubborn fascination until it began to trundle forward again.

What is the schedule for this week?

Your call, Audra replied shortly.

Now the cursor seemed to blink in silent confusion. *I am making a call? Or it is my call to plan the week?*

Audra hit her keyboard hard with angry fingers. *Where is Dagmar?*

The cursor vanished. Dagmar's icon hovered for a while, and then it, too, vanished.

Audra kept typing, knowing the cowards would get the message when next they dared log in. *You're going to die. You're all going to die of the plague because you wouldn't let us do our jobs. May the pox take you and the plague finish you.*

No other curse felt more potent; there was nothing as transgressive and shocking than to wish this awful death on another human being. Audra slammed her fist against her desk.

"What happened?" Colin's voice seemed from another world, but for once it was a welcome distraction. Audra relaxed her clenched jaw and tried to answer him calmly.

"I don't know. I thought...I thought I was talking to Dagmar." She sounded helpless to her own ears.

Colin rested a hand on her shoulder in a rare gesture of comfort, but then his fingers spasmed hard against her collarbone. "What's that?" he asked harshly, leaning over her to peer at her screen.

A rush of new, unread messages clustered thickly down the page, chiming faintly on arrival until they all merged into one long, high-pitched pulsation. Audra muted the sound. "Someone's flooding the Network with data files. But who...*how?* We always save our work to our network daily...*hourly.*"

She tapped a message open, not caring for once that Colin was reading over her shoulder. "Who's AES?" he asked.

Dagmar's Alexander, the guardian and investor angel of the Network. She went cold again. She had fallen out of the habit of hope. If it was something this big, it had to be bad.

Then the lab phone rang. Audra answered it absently without checking the caller identity, her eyes still reading the titles of the

incoming messages on her overwhelmed screen. "Dr. Lee here. How can I help you?"

"Hello, Dr. Lee. Sorry to be a nuisance. We found a lot of information, and I'm afraid you're going to have to organize it for us. We'll be very busy for a little while." Slightly accented English, oddly antique phrasing, and a little quaver of age or weakness over it all.

"What?" Audra dropped her professional tone. "Who is this?"

"She trusts you to pull it all together. Remember, no one is indispensable. Continue the work!"

With a click, the caller vanished into the ether, whether of his own will or no, Audra could not tell. "Oh God, no," she whispered. Was Dagmar dead, or dying? Imprisoned? Injured? How had they silenced her? Was the Network at risk? She began to pull drawers open, scrambling for old physical backup disks and storage cards to plug into her main and save the new messages.



"What can I do?" Colin demanded. "How can I help?"

"You can't," Audra wailed. "I don't have time to explain this to you. Just give me some space. I have to get all this before it disappears, too!"

An answering wail came from the inner room of the sealed section—Maisie waking in distress, either because of Audra's shouting or some other, personal nightmare. She walked into the half-light of the lab, crying inconsolably, and curled up with her blanket near the air lock entryway.

"Help *her*," Audra begged Colin, and turned her back to them both.

She worked long hours into the early morning, saving files and sending frantic notes to others on the Network. Replies and fresh news

came in for her to read, and slowly the cascade of chaos began to resolve itself into a quantifiable situation with a potential solution.

“Oh, Gilles,” Audra said softly. “I wish it *had* been aliens.”

Dagmar, or someone under her direction, had discovered and unlocked a secret cache of research. Not only recent, ongoing research by many of the leading scientists in the field (including some recent unpublished papers by Zhang, Trevor, and Ali that Dr. Pereira would love to see), but also transcripts of commentary from an internal forum featuring names from several of the most famous research institutes. Audra laughed to herself a little bitterly. They had been investigating similar areas: phage therapy, of course, as well as immunotherapy and stem cell therapies and potential antimicrobial drugs. And they had shared none of it with the wider world.

Why? Audra wanted to believe in incompetence, not malice, but she knew how hard the Network had tried to get information from these same institutes. She couldn’t help but imagine the worst. Beyond all conspiracy theory, what if the silence from the mainland, and the missing journalists, and the darkening corners of the web were only partly due to the plague? What if there was a cull—not a purposeful, engineered attack, but a carefully curated neglect? Keeping the best chances of prevention and cure for those who could afford to pay for it...a kind of plutocratic manifest destiny.

Their central medical systems and institutions hadn’t collapsed, not really. They’d been hit hard, but they hadn’t given up. They’d consolidated. And they’d quietly narrowed focus, deciding who was worthy of being saved, and waiting for time to take care of the rest.

Hot fury surged through Audra’s veins. She knew triage, and she would not dignify this with that name. This was pure, arbitrary selfishness that would see millions of innocents die so that rich old men could live a few months longer in an emptier world. She would take up the challenge they had abandoned and stay true to her declaration of ethics, if not for Dagmar, then for Maisie.

Maisie.

Audra hadn’t heard so much as a snuffle from her direction for ages. She looked through the barrier and saw Colin lying in the recliner with Maisie in his arms, all wrapped up snug and comfortable in her blanket. They were both sleeping soundly. She smiled.

And then, quietly, she came up to the barrier and slowly pressed her hands against it, pushing against the contaminated air of the interior. “Colin. Colin...*why?*”

Unmasked, pajama-clad, cheek to Maisie’s flushed and tear-damp cheek, her brother held his child with a peacefulness that was its own kind of saintly defiance.

Dr. Pereira assigned Antonio to monitor and care for Colin and Maisie, another favor that Audra did not dare request but for which she was deeply grateful. She literally did not know how to feel anymore; there was never a moment of unalloyed joy or pain. She missed Dagmar and worried about her to the point of full grieving, and yet she was ablaze with the excitement of Dagmar’s discovery and focused on the work of redirecting their research efforts to take advantage of the new data. The week that Antonio reported the emergence of Colin’s pox symptoms was the same week that Jennifer relayed a massive breakthrough from a group of community clinics in Kerala.

By the time Colin’s sores had scabbed over and healed up, the first phage trials in Kerala were underway. Audra thought about having a small party to celebrate both...and then received the news that though the cure had been successful, the attempt to make the cure infectious by droplet transmission had triggered a cytokine storm in test subjects. The fatality rate had reached as high as eighty percent in some groups.

Jennifer’s lip twisted bitterly. “We wanted a cure that would be more infectious than the disease. We didn’t anticipate that the immune system would overreact to it. But don’t worry. We’re going to make some changes and try again. We’re close, Audra. I promise.”

Months later, Kerala confirmed that the problem had been solved. But the day Audra began to synthesize doses of the cure in her lab according to version two of the Kerala formula was the day she first heard Maisie cough and knew that this was it, this was what they had feared all along. A ticking timer went off in the back of her brain, and she pushed it further back into the shadows to be in company with her feelings about Dagmar and her brother and her niece. No use dwelling on what she could not change.

“What are these exactly?”

Gloved, masked, and gowned, Audra continued her work with slow deliberation and answered shortly. “Nebulizer vials. A mist of fine droplets is the best way to get the engineered virus into the lungs.”

“How soon can we give one of those to Maisie?”

Audra finally looked directly at her brother. Seeing his heavily scarred, masked face made her wonder how different life would be if the strength he had to do anything for his daughter had included the strength to bear his daughter’s sorrow. “It doesn’t work like that, Colin. We have to see what results we get from the trials. It’s going to take time.”

“She doesn’t have time. She’s getting sicker. You know that.”

Audra knew that Maisie was deteriorating, and she could see the effect it was having on her brother. Colin was tending to Maisie full-time with a belated but necessary caution about his own protection from further exposure.

She made herself say it, and she made sure to look him in the eyes as she did so. “This may not happen in time for Maisie, Colin.”

“All the more reason—”

“Colin, let me explain what happened with the first trials in Kerala. It wasn’t just that people died. The problem was the cure was more deadly than the disease. Those aren’t sensible odds. Let’s take time to see if we’ve got it right. Maisie...she’s not doing that well, it’s true,

but watchful waiting is a safer option for the time being. I’ve already discussed this with Dr. Pereira and Antonio. Ask them—they’ll both tell you the same thing.”

“But if there’s a chance—”

“Colin, these vials aren’t my personal property! The cure belongs to the Network and the community clinics, and no matter what, I have to respect that!” Audra paused, swallowed, and added quietly, “She’s my blood too.”

Her brother stared but, having said what she needed to say, Audra turned away to continue her work. She slid a fresh tray of vials into cold storage and closed the heavy fridge door. Dr. Pereira would be coming to pick up the first batch tomorrow. Salt Rock Quarantine Center would join several other clinics worldwide in the first wave of global trials. Being part of that history was thrilling, but her niece might die before the end of it. Saving millions of lives was worth it, but her niece’s life, after all their hard work, would be lost. Joy and pain together, canceling each other out...impossible to feel anymore. She moved mechanically, losing herself in the routine tasks.

One more vial. Maybe two. It wouldn’t hurt to have extras. She did the preparations, and tucked the doses neatly into a smaller tray beside a nebulizer and two detachable intake masks. She rested it on the table near the fridge. Her hands were shaking. She’d been working such long hours. *Just a few minutes’ rest.*

Audra sat at her desk and yawned, drained to weakness. She put her head down and closed her eyes.

Then she watched wearily through half-opened eyes as Colin (all suited, booted, gloved, and masked) quietly exited the quarantine section, silently took up the doses and nebulizer that she had so carefully arranged, and vanished once more behind the plastic barrier. Anger, hope, relief, and fear swirled sluggishly, but a heavy blanket of exhaustion smothered all as Audra closed her eyes and witnessed nothing more.

Over the past year, Dr. Pereira had granted Audra many concessions and gone above and beyond in showing her compassion, but the kind of carelessness that led to two vials of engineered virus going missing could lead only to grave consequences.

“I am going to ask you one thing,” Dr. Pereira had said, her eyes filled with hurt and disappointment. “Leaving out those two vials—was that oversight or intention?”

Audra was able to meet Dr. Pereira’s steady gaze, but completely unable to form the words to reply.

“Oversight...that’s one level of disciplinary action. But intention? And making your brother an accessory instead of taking the full responsibility on yourself?”

At those last words, Audra dropped her gaze, stricken.

“Thank you for all your hard work on this project, Dr. Lee,” Dr. Pereira said distantly. “I would like to suggest that you take a leave of absence.”

The day that the trials were declared a success was the day that Audra’s license was revoked. The day that Maisie and Colin were confirmed free of the gray pox bacteria, and allowed to leave quarantine, was the day that a replacement doctor was hired and the diagnostic lab was moved back to the main building adjacent to Ms. Roberts and pharmaceuticals. There was much to grieve, and much to celebrate, and Audra’s mind and body oscillated uncertainly between the two states.

The quarantine center was transformed to fit a new purpose. Instead of screening those about to enter the sanctuary of Pelican Island, it now processed the outward journeys of volunteers infected with the engineered virus, sending them out into a sick world to breathe the contagion of cure into the atmosphere. It was a noble venture, and an exciting opportunity for those who had for too long felt powerless to change their world.

“How long will it take...?”

“As long as it has to. Every community clinic has the capacity

to create the viral cure, and one person per household is all that’s needed, but it will still take time to spread through all the affected populations.”

“How long?” The repeated query was more forceful, less hopeful. Colin’s tone was charged with the anger and weariness of a survivor who had no power to make the world anew...at least not yet.

“My best estimate? About five years for the primary infection to complete its spread. Several generations before the population returns to pre-plague levels. But beyond two years, we’re guessing. We’re all guessing. And yet...we found a cure. We won. We’re gambling on a sure thing. It’s only a matter of time.”

“The more carriers you have out there, the faster the cure will spread, right?”

“Yes, but—”

“Then that’s the adventure I choose. We were lucky to have Pelican Island as a refuge for so long. Time to spread that luck.”

“Some people won’t be kind, if they suspect you. Some people won’t understand. Remember Dagmar.”

“I’ll be careful, then. For Maisie’s sake, if nothing else.”

“Stay in touch. Please, Colin, for *my* sake.”

Their words were effortful, uneasy; a shadow tainted their farewell. Dr. Pereira had been right. Colin understood both the gift and the burden of the choice Audra had forced on him, and that knowledge was a strain on their bond. And yet, hadn’t she paid the price for her actions and his? Didn’t he owe her something for that sacrifice?

Audra bit her lip and turned away. Better this parting now than years of increasing bitterness on both sides. She tried to cheer herself with the memory of Maisie’s warm kiss on her cheek, Maisie’s excitement about the wide world after months of confinement, Maisie’s utter delight in bragging about her father who saved her and her aunt who helped save the world.

When Audra returned to her too-quiet house, she was thrown for a moment to see a vaguely familiar off-road vehicle sitting athwart two parking spaces with doors open. The faint whiff of manure told her what the absence of mud could not—the Guerrilla Network Unit had returned. The lanky lead tech gave her a cheery wave from the driver's seat. Audra felt a pang. Were they going to strip her roof of its lovely new equipment, returning her to the days of typed text and crackling audio? But then, as she walked closer, someone stiffly emerged from the back seat of the rickety car, a far older man than the pair of techs she had met. He was fastidiously dressed, but flushed red and sweating helplessly in the tropical heat, combining an authoritative air with an odd vulnerability.

He extended his hand and Audra took it on pure instinct. "You're Dagmar's Alexander."

The old man's eyes widened a little in shock, and then he smiled slowly. "Yes. She sent me to tell you that she is alive and well."

Slightly accented English, oddly antique phrasing with a little quaver of age or weakness over it all.

"Where is she?"

"That, I cannot say. The situation is complicated. Her results were applauded, her methods less so. Perhaps history will give her the laurels she deserves, but for now my work is to shield her from the courts of law."

Audra lowered her head and smiled sadly. She suspected that whatever illegal or semi-legal methods Dagmar had employed to get the data, she had embraced the risks bravely, with no half-heroic measures to trouble her conscience. She tilted her head up again and blinked, trying not to cry in front of Alexander and failing...but that was all right, because it meant she was finally free to feel again.

"Will you get her cleared? Dagmar said you were rich. Old money, noble family. Isn't that right?"

Alexander looked even more apologetic. "More or less. More noble than rich, that is. But I *do* have a marvelous reputation, and

there are many people, both old and new money, who trust me to recommend worthwhile investments and endeavors." He gave a wry chuckle. "We label it charity most of the time, at least for our accountants and auditors."

He sobered quickly and gave her a stern look. "What I'm trying to say is, I'm not an angel. I'm a facilitator. What I and my associates do is neither legal nor illegal, but it might be considered...a bit irregular. Dagmar understood that. The whistleblower who gave her the data understood that as well.

"Dagmar saved my husband and my son from the first phase of the plague when no other doctor would come near them. Now she has saved them from living with the dread of a second phase death. Only two among many, but they are all the world to me. I owe her everything, and I'll do everything I can for her, but I can offer no guarantees.

"But what do *you* want? Do you need anything?"

Audra startled at the segue, then seriously considered the request. "Our Network will always need resources. Continue to be our facilitator, and find people to fund us. But don't dare call it charity. Tell them to invest in the world they'd like to live in, the world they'd like to leave to future generations."

Alexander inclined his head. "I know a few who have learned the hard way that a luxury bunker is too narrow a world at any price. No more moats and walls. We will tend the garden for everyone."

Later, after the GNU mobile had driven away with its three occupants, Audra looked at the empty building that was her gutted laboratory, the house that was too big for one person, and considered for a mad, brief moment the empty months and years that lay ahead. Alexander's words echoed in her mind.

What do you want?

She walked to her old lab, opened the door and hovered at the

threshold, marveling at the huge, half-lit, hollowed-out space, emptied of furniture and equipment, as anonymous as any random storeroom. Memories of faces on screens—Gilles, Jennifer, Dagmar—floated amid the gilded dust motes. The new doctor at the diagnostic lab would work with the Network now. Audra had said her farewells to her remaining colleagues—hasty, unthinking, distracted farewells. Only now, in the silence and shadow, did she realize how much she missed them, how much she missed the *work*.

A sharp *ding!* interrupted her musings. She sighed and fished her tablet out of her bag, and frowned in confusion. She'd never deleted the Network's communications app from her device, even though she no longer had access to the lab account. Now, instead of a generic login page, it was showing her a message with YES and NO buttons and a few lines of text.

we need a full-time admin with medical experience

license not required, tech will be provided

low pay, high risk

ready to continue the work Y/N?

Eyes on her tablet, Audra absently closed the door of the lab with one hand. The air was fragrant with plumeria blossoms, the sun shone with bright promise, and Audra's heart was soaring with sudden excitement. She poised a finger above the screen, hesitated to savor the moment, and pressed.

YES



10

STORY 10

THE MASCULINE AND THE DEAD

FRANK BILL

ILLUSTRATIONS BY MATT CHINWORTH

The pain of a hard breath came every morning like callused knuckles to the kidneys. Not from a punch but from the push of foot to earth, the burning of lungs, the pump of muscles, the screams of men barking in Guy's brain with gunfire and the shrieks of Jihadism seared in his memory. This contemplation was his torment. Whittling his intellect, day after day, the blame from being over there—tour after tour—and not here. With her. In death.

But Guy made a choice.

His and the four legs of red, smoke-gray, and red-ticked fur ran along the double track of dirt. Taking the steep climb of rock and root, up some 1,200 feet of elevation, he dug deep to find the top. Halfway up the hill his thighs rung tight and he questioned, Did she suffer or had the end come as quickly as the snapping of fingers? Would the outcome have coursed and plotted differently had he not been over there hunting Taliban and ISIS?

She'd made her choice.

Not included him.

Had given up treatments.

In the end that was the issue; no one told him until after.

She's gone. We need you to come home.

At the top of the hill he did not stop. He kept pace, just as he did every day. He kept logging miles on the beat and broken country roads and the dirt trails surrounding acres, or he'd press, pull, and squat plates of iron within his dusty webbed barn, but that's what Guy did every day. Broke himself down. Regardless of rain, snow, hot, or cold—none of nature's elements had any effect on his routine. He pushed, tiring himself with the lactic burn

of endurance and strength training. Until his limbs pulsed with blood and tremored with exhaustion. Until he could no longer run or press, pull or squat.

Normally Guy and his red tick hound, Carbine, would now follow the right flank two more miles to his home: a cabin upon 200 acres of woods left to him by his father. A rocky holler separated him from those woods upon which sat a barnacled trailer of grime covered in an entanglement of split-glass windows nestled into the hillside of walnut and oak. Leaves lay brown and decayed, adding to the faded beer cans, empty fifths of Early Times and Jim Beam, bicycles with tires of rot, frames colored by rust, and the single eye of a pit bull wrapped in a brindled mud-puddled coat whose Cro-Magnon man's bone gauge of chain kept it restrained to what looked like a weathered truck propeller shaft sledgehammered into the soil. A dented and nicked chemical drum wedged beneath the molded green deck and lined with grimy rags served as the pit's sleeping arrangement. Two warped frying pans lay before the canine: one for feeding, the other for hydration.

His watch registered fifteen miles. Highway 62 curved behind him with the limestone wall dotted with cedar about the top. As he crossed from the double-track trail that ran some twenty miles through ole man Travis's property over clumps of cinder outlined by snakes and shaded by timber, salty beads flamed into Guy's vision. The tread of his trail shoes weighted the busted blacktop of Walnut Valley Road combined with the pant of Carbine, who kept cadence with him.

Guy's cramping hamstrings, depleted of potassium and sodium, ached painfully with every tread, same as those days under the sun and sand: a sixty-pound rucksack weighing on his shoulders and back, sprinting into the Humvee with the eruption of explosives and gunfire overseas, finger heavy on the trigger of his M4 machine gun, and grit somersaulting into the vehicle as they sped through the war-torn streets past the weathered visages of men and women whose hard lives bled through zombie-like movements up and down the war-torn turf.

His lungs flamed while perspiration irritated his vision of a man in a Harley-Davidson T-shirt, mercury locks slicked and ponytailed into a braid with a matching beard that coursed like flames from his face in all directions. His moniker, Kopp Weevil.

Kopp shook a wiry fist of bone at his young boy, just as Guy remembered Kopp's father had done to him in his adolescence. Kopp's boy was not much older than the pit in dog years, with a leg as crooked as a jack pine tree branch, flaring in and out from his frame.

Hair splashed over the boy's eyes in choppy lengths that resembled a worn floor mop, jagged and burnt, his scrawny frame covered in a hole-worn cotton shirt and dirt-stained denim. He had a grin frozen in confusion, as if lockjaw had been chiseled into his nine-year-old chops—though it had not. It was only his slow-minded demeanor. Throughout the valley he was referred to as “Crooked-Legged” Bo Weevil.

Coming down the hill, he caught sight of violence, which hammered Guy to a dead stop on the knotted terrain: Kopp's palm struck Bo's head full of messy locks, which knocked Bo's ragged frame backward over a dented lime green push mower. Wanting to mind his own, to finish his last few miles, Guy felt conflicted as his discipline of soldiering—of hunting down bad men and removing their ill ways and negative effects—was branded into him. He could not ignore the actions of anger displayed by Kopp toward Bo.

Seeing the boy treated in such a fashion redirected Guy from the road, consumed by memories of a young Afghan boy being lashed at by a tribal member for waving at the American troops passing through their village. He kicked the boy's feet from underneath him and slammed him face first into hard earth. This image of terror angered Guy as he crossed the wooden driveway-bridge over the rocky holler that connected Walnut Valley to the Weevils' weeded-gravel and potholed drive, Carbine on his heels with his violet tongue hanging from his panting-pink stretch of jowls. Guy recalled his getting involved—even though it wasn't allowed—stepping up with a swift

drive of his automatic rifle into the rear of the man's skull, showing him the sand, and daring him to find his footing while offering a hand to the boy.

There were several other times when he stepped in: stopped beatings, killings, rapes, and bodily dismemberment of those who were tired of being mistreated and ruled by terror. Guy sometimes felt that if religion was removed from the equation they'd have nothing to fight about, no grounds to stand upon. Guy believed there was a freedom in the U.S. that others took for granted: one side lived comfortable, while another side fought and sacrificed for the other side's comfort. Guy had spent most of his life fighting for others who could not fight for themselves, and he'd do the same here just as he'd done overseas.

Guy had always held distance from the boy and his sire because of the bad blood incited by a nasty land dispute between Guy's and Kopp's fathers. In their younger years, their fathers had both been employed by the local quarry. The fifteen acres Kopp called home belonged to his daddy, passed down to him after Kopp Sr. died from a three-pack-of-Marlboros-a-day habit. Add that to the bottles of Jim Beam and Early Times Kopp Sr. used to wash away the gritty coughing caused by the inhalation of dust from granulating stone into gravel at the quarry. The toxic abuse had taken residence in the lungs, then the liver, retiring Kopp's old man from existence.

The land had been offered to Kopp's daddy by Guy's father after they'd gotten to know each other at the quarry, giving the man a chance at a fresh start for himself and his family. A payment plan had been set forth, but no papers had ever been drawn up. Deeded by the grasp of appendages: Guy's father had been old school; to him, a man was only as good as his word.

After nearly a year of never missing a payment, the second year followed with delinquent payments and excuses: *car troubles, plumbing issues, need a new roof, wife's out of work, helping in-laws*, and so on and so

forth. When the excuses had run dry with repetitiveness, Guy's daddy felt idiotic because of his Samaritan ways. A final visit was paid, and threats to evict were given, looking at Guy's daddy on the deck through the trailer's screen door. Kopp's daddy, holding a double-barrel .12 gauge, said there was no contract, Guy's father was trespassing on his fifteen acres, and if he didn't get on his way, he'd scatter him and his threats about the yard. That was the finality of the land agreement.

Bo's crooked appendage was stuck upon the housing of the mower, while the other foot, trembling and weak, pressed at the small exhaust. Kopp, with his scrounge of hair, stood over Bo, his back to Guy, spraying a defilement of words like those of that Afghan tribesman, "Stupid little son of a bitch! Tell you to do one damn thing and you fucked that up! Gone and flooded the damn mower!"

Kopp kicked Bo in his ribs. "Ahh!" Bo wailed.

"Get yur gimp ass up!" Kopp demanded.

The action set off an explosion of ordinances within Guy's demeanor.

Guy came up behind him, snaked his left arm under Kopp's right, and locked it. His right forearm pressed across the back of Kopp's neck. His right palm cupped and latched into the chicken meat of Kopp's neck. He pulled Kopp away from Bo, swept his weight from his feet, and drove Kopp face first into the patched yard of burnt grass. Kopp's pit emerged from beneath the trailer in a torrent of barking, reeling the chain stiff as a tight wire.

For fear of a collision, his protecting his own, Guy shouted to Carbine, "Sit! Stay!"

Air spewed from Kopp's lungs as he panted, "The...fuck...man?"

Damp fell from Guy, whose knee pressured down into Kopp's lower back. Weighted his features into the soil. "Takes a big man to lay skin upon a young boy."

Kopp slobbered, "Ain't none of yur concern on how I discipline my spawn."

"I'm making it my concern."

Behind Guy and Kopp, Bo, with his mess of damp hair and pale complexion, gasped and inhaled hard as he rolled to his side, freeing his curved leg from the mower. Grunting, he struggled on knees and elbows and pushed himself to standing, searching for balance as his normal leg spasmed from the effort of exertion.

"Best get off me know what's best fur you," Kopp slobbered through his lemon-yellow-stained teeth.

"What's best is you not laying skin to yur son. There's ways to learn your boy without rendering physical abuse."

"Don't hurt Daddy, was my ignorance, mister. P-P-Please—" Bo spouted with fear.

"—Son," Guy interrupted, "you got nothing to be sorry for. Only one person here that needs to be sorry is the one absorbing the dirt."

Bo waved his locks from his eyes, kickstand-limped to Carbine, bony limbs brushing the granules of dirt from his stained and faded orange *TIME* logo T-shirt. He pressed his fingertips between Carbine's ears and rubbed his head. Carbine sniffed and licked Bo. Bo smiled and said slowly, "It's alright, ole pup."

"Let up on me!" Kopp demanded.

Guy knew he could crush Kopp like a car in a salvage yard compactor. He wanted to, but that wasn't the issue. The issue was the treatment of Bo. Glancing around the yard, he realized Kopp's treatment of the property wasn't much better, disgusted by the cars of any and all makes and models fertilizing the earth with years of breakdown: each with fogged glass of grime, busted lights, scuffed fenders and doors, poison ivy and milkweed swarming the airless tires and rusted undercarriages and fenders, wasps and mud daubers swarming in and out of the interiors used as storage for ragged boxes of clothing, toys, pictures, and keepsakes. It was a corrosion of history, reminiscent of the bombed-out and rusted relics and remains from the Afghan and Russian war that populated much of the areas Guy had trespassed on during his early deployments overseas.

Looking down on Kopp, with his lard-soaked locks and the smell of chemical stink wafting from his grizzled frame, Guy wondered why the man chose to live this way. Why didn't he choose better for himself or his son?

Finally, Guy released his maddening restraint on Kopp, stood up, and watched Kopp as he slithered across the burnt land and struggled to his feet. Cinnamon-colored swells whirled his complexion as he wiped the slobber and dirt from his features and pointed at Guy. "Fuck you and your ways! Been meddling and changing everyone's way of living since you moved into the valley! Wanting to live like a band of fucking hippies!"

Guy had helped to create a bartering system with the neighbors throughout the valley, starting with his own gardening and hunting, meshing with ole man Travis's raising of hogs, and then the Wiethops with their cows and ammunition reloading. Soon after, there was the Hugheses with their hunting preserve, greenhouses, and weekend bonfires, where together the members of the valley were welcome to grill and swap stories and family histories.

And Guy told Kopp, "It's called community, you fucking bully."

And Kopp barked, "Not gonna tell me how to discipline my kin. This is how I live." He spread his arms wide. "All this here land, my home! Bo? My boy! Not yurs nor nobody else's. Ain't no one, no damn war hero or bible-thumpin' grass-fuckin'-fed neighbors gonna threaten me and my freedoms!"

Fighting the pugilistic force that raged throughout his frame, Guy clenched his fists and bit his tongue. Restraining himself from offering a restructuring to Kopp's face, Guy inhaled deeply, then exhaled. "Damn shame, treat your own blood same as you was treated. Think you'd want betterment of self. Offer something more than what you's offered."



Loud music shook the interior walls of the trailer. In his closet Bo sat drawing shapes and stick figures on the wall—a man and his dog, a stick figure face down on the ground—night crawler—thick swell about his face, holding a flashlight between dirty fingers. The noise grew louder and so did the voices, followed by the smell of chemicals wafting into Bo's nose. The air was stagnant; Bo's eyes and lungs burned as his stomach grumbled and growled for nourishment. Bo knew his father would soon come stumbling and reckless, hands gripping and forceful. Worry and fear swarmed Bo.

He decided to flee; opening his window, Bo climbed out. Trailer lights and music vibrated behind him. Venturing up the hillside, the lights faded, the sounds lessened, until distance walled out any hint of the trailer and its occupants. Bo began his search for nourishment through the neighboring woods.



Back pressed into the worn leather bench, Guy lowered the 300-pound bar to his chest, pressing it up and exhaling. Noting the pump of blood in his triceps and the flex of his pectorals, his back, and front of his shoulders, tight under the dim light of the barn rafters overhead. He thought of the men, women, and children he'd helped. Given them hope for betterment. A chance. That's what the news never showed. Never spoke about. Betterment. All the work soldiers did, gave their livelihood for it, and sometimes it brought improvement. Of course when Guy was home, the World News only preached about struggle: Killing. Bombing. Accidental deaths. Political finger-pointing of blame. He rarely heard about anything positive.

Guy lived with the images of war and loss in his mind, but also regret and anger: a constant circuit on instant replay. Twenty years, he served his country, traveling in and out of foreign lands, training

to fight the battles that others could not while she lay dissipating to bone cancer. In the States there was much negativity. Negativity gave analysts something to bitch about it. Created ratings and drew viewers and the soapbox of opinions from those who'd never served. Never stepped foot on the battlefield. Never knew what it was like to be in a war zone.

Lips the shade of beets, her tint faded, the callus of sweat. Clamp of her cold hand losing its clutch that last time he'd viewed her. Chopper blades assembling the air in rifts of high and low. The company of men, grunts, tension. The smell of iron, taste of blood. Screams of the blackened and burned, the damaged. Then Silence. Those no longer breathing.

The daily grind of perspiration and ceaseless effort stained Guy's steel bar, which he sometimes used as a shoulder-width grip, sometimes for bench pressing, and other times for shoulder pressing, squatting, deadlifting, rowing.

Carbine lay stretched out on a camo dog bed about the wooden slats of dusted floor watching Guy. Night air came warm from the valley with the scents of dirt, tree, and field grass, settling with the almost quiet of night, the only exception being the distant smudge of music and clamor of human disdain that echoed from way down over the hill at the Weevils' trailer.

Finished with the bench, Guy jumped up to a metal bar attached between a framed opening of rough cut 6x6's, palms facing away, and began cranking out pull-ups: five reps, then ten seconds of rest, then five more, going back and forth until sixty seconds had expired. Guy pushed through the pain. His mind drifted, thinking about the countries he fought in: how terrible it might've been from the beginning, but by the end it was better. Safer. Making a dent. Removing terrorism. Insurgents. Training others how to police their territory. To take responsibility. To care for their own.

Guy's grip released after the intervals completed within sixty seconds.

Back to the bench. He added a five-pound plate to each side of the bar, lay back down, un-racked the bar, and lowered it. He pressed out 310 pounds for three reps.

Now, all these years later, all he had was loss: a son he'd maneuvered a wall between, who he'd not spoken with since his wife's funeral, and an abusive neighbor like the abusive tribesman he'd encountered overseas.

Getting up from the bench, Guy grabbed the chin-up bar and cranked out five pull-ups. Rest ten seconds. Things changed after the loss of her. He couldn't speak to his son. Call it guilt. Call it inability. Call it acceptance. When he looked to his son he was at a loss for words: part of Guy saw her in him, while the other part of him didn't know what he saw or if he even understood her death. There was only a void, which he blamed himself for. Finishing another sixty seconds, he added another five pounds to each side of the barbell, slid beneath it, and cranked out another three reps.

Being on the Teams, it was about working together. Never leaving a soldier behind. The Teams were your brothers, your family. There was power: in unity, in brotherhood, in owning up to one's mistakes and learning from one's wrongs. Seeing the mistreatment of Bo made Guy think of his own wrongs. His own "owning up." Because he couldn't get why a father would mistreat his blood in such a brutal way—but then why would a father go tone-deaf to his son for five years after the loss of his wife, his own son's mother?

Going back to the pull-up bar for his final sixty-second set, he heard the screeching echo of the screen door slamming down at his cabin. Carbine growled, sat up, and glanced at him, silky ears perked. Then out the open barn Carbine went before he halted, waiting for Guy to lead. *Who'd be dumb shit enough to burglar my stead?*

Guy reached for his Desert Warrior Kimber with a .45 ACP and pulled it from its holster. Carbine was in full alert mode. Guy gripped the pistol in his right hand as his left opened the screen door. There was the clatter of rummaging from his kitchen. Entering the living



room, Guy's curved nails scratched across the hardwood to the kitchen ceramic, pistol raised, while memories rushed in of sweeping and securing mud structures, men appearing from the shadowed corners, trigger pulls dropping the figures. Guy's heart punched hard, seeing the cabinet doors stood ajar and the steel reflective fridge door open. Proceeding around the door low, pistol pointed, Guy saw a boy knelt down in worn tennis shoes, one foot wrapped in duct tape.

It was Bo. Guy shook his head, releasing the tension from his war brain. His heart slowed in its rushing rhythm. Carbine came up beside Bo, licked his ear, and Bo turned to Guy and said, "Nothing but green shit in here. Don't 'cha got no real food?"

Real food. Little shit wants nourishment and I's ready to end his ass. "Awful picky for a kid who's breaking and entering. Why are you not at your home at this hour of night?"

Standing up, he said, "Daddy's got people over. They's cuttin' a rug

as he sometimes calls it. I's hungry but know'd the cabinets probably empty as my stomach."

"So you snuck out, thinking I'd feed you?"

"I'd hoped. You offered concern for me today. You been living here fur some time, never took a care to Daddy's actions before."

Guy turned to the open cabinet, sat his .45 on a shelf that Bo couldn't reach, looked back at Bo's scuffed appearance of lived-in clothes and told him, "That's 'cause I'd never seen your two-bit daddy offer skin upon you before."

"Momma stood up to his temper, got an eye full of knuckle for it. Why she run off."

Guy's stomach knotted. Hearing Kopp's wormless ways of action deciphered reminded him of the kids over there with nothing. No family. No role models. No food nor clothing. Just to wake up breathing was a blessing. They had nothing but war.

"Sorry to hear your mother left."

"I miss her. Don't know where she ran off to."

Guy felt for the boy: a motherless son. And he changed the subject. "What can I fix you to eat?"

"Don't you got no Doritos, Pop Tarts, or frozen Tony's pizzas?"

"Ain't got none of that garbage you speak of. How about some deer loin and brussels sprouts?"

"Deer? Why don't you got no chips or frozen pizzas?"

"That's not real food; it's processed by some unknown source, full of chemicals and God knows what. I live from the land, earn what I eat. I know where my food comes from. It's how I was raised."

"Hmm, never had no deer. Daddy don't hunt."

"I'm sure he don't."

"Seems strange, you don't even eat McDonald's?"

"No. Eating that's worse than smoking cigarettes."

Bo scrunched his forehead in thought. "How 'bout eggs. You got eggs?"

“Straight from the chicken’s ass. How about steak and eggs?”

Bo’s powdery nomadic complexion brightened, and he nodded. He watched Guy pull the ceramic bowl of brown-shelled eggs from the fridge, a white log of freezer paper from the freezer, a jar of ghee from the cabinet, avocado oil, and Himalayan pink salt. Firing a cast iron skillet upon the blue-orange gas flame of his stove, spooning the deep yellowish ghee and pouring the lime green oil in the pan, Guy sprinkled the salt in for added flavor and minerals.

“Why don’t you all have no food?”

“‘Cause Daddy’s on one of his binges. Buying and trading meth with friends.”

Anger clouded Guy’s mind as he cut the frozen blood-colored loin into thick slabs the size of his palms. The boy speaking so open about his father’s abuse as if it were natural.

“Why yur eggs not in a carton?”

“They’re from my grass-fed chickens. I gather them up fresh every morning.”

“You don’t buy them?”

“No. Don’t buy much food. Nor do most the others who live in Walnut Valley. Most of what I have is either grown, laid, or shot, then canned and shelved or hunted, butchered, cured, and frozen and traded with some of the other farmers in the valley.”

“Daddy says the valley’s full of no-good hippie fucks.”

“Yeah, he mentioned that. That why he still lives here?”

“Daddy says he’s gonna sell our place. Move further south.”

“Is he now?”

“That’s what he says.” Bo paused, looking at the pictures hanging on the kitchen walls, then asked, “Who’s that woman on the wall?”

Straight brunette locks flowing down to her shoulders, she was a natural beauty with green eyes and a smile that’d make a man warm from his heart to his heels. “My wife.”

“She in bed sleeping?”

Laying hunks of loin in the hot oil, Guy watched as they sizzled and popped. He thought of her, of those times he was home from the war when he and Hodge would gather eggs at their old home. They could smell the bacon grease and the eggs, heated over the blue-orange flame, from all the way up at the barn.

“She passed. When I’s overseas,” he said, as he turned each steak with a fork.

“How’d she die?”

“Cancer. Quit the chemo. Then the dialysis.”

“Dialysis?”

“Her kidneys quit. She had to have them cleaned or basically recycled by a nurse and a machine.”

Guy took a plate from the cabinet, lined it with paper towels, and laid each steak on the plate. Then he cracked six eggs, filling the skillet with them. He reached to remove the lid from the jar of ghee, spooning out more of the yolky-colored substance that was thick as peanut butter into the skillet.

Pointing to a picture of a young man who resembled Guy with his arm around another young man, Bo asked, “Who’s them two guys?”

“My son, Hodge, and his boyfriend.”

Bo pushed his hair from his greasy complexion, held the description of confusion, “Boyfriend? He’s a faggot?”

It sounded insulting when spoke by anyone, but even worse by such a younger individual. Judgmental. As if there was something wrong with the word. Its definition. His son. But there was nothing wrong with it in Guy’s mind. Though he hadn’t fully wrapped his mind around it. He loved his son regardless of his choices in life.

Guy winced, “No, he’s gay.”

“Ain’t that a fag?”

“That is an insulting term I’m sure you acquainted from your no-good son of a bitch daddy. My son is gay. And he’s a good man. Out of respect I’d appreciate you to do the same.”

“Hmm, never met a person who had a gay son.” Bo grew silent, chewing on his next question. Finally, Bo said, “Daddy said you’s a war hero.”

“No hero. Just a soldier. Marine Recon.” Guy cut lines in the skillet, separating the eggs, then used a spatula to flip them. He placed the eggs onto plates, added the steaks, and sat each of them on the rectangular-shaped hard oak table. “Help yourself.”

Seeing Bo in his home reminded him of Hodge when he was a kid—only he could already cook. Cracking eggs, adding them to a buttered skillet or slicing deer, peeling sweet potatoes, adding cinnamon to them—Hodge had been raised to care for himself. He had been raised with manners. Looking at Bo, whose teeth were tinged a color green as thick pond scum, Guy wondered if he’d ever had a physical or a dentist visit. Bo chomped his food like a scavenging barbarian, mouth wide open, particles displacing from his lips.

“No one ever teach you to close your mouth when eating?”

Bo began to talk, brown and white wads of deer and egg mixed about his mouth when Guy interrupted, “Close your mouth, no need to speak with a mouth full of food. It’s etiquette.”

Bo shut his mouth. His face reddened. He lowered his head and slowed his chewing.

“No need to get embarrassed,” Guy comforted. “You don’t know better if no one ever learned you proper manners.”

Bo cut his deer, forked it into his mouth. Kept it closed. Chewed a little slower. Guy noticed the dots of bruising that purpled Bo’s wrists and forearms.

“What is it you do all day at your home? Don’t you got school?”

Swallowing his food, Bo responded, “When I go. Some days I miss the bus. No one ever makes me go. But we’re out now. Most days Daddy’s gone running around with his friends. Sometimes I go with him. Sometimes I don’t. . . I-I-don’t like going.”

“Why’s that?”

“His friends ain’t nice people. They—” Lowering his gaze, Bo said, “—I don’t wanna talk about it.” Mashing the white and yellow of his eggs, Bo forked them into his mouth.

Guy asked, “How old are you?”

“Nine. I turn ten in a couple months.”

His mind seemed younger. “You’re in third or fourth grade?”

“Third.”

Guy finished eating, stood up, scooted his chair beneath the table, and went to the steel sink. He washed his hands and placed the dishes in the sink, plugging the drain and turning on the hot water. He reached for a sponge and a chunk of lye soap, then began scrubbing the grease and food stains from the plate. Bo got up from the table and began to wander about.

“Your plate?”

Bo looked oddly at Guy. “What about it? I’s done.”

“You’re done once you push your chair beneath the table and place your plate and utensils in this hot soapy water to clean them. Least you can do after I fed you.”

Confusion dumbfounded Bo’s yolk-smeared lips, his greasy mop covering his right eye. He pushed the chair in, grabbed the plate, and stepped solidly with one leg, off-kilter with the other, shaking all the way to the sink. Guy moved to give the boy space. He watched as Bo dropped the plate into the heated sink full of suds. Bo looked up at him, flung his head sideways to clear his locks from his vision. “How I do it?”

Guy was reminded of Hodge and him, clearing the table: he’d wash and Hodge would dry. His wife would wipe down the stove and the kitchen table and place leftovers into Tupperware, storing them in the fridge. It was family: something Guy had not felt in a long time and a concept that seemed foreign to Bo.

“Hold the plate in one hand, grip the sponge in the other. Scrub off your eatings til the plate’s clean. Rinse it off in the other sink. Then I’m walking you home.”

“Can I come back?” Bo asked timidly.

“Anytime you want.” Guy paused. Curious, he asked, “Your leg, how’d you injure it?”

“Daddy ran over it with a lawnmower on accident when he’s mowing and I’s playing in the yard. Never could afford the surgery to get it right.”

Guy wondered if Kopp even considered having Bo’s leg fixed, then realized he more than likely hadn’t. It was a sad situation, considering there was always means to heal or fix a person if one looked hard enough, put forth the effort.



Kopp watched Bo as he crawled back through his bedroom window. Kopp was enraged. His eyes filled by red vessels and glossed by a stupor of various drugs and booze, he demanded to know where the fuck Bo had snuck off to.

“The woods.”

“The woods? Doin’ what?”

“Just walking ’round.”

“Useless ass, got people in the other room, they’s waiting to meet you.”

“I-I-don’t wanna.”

“Sound like yur whiny ass mother used to. They’s plenty of things I don’t wanna do. Didn’t wanna spit yur ass into this world, but yur momma did, then skipped out on us.” Pausing, he pointed to Bo’s unmade bed, to the wrinkled and dirty flower-print dress that lay spread out. “Now put that on.”

With sunken shoulders and eyes bubbling up with tears, Bo began to undress.



Gunfire sparked from the speeding steel-plated Humvee barreling down the streets of sand. The gunner on top dropped brass, throwing up chunks of clay along the rooftops of insurgents up above. Cries of battle rang and scorched from thick wool-faced men. In the Humvee, Guy sat with his men, the tone of her voice echoing in his mind, remembering when he’d call after a mission—feeble, weak, worn—sometimes after sitting for days, watching, gathering intel. No matter what state Guy was in, she was always able to speak with him. Then came an explosion. Screams and shouts from men woke Guy from his sleep.

Sweat-soaked, he reached out and patted the velvet soft-ticked fur of Carbine laid out beside him. Ribcage rising and falling, Guy sat up and turned, legs hanging muscled and veined from the cotton-covered mattress. His eyes scanned the wall quickly, dismissing his medals of service and focusing on the picture of her and him, young together, ear-to-ear smiles. No sickness. No war. Just bright eyes. Then he looked to another photo: a young man, camo makeup caked on his face, orange vest on his torso, hands grasping the wide forked rack of an eight-pointer. Mess of leaves painted dark by blood, which to the amateur eye appeared like shadows befalling the midday light. It was field-dressing to Hodge, around eight years of age after taking down his first buck. He thought of all those years of coming home from foreign lands, teaching his son, Hodge. All the times they’d spent as a family when they could. Hunting. Fishing. Hiking. Birthdays. Christmas. Grilling. Camping. Then came the sickness. The loss. Then silence.

Where did time go?

Guy blamed himself: for not being here, for taking that final year over there. Should’ve stayed here. Close to home. Trained and prepared soldiers to go over there. For combat. Visited her on the weekends. Would it have made a difference? He told himself it would’ve. He was starting to see that now.

Then came the knock at the back door.



“Early riser.”

Bo stood donning an off-white T-shirt with Johnny Cash flying the bird, faded Wranglers with spurs of fray about the denim knees. His hair wasn’t matted and oiled to his forehead as usual, covering his field of vision; instead the length was pushed over and tucked behind his ears. He appeared clean, as though he’d bathed. Changed his clothing.

“You—you said I could come back.”

Guy started to smile.

“I did. Come on in.”

Eager, Bo asked, “You got any more of them eggs or that deer?”

“I do. Give me time to get my stretching done. I’ll cook something.”

As if a foreign word had been offered, Bo questioned with “Stretchin’?”

“Yeah. Keeping the body strong. Limber. Tendons and ligaments. Boy your age, it’ll help with longevity.”

After twenty minutes of Guy showing Bo different ways to twist, bend, and kneel his body into odd positions—holding postures like Prayer Twists, Downward Dog, Butterflies, Kneeling Tiger—and how to lower and raise his body weight with push-ups and air squats, Bo was trembling as he stumbled around off-balance from his malformed leg.

The phone rang. Guy walked across the hardwood to the tiled kitchen. “Yeah?” he answered. “Say it’s pretty wet, is they a large puddle?” Guy paused. Shook his head. Bit his lip. “Sure, just give me ’bout ten and I’ll be over.” Guy hung up the phone.

Bo stood moist-faced and out of breath as Guy told him, “Negative on the food, got an errand to run. I’m loading up, need to shuttle out at 0900.”

Surprised, Bo said, “Loading up?”

“Going to help ole man Travis with a busted water line.”

“Can I go?”

“Sure, could use the extra help.”

A transplant from Mississippi, Travis was a retired factory worker turned farmer with an affinity for rescuing beagles from shelters. He’d a large area of yard fenced off where five were housed with plenty of food and exercise to live out their days free from restraint and stress. He’d grown up within the Delta, learned to pick the guitar from his father and grandfather. Held an addiction to R.L. Burnside and Leadbelly, some classic blues artist years deceased. He would pick his guitar at weekend bonfire gatherings within the valley. He was a brute of a man, standing 6’5”, 250 pounds, built like a Montana grizzly bear.

Out at Travis’s home, the soil was saturated by puddles of water.

“Figured I best phone you,” said ole man Travis. “Think it can be fixed?”

Examining the mess of water, Guy said, “Don’t see why not.” Standing with Bo and Carbine, Guy looked about the wet grass and continued with, “Get some shovels. We’ll dig the area up, see where your leak’s coming from. And you may wanna get Wiethop on the phone, get an extra hand over here for digging.”

“How ’bout the main?”

“Cut ’er off. When we ran this line, we didn’t go too damn deep. Shouldn’t take more than an hour to dig down and find our leak.”

Guy had come up with a solution to rising water costs: to pipe the cisterns on each person’s property and supply them from a cave on his land, which tapped into an underground stream. It was a new venture, and Travis and he had rigged up a filtration system with a generator and pumping network. They were still working the kinks out of it.

Travis went into the barn and returned with three rusted and worn shovels. Guy took one and glanced at Bo.

“What?” Bo asked.

“Take the damn shovel.” Guy pointed to the muddy area. “Start digging.”

“I’m headed to the house, give Wiethop a ring. Be right back,” ole man Travis shouted.

“Go ’head, we’ll get started.”

Later, with the sun firing down upon the four frames in the yard, their bodies casting shadows over the ground, each working as well-oiled machines, Bo stood irritated by the moisture beading down his forehead and neck, the cotton of his shirt and the denim of his pants suffocating the pores of his skin. Angered and confused, he watched Guy, Travis, and Wiethop. Did his best imitation of their actions, stomping the blade into the earth with his malformed leg, balancing his body as he scooped the wet soil and piled it off to the side.

Out of breath, Bo asked, “Why for we gotta do this, can’t someone else?”

“Someone else? They’s certain traits and skill sets each of us in

the valley have acquired over our years of living. Wiethop here, he raises hogs and cows, Travis is a big gardener, we all hunt, fish, know about guns and carpentry. This is what we do. Help and learn one another.”

Bo’s words reminded Guy of Hodge the first time he took him hunting. All the “whys”: Why we walking so far? Why we up so early? Why we gotta be so quiet? It was the blind know-how of the learning curve.

The men worked, heat penetrating their bodies. Shovels slicing into the soil, creating that rhythm of metal to dirt, over and over. Travis wiped the warm from his brow with a blue hanky pulled from the worn denim of his ass pocket, said, “Been five years or better since your daddy passed, since you moved into the valley, ain’t it Guy?”

Guy looked up, his vision pinched beneath the bright heat, sweat beaded up. “’Bout that. Why?” he asked, wondering where the conversation was headed.

“Jus’ thinkin’ on how much things has changed. Ain’t heard of



too many break-ins around our area for some time. This county was scourged by meth, heroin, and Opana. All the theft and addiction was goin' around to good hardworkin' folks."

Wiethop looked at Bo, wanted to say something about the boy's father, but instead he ran a forearm over his salty face. "Guy, you really helped out by speaking with local representatives, the mayor, local law. Got all of us neighbors together, brainstormed ideas for solutions instead of bitching and complaining. We really educated one another, worked together. Helped get funding for rehabilitation of opiate and meth addiction."

Guy paused, sweat soaking his frame, and said, "At the end of the day most folks want healthier ways of livin'. Goes to show what speaking amongst ourselves and working for a goal can rectify."

Wiethop smirked at Bo. "Don't get why some folks is happy living in an abusive manner. Milking disability, destroying their mind and body. Decaying their souls with dope."

Bo felt Wiethop's eyes on his, didn't quite understand his phrasing, but knew the weight of what he was saying had to do with him and his father and how they lived.

Guy spoke: "In my Recon unit, we'd built a brotherhood through the grind of our training. Teamwork. Implemented ideas and input from each other. Helped us survive, created a better environment amongst ourselves. I just did that same way of thinking here." He reached, patted Bo on the shoulder. "When one soldier wasn't 100 percent, another was there to guide and learn him until he was."

Mud piled in height and width until they'd unearthed about eight feet of length from the line. The water around it came caramel-colored. Guy pointed out the leak and Travis asked, "What's yur prognosis?"

"Cut out about an inch or two before and after the leaking section of the PVC. Let the remaining water drain out. Get Bo a rag and a two- or three-foot section of tubing or garden hose to siphon the water from around the leak, then let Bo wipe the pipe down once

it's drained. I'll take care of sealing it."

In the barn on a workbench laminated by motor oil and grease, Guy held out his Case XX pocket knife, told Bo, "Cut me off a few feet of that string. I'll show you a trick."

Uncoiling a long piece of string, Bo severed it. Guy noticed new bruising around Bo's wrist. As Bo handed him the string, a surge of discomfort and anger wilted Guy internally.

"What are you gonna do with that?" Bo asked with a grimace of confusion.

Lining the string across the replacement PVC, Guy wrapped the string around each of his digits. Pulled the string tight as if he were going to choke someone from behind. He pressed the string across the PVC and thought of Bo's bruises, then the young boys overseas, how some were treated, how the tribesmen spit in their faces, tripped, kicked, and punched them.

Anger expanded as he began the back and forth motion of sawing, remembering all of the times he was supposed to have ignored those ill deeds but could not, when he had to intervene, to step in, to stop the assaults, the abuse.

"How you learn to do that?" Bo asked.

Bo's words brought his mind back to now, and he told him, "My uncle was a pipe fitter. Old trick he showed me when you don't got a saw. Friction across the pipe creates heat, letting the string divide the pipe."

"Divide? You mean cut?"

Ole man Travis chuckled. "Son you sure got a mouthful of unknowns."

And Wiethop mumbled, "Sometimes you cain't fix stupid."

Bo's complexion reddened.

Ignoring Wiethop's words, camouflaging his discomfort, Guy asked Bo, "Where them bruises on your wrist come from?"

There was a quiet that suffocated Bo as though it was ether in the air: embarrassment. Bo shied away from the actions of the others,

reminded of his behind-closed-doors abuse, and mumbled, “Daddy and his friends.”



The sun dissipated to the west as Guy sat at his kitchen table. Several old T-shirts doubled as rags, splotted by greasy-yellow stains. A notepad, a can of 3-in-One oil, a skinning knife, and a few pocket knives lay scattered next to a gray rectangular hunk of stone. Bo looked curious, pointed and asked, “What’s that rock for?”

Guy smirked. “It’s a sharpening stone. Use it to sharpen my knives.”

Picking up the stone, he handed it to Bo, “Here, hold this.”

Bo took the stone. “What’ll I do with it?”

Guy squeezed the bottle of 3-in-One, which came out in small drops, a similar shade to canola oil, and wet the stone. “Rub your index finger over the liquid, real easy like.”

Bo ran his finger back and forth over the stone. The oil slowly moistened the surface and Guy took the stone from Bo and told him, “That lubricated the surface. Now we can hone us a good edge.”

Taking his skinning knife from its black leather sheath, the blade a shiny chrome, Guy pressed and guided the edge gently against the stone. On one side and then the other. Going back and forth. “I try to do the same number on each side, gliding it real slow.”

“How many times?”

“I’ll do five on one side, then the other. Just go back and forth like so.”

Guy sat the stone down, reached for a rag, and wiped the gray oily film from the blade. “Now I check how sharp it is.” Guy tore a piece of paper from the notepad. Held it up, met the top of it with the blade, started a slight sawing motion as he pressed the blade, looking to make a single swipe. “If I gotta keep sawing, the blade ain’t sharp enough. If I can make a single swipe, it’s good.”

Bo sat in amazement. “Can I try and do it?”

“Sure,” Guy chuckled. “We’ll use a smaller knife.”

Guiding a single edge of a three-blade pocket knife back and forth over the wet stone brought back memories of Hodge getting his first pocket knife for Christmas: a Buck knife with a lock blade, brass ends with a dark walnut center. Guy taught Hodge all the dos and don’ts of owning a knife. Don’t cut toward yourself, cut away from yourself. Never run with an open blade, don’t stab at or pretend to poke someone with it, it’s not a toy. He remembered showing Hodge how to sharpen his knife. How to keep the blade oiled, the hinge and the lock lubed.

Bo asked Guy, “Think that’s enough?”

“Grab some paper and we’ll see.”



The passing weeks brought more and more thoughts of Hodge. How he’d been doing since the passing of his mother. How was his job at the Ford Motor Plant where he was an engineer? Was he even still there? Guy had picked up the phone more than once, wanting to dial that number. Only to hang up.

One night, Guy and Bo came across the damp kale-green yard, carrying a large mason jar half filled with moist soil. And Bo questioned, “What’s this jar of dirt for again?”

“To keep what we catch alive.”

“What’re we catchin’?”

“Night crawlers.”

“Then what’ll we do with them?”

“Store them in the fridge until we’re ready to go fishing.” Guy shined his large Mag-Lite upon the ground, worms slithered from their pencil-sized holes, greasy-pink and veiny. Guy told Bo, “Reach down and pick them up, put them into the jar before they shoot back into their holes.”

One after the next, Bo’d bent down, pressed his already dirt-stained

knee into the ground, reached and pinched a worm between his fingers, feeling its squirm and slither. “Uhh, that feels gross,” he said to Guy as he placed them into the jar. “Why we doin’ this?”

“Cause you told me you’d never been fishing before. Once we fill the mason I’ll take you to a honey hole on the Blue River one evening. Reel in some hand-sized bass and bluegill.”



Nearly every morning Bo showed up at Guy’s back door, sometimes in the same ragged shirt and dirty denim from the previous day, hair slapped across his head, unwashed, the reek of body butter, but always eager to seize the day.

On one particular morning, after a strong cup of coffee and stretching, Guy and Bo came from the house, walked up to the barn with Carbine trailing to the hen house, just opposite of Guy’s workout area. Bo carried a white bucket, went from hen to hen, checking their roost about the hay just as he did most mornings upon his visits, pulling from beneath them the caramel- and vanilla-colored eggs.

Reaching with his tiny arm, his fingers feeling beneath a red and rust-feathered hen, he glanced to his right. Alarm stabbed down his spine as he saw a black-scaled serpent outstretched off to the left of the chicken, its forked tongue sliding out. Watching Bo, it raised its head, curious to his movements.

Bo stumbled backward over the slats of dusty floor. Guy caught a view of the scaled reptile and its yellow stripes over the black. Reaching ahold of Bo’s sweaty shirt collar, he helped him retain his balance, said, “It’s okay, only a black snake. Harmless.”

“Its tongue keeps jutting out. Fucker’s preparin’ to bite me!”

“Naw, they can’t hear. It’s bouncing waves out at your movements. It’s like a radar detector. Just curious is all.”

Reaching quickly, Guy grabbed the snake behind its head, pinching

and picking it up. The snake coiled its body over the ropy muscle of Guy’s forearm. Walking from the barn to the green yard, daylight beating down, Bo followed behind Guy, nervous, grasping the bucket of eggs. Guy turned, held the snake for Bo, said, “See its eyes, it ain’t poisonous. They’s good for catching mice and rats. Gotta watch ’em around the eggs. They’ll try and eat ’em.”

Guy released the snake, watched it slither away through the grass.

There were other mornings when Bo would arrive before sunrise to work out with Guy, his muscles shaking and twitching from doing body weight exercises Guy taught him, push-ups and pull-ups and air squats. Though he was weak those first few weeks, nearly falling over from the crooked leg, his strength and balance began to take hold and grow, as did his confidence as he’d built his body up to doing several sets of ten to twenty reps after a month.

Other times, he’d ride with Guy when he visited ole man Travis or one of the other families within the valley to offer a hand around their farms: cutting wood, running or repairing fence line, helping with gardening or green housing. Guy was building Bo’s character and his confidence, educating him with discipline, etiquette, teamwork, community, and masculinity, filling the void of father and son within both their lives.



“Hell, you go every damn day?” Kopp questioned as he slapped Bo upside his head.

Red-faced and swelling, Bo told him, “Why hell you care, you ain’t never home no way.”

“Don’t give me the smarts boy, answer the question!”

“Walkin—”

“Walkin’ where?” Kopp fired without allowing Bo to finish.

“The neighbors’,” Bo said, rubbing the heated swell of his head.

“What neighbor?”

“Guy.”

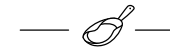
Anger thickened within Kopp. He knew the boy had been going over there for weeks. Kopp just wanted to hear him admit it and said, “The war hero. Really. What for do you all do all damn day?”

“He learns me ’bout things that you don’t,” Bo said, using his words like punches. “Like gardenin’. Gatherin’ eggs. Knife sharpenin’. Wood cuttin’. He’s takin’ me fishin’ Sunday evening.”

“Things I don’t? Fuckin’ retard. Fishin’? Like to see that,” Kopp cackled. “Probably cain’t even bait the fuckin’ hook without runnin’ the damn thing in yur index. You’d fall off the damn bank. Drown for you catch a frickin’ fish. Maybe he teach you how to swim why he’s at it.”

Kopp thought not everyone wants to abide in this Samaritan community. Some things a boy needs to learn on his own. Like how food don’t just appear in the cabinet. It takes money to buy that shit. But this little son of a bitch wants to sit around and eat all day every day and do jack shit around the trailer. Geez. What does a guy get from cutting wood, draining his pores while digging fence post holes, butchering hogs, milking cows, or tending garden other than sore hands and a busted back? Kopp never had no interest in helping these fucks out. Probably talking about wars fought on continents he gave two shits about, gardening, hunting, livestock, or what the fuck ever they talked about when they did what they did. Boy should be here mowing my fuckin’ yard. Washing dishes. Scrubbing shit and piss stains from the toilet. Keeping the trailer cleaner than it was. Should be here taking care of his ole man. Doing what Kopp wanted him to do. Buncha’ horse shit if you asked Kopp. He know’d what all this was about, what all these hippie fuckers was aiming to do. The sons of bitches was trying to brainwash his boy. His own flesh and blood. Raising him how they saw fit. ’Cause he’d never give in to their ways. Fuck them. He wasn’t liking it one damn bit. He wanted to bust Bo upside his head again. But he knew how to hurt the boy worse

than physical contact. Instead he told Bo, “You ain’t goin’ nowhere’s Sunday. Got company comin’ over. Need you here.”



The community sat as they did every Saturday evening in the old Methodist church’s hall. Speaking about change. Progress. Goals. And betterment for everyone in the valley.

“Don’t get why you’d have an interest in helping that boy,” said Wiethop with his thinning mane of hair. “His granddaddy stole your daddy’s land.”

“Someone’s got to,” Guy told him.

“Why you?” asked ole man Travis.

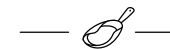
“Cause he came to me. The boy didn’t do nothing to me nor my father.”

“Kid’s simpleton in the skull,” said Wiethop, pointing to his temple.

“He’s got simple ways. But he learns good. Retains. Problem is he’s never had no one that gave two shits about him,” Guy told the men.

Shaking his head, Wiethop said, “Don’t none of us in the valley get it. His daddy’s a no-count-dopeheaded-son-of-a-bitch. Ain’t your problem if he’s a big minus as a father.”

“They’s nothing to get. We created a community that helps one another. That’s what I’m doing. Helping and learning the boy with some skills, attributes. Things he can carry on in life, maybe learn someone else when he’s older, break this mold that he’s engulfed within. He deserves that much.”



With each unanswered ring of the phone, there was a nervousness that Guy hadn’t felt since his first day of boot camp. Just when he was ready to hang up, a voice that sounded much like his own, but younger

and familiar, answered, “Hello?”

An uneasiness overcame this man who’d been trained to be precise, dead-on, instinctive, and he said, “Hodge?”

“Dad?”

“How you been?”

“How’ve I been?” Hodge repeated sarcastically. “Wow.”

“Look, just hear me out, can you offer me that much?”

A deep exhale came from Hodge, followed by a bored tone of, “Can I offer you that much? Sure, I guess I can. I mean, it’s only been what, five years of you bein’ off the grid. Or what’s the military term, MIA?”

“What I did, it’s wrong. I should’ve answered your calls. Your notes on the door when I wasn’t here. Should’ve called or visited you.”

“I always looked up to you, after everything you did raising me. Never judged you for taking deployments. I knew what you had to do—it was your job. You were my hero. A real-life combat soldier. Even in the end, when you weren’t here, I knew, Mom knew, or at least we thought we knew, that you loved us. But after, I mean, you’re retired, you’re home, she’s gone, but I’m still here, you’re still here, or I thought you were.... But there’s only so much time. You taught me to make the most of that. Not distance ourselves.”

“I deserve every word of that.”

“Damn right you do!”

“Truth is, every time I looked at your mother in that casket, all I saw was you, then seeing you reminded me of her. All that did was make me realize I shoulda been here, I shouldn’t have been on deployment. I made the wrong choice. If I’d have taken a job trainin’ and preppin’ soldiers for war, I coulda been here and she wouldn’t have turned down care. She’d have had a fightin’ chance.”

“It wouldn’t have mattered. She made her peace, made her choice.”

“I could have persuaded her. Extended her life by searchin’ out other options of treatment.”

“No, you couldn’t. And she knew that. She was tired of fighting. She wanted to rest. She had worn out her existence of pills, injections, and tubes. All the prodding and poking with needles and fluids. She wanted to be herself, not a figment of the doctors and their pharmaceuticals. She wanted us to remember her how she once was, not how she ended up in the end. It was her choice, not ours.”

Silence sat hard.

“Look, I didn’t call to fight, I called to say I was sorry.”

“Fine, you’re sorry.”

“And I was wrong for what I’ve done. I wanna see you.”

“Why, why now all of a sudden you got a change of heart?”

“Bo.”

“Bo?”

“He’s this boy, lives down the road, bein’ abused by his father, who’s a no-count son of a bitch. A real fuckin’ tool. Dopehead. Boy’s been helpin’ me ’round the farm. Learned him a lot like I learned you. It’s brought back all of these memories, things I hadn’t felt nor let myself think about in a long time.”

“You’re a real piece of work, Dad. Don’t see your own son in five years but you’re makin’ time to raise some dopehead’s kid?”

“Look, he don’t have no one. Got bruises all up and down his arms. A busted-up leg. Didn’t know his ass from a hole in the ground. And of all the simplest and smallest of things, the boy has no table manners to speak of.”

Hodge got quiet again, then he laughed. “Bet that didn’t go over good.”

“Why you say that?”

“’Cause Mom set you and me straight more than a time or two about eating and talking with our mouths full. You was always gone, and when you come home we’s always eager to talk. To catch up. She always said, ‘Chew your food first, swallow, then talk all you want.’ No heathens being raised in her house.”

“Really miss her.”

“Me too.”

Silence.

“Look, I wanna take Bo fishin’ Sunday and I’d like you to go. Think he could learn a lot from bein’ around you.”

More silence.

“Well?”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Can’t expect anything more, I appreciate it.”



Guy’s body still twitched from his morning workout as he paced. Carbine sat watching Guy walk back and forth over the hardwood floor, stopping every now and then to pull the curtain back, glance out at the gravel drive to see if Hodge was driving down it.

Carbine’s tan ears perked up, his nails ticked across the floor, and he stood at the kitchen door waiting and watching. Then came the knock. Carbine stood, his tail slicing the air, whining with excitement at the scent on the opposite side.

Guy opened the door and there stood a mirror image of himself, only younger. His hair longer, devoid of gray. His face sharp as a razor. Arms veined and thick, they hung from his navy blue ROGUE T-shirt. “Gonna invite me in?”

Guy embraced Hodge, patted his back hard with his palm. Carbine came, nudging his head beneath Hodge’s hand that lay flat and trapped at his side by Guy’s bear hug.

“Thank you for coming,” he said into Hodge’s ear.

“Alright, alright. Can I come in?”

In the kitchen Hodge stood, chest and shoulders pressing out of his shirt, his old denim jeans, faded and relaxed, ran down over his beat work boots as he rubbed Carbine’s hound dog head. “Looks like

you’ve taken good care of Granddad’s house.”

Guy poured a fresh cup of coffee. “I do my best. You want a cup?”

“Sure.”

“Black, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Can’t believe it’s been five years.”

“Wasn’t my choice,” Hodge said, scooting an oak chair from beneath the kitchen table, with Carbine at his side, licking and play biting at his hand as Hodge sat down.

Grabbing the glass pot, Guy poured a steaming sludgy cup for Hodge, handed him the cup, and said, “I know. It’s mine. Can’t make up for lost time, only make the most of what time is left.”

Hodge raised his cup. “Here’s to new beginnings.”

Guy did the same. Each sipped his steaming cup. Swallowed.

“Carbine’s gotten bigger. Looks like he’s in good shape.”

“He runs with me most days. I don’t wanna overdo it on his joints, but he gets plenty of road work.”

“And belly rubs?”

Guy smiled. “Plenty of those.” Sipping his coffee, he asked, “What made you come?”

“Devon. He told me how when his father passed, it left such a void in his life. Lot of things he wished he would’ve done but didn’t. He and his mother quit talking. And then she got sick and, well, he has a lot of regrets.” Hodge sipped his coffee, said, “Look, I’m here and that’s what matters now.”

“I’ll have to thank Devon when I see him.”

Hodge nodded. “Where’s this Bo?”

“Good question. He’s here most mornings before I can even stretch.”

“Early riser.”

“He’s got a lot of potential. Just a shithead father. Let’s get our gear ready while we wait.”

“Sounds good.”

They readied their fishing poles, bringing a third for Bo, had the mason of night crawlers and artificial baits, hooks, jigs, extra line, and sinkers. They stood out by Hodge's black and blue Ford Raptor. Guy said, "Looks like work is treating you good."

"We get the A Plan discount at Ford, but yeah, things are good. Came back strong after the downturn in 2009 with layoffs and other places shutting down."

"It really hurt a lot of folks."

"Yeah." Hodge paused, looked out to the fields. "Always was peaceful here."

"Still is." Guy looked at his watch. "I don't know where Bo's at. Not like him. Something's not right. Should've been here hours ago. Bo wouldn't miss going fishing for the first time."

"What do you wanna do?"

"Phone the sheriff. Tell him we're paying Bo and his father a visit."



Vehicles with various forms of wear and corrosion lined the gravel-patched-by-grass driveway. Shifting to park, Hodge asked, "Why didn't you tell me it was Kopp's kid? His daddy fucked Granddad over real good from the story I grew up hearing."

"That he did. With us not talking, I didn't think nothing of it. But now you know—"

"I know this kid of his don't got a snowball's chance in hell if everything Granddad used to say is true."

"You ever know'd your granddad to be a liar?"

"Naw."

"Fore we get out, here's the situation: they's drugs inside that trailer and some form of abuse toward Bo. I'd bet my existence on it."

"Wanna wait on Sheriff Diggs?"

"Naw, Bo's waited long enough. We gotta get him out."

Stepping from the Raptor, Guy and Hodge went side by side up the uneven walkway. Music thumped and voices carried from the trailer. Guy kept his temper tucked like a .45 Colt, imagining the mistreatment of Bo, how those bruises had been obtained upon his wrists, hands pressing to skin violently, wrapping, delivering pain. He tucked his anger down into each fist. Would do what needed doing with his fists if it came to that. Expecting shit to detour south quick. Stepping from the walkway, Hodge and he came across the mends of yard, boots pressed up the creak of rotted steps, sounding off like a battalion of two soldiers marching toward battle. The pit bull was nowhere in sight, which alerted Guy that the dog was more than likely inside.

Facing the green, molding front door, Guy heard voices rumbling from the other side. Water fell in a constant drip beside him from a window-unit A/C. Guy looked to Hodge. Hodge nodded. Rested his hand on his thigh. Guy raised his fist and pounded the door in sync to the rhythm of Ray Wylie Hubbard's "Mother Blues." His other hand held a lax fist. Adrenaline surged throughout each man's frame like high-voltage electricity. Then the twist of the tarnished knob. The door swung open and a draft of cold air combined with chemicals and tobacco smoke stung Guy's and Hodge's faces. Guy stood face to face with Kopp, his insides raging. Wanting to rip his arms off. Beat the man with each limb.

"You lost?" Kopp asked, shirtless and pale. Eyes stabbed with veins and dope-glaze.

"Here for Bo."

"Bo's busy."

Behind Kopp the room was laced with silhouettes that Guy tallied in his mind. Three cars in the driveway, couples of two inside the trailer, if his headcount was correct.

That'd make six. Seven counting Kopp, eight with the Pit. Kopp would be a shield to his entrance. Used to block and ram whoever came next. And they wouldn't just get thumped. They'd get hurt.

No wasted blows. Each man would have to get stung by injury. From somewhere inside the Pit barked. And Guy told Kopp, “He’s gonna get unbusy.”

Irritated with a hint of shivering, Kopp twisted his head, lipped, “Shut that bitch ass dog up.”

Someone made a racket. The dog growled then yelped. A jolt traveled through Guy. Mistreatment of another human was something he couldn’t tolerate, but to mistreat an animal really pierced Guy’s skin. Then he saw a glimpse of Bo, in a flower print dress, two men lounged on a couch on one side, loveseat on the other with a lone man, that’s three men, pushing Bo back and forth, laughing, “Get ye an eye full!” Kopp twisted his stagnated gaze back to Guy and laughed.

Furious, Guy said, “Bo’s coming with me.”

“Over my dead body.”

“Have it your way,” Guy told Kopp. Came with a left hand to Kopp’s throat.

Then Guy dug his fingertips into Kopp’s windpipe and squeezed. Muscled his frail ass backward into the trailer. Ran him into a table lined with bottles of booze and baggies of white powder until his legs buckled. His body spread across it. Clattering the shapes of glass to the floor. All eyes came to Guy, who looked to Bo. “You’re coming with me.”

Music was still pumping Ray Wylie Hubbard. The Pit sat on the floor, scared. Chain attached to its neck next to one of the men’s bare feet, who looked up with one eye fractured into a permanent wink, the other smeared by drunkenness and drugs. “Who the fuck are you?”

Hodge towered over the man, daring him to move. “Button your lip or I’ll button it for you permanently.”

“What ’bout Kadie?” Bo asked, his face pocked by lipstick.

Guy yelled to Bo, “Get your dog and let’s get.”

Kopp came up from the table, wobbling, arms swinging. “Ain’t takin’ my boy!”

Guy caught his movement from the corner of his eye, met him with a left stiff cross. Fluid and teeth flinted the air as he was knocked back across the table. “Your boy? You got a sick way of raising him.”

From the loveseat, the lone man started to stagger to standing, “Wait a fuckin—”

Kadie went crazy, barking at the man as if she sensed security from Guy and Hodge, as Hodge came with a hard right, indented the man’s sternum, shifted the lone man back to sitting. “Find your fucking cushion or find your teeth.”

Showing the dirty palms of each hand, the man searched for his wind, rubbed his chest, gasped, “Not a problem, man, not a problem.”

Bo took Kadie by her chain, led her from the group of men. Kopp came from the table once more, blood rivered from his lips and nose. He’d still not recovered the function of his legs as he stumbled, slurred, “Ain’t takin’ my boy!”

Guy punched Kopp back onto the table and held him down while telling Bo, “Kadie and you get out to the truck, you don’t need to see this.”

Bo ran out of the trailer with Hodge close behind. Barefoot, he ran with Kadie over the deck. Down the steps. Hodge followed behind him, telling him to go toward the police lights.

Inside the trailer with Guy’s right hand clamped around Kopp’s throat, squeezing, he felt Kopp trying to struggle, to move. But the man was weak, his face blistered-red as he gagged and stuttered, “W-w-w-w-hat are y-y-you waitin’ for war hero?...e-end m-mme...”



Kneeling, he ran his fingers over the mucus-slick marble that tic-tacked in colors of pink, black, and gray. WIFE. MOTHER. LOVED BY ALL. Engraved into the stone. A cold air from within warmed Guy internally. He’d never visited Joyce. Most referred to her as Joy, as

that's what she brought. He lay the white petals with yellow centers upon the pedestal—daisies, her favorite flower. He felt a guilt needling within, from not visiting sooner. Lowering his head, taking in all that he'd incurred over the long weeks, his mind still burned with the visit from the sheriff and their volley of words.

"No one would've blamed you if you choked that useless son of a bitch to his death," said Sheriff Diggs in his county browns.

Standing out back of Guy's cabin beneath an elm tree, Guy told Diggs, "Can't say I didn't wanna. But I couldn't take that from the boy regardless of how wretched his daddy is. We'd both be living with that for the rest of our lives."

"Well he and those miscreants ain't gettin' out anytime soon. They's enough drugs and paraphernalia to seal them in county for a long, long while until they court date."

Diggs cleared his throat and continued. "Judge Harlan and child services says the boy can stay with you 'til they locate his mother. If that's okay?"

"That's fine. My worry is you won't find her less you get a cadaver dog and search Kopp's property."

"Shit, Guy, don't say that."

"Regardless, what I don't get is how in this day and age, with all that's offered for betterment, why a person wouldn't make a go toward betterment for himself and his boy."

"Drugs, they've been the ruin of many lives throughout the county. See it day in and day out."

Ruin. Guy rolled that word over in his mind. Looking at the stone. Thinking now of his wife. Of Joy. Of how even with all of his discipline, a part of him had been ruined by her loss. Off in the distance behind him, the idle of his son's truck carried in the air. And he thought about Bo. How he'd helped mend that ruin. Helped him face that blame he carried within. Guy wasn't healed, but he was no longer ruined.

AFTERWORD

*Michael W. Painter
and Jody Struve
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What does it mean to hope for something better, not just for the few but for everyone?

How might we imagine and build a place where everyone has a fair and just opportunity to live a healthy life?

Could fiction help take us to such a better place? Can stories help us envision alternatives to present-day inequities?

At times the current headlines in the United States can be disheartening. It can seem like we're pretty far from "better." For too many, fair and just opportunities are demonstrably not "right around the corner."

Take racism. Racism persists and resists. It hasn't gone anywhere. It has continued to embed itself sickeningly throughout our society.

Xenophobia? We haven't defeated that either.

Both reveal themselves in how people get treatment, who lives and dies, who has access to good jobs, homes, and schools—and even healthy food and water.

Advances in technology have always left people behind, as Gil Scott-Heron observed in his 1970 poem "Whitey on the Moon":

I can't pay no doctor bills.
(but Whitey's on the moon)
Ten years from now I'll be payin' still.
(while Whitey's on the moon)

Still, to many our technology might have once mostly seemed exciting and benign. Now, in addition to the troubling equity issues, most realize it comes with other sinister implications—like alarming threats to privacy and security, or supercharged erosion of the basic civility that binds us.

And if all this wasn't enough, there are the new "existential threats." Week by week the effects—including devastating health and equity effects—of human-generated climate change, mass extinctions, and ecosystem collapse become more apparent and increasingly alarming.

At times it can seem as if the promise of a better, fair future is a naïve pipe dream. In fact, that despair can be pretty enticing. But we know this: Cynicism and despair are traps.

Are the challenges *and* the stakes high? Yes. They are and always have been. The opportunities, though, for a better, healthier, more equitable society are even more profound. In fact, they're enormous—if we work together.

At the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, we're working to improve the health and well-being of each and every person living in the United States. We can't do that unless we change our culture. We must urgently work together to build a future where everyone in the United States, regardless of who they are or where they live, has a fair and just opportunity to live their healthiest life possible.

We call that better time and place "a Culture of Health."

We turned to writers to help us envision a Culture of Health because history has shown us that stories have the power to shape our culture. Fiction forces us to contemplate our world and our role in it.

A story invites us to step out of our own life for a moment and into another, often one quite unlike our own. The promise of a good story is that we are delivered back changed in some small, or perhaps profound, way: We ask new questions, our perspective is widened, we listen and we hear anew.

It is in that spirit that we sought out ten diverse and gifted writers of fiction. We told each of them about our vision to build a Culture of Health. We explained how it could be a time and place where everyone could live their healthiest life possible. We tried to convey our hope and optimism. But we also encouraged them not to shy away from the harsh realities, injustices, and pain of the present day. We asked them to imagine the good and bad consequences of our actions or inactions on the near and far future. We then asked them to tell us a story about that time and place, about a Culture of Health. Ignite our passion to create that better place.

They did. This collection is their offering back to us. We greatly respect the unique ways they each looked through the prism into the future—and saw a different ray of the spectrum. They helped us see what all those rays together could become.

As Mike McClelland’s character Kyle, in “The Flotilla at Bird Island,” says, “...this was the future I wanted for all of us, one that I didn’t know was possible.”

What do you say, dear reader? Let’s keep looking and listening—and talking, together. Ask yourself, and more importantly, ask each other: What is your Culture of Health story? A Culture of Health is not one vision or one story. It is, and must be, many. What will happen to us in your version of our healthy, hopeful, equitable future? And how will we get there?

The power of our stories is unfolding before us.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Madeline Ashby (*“Viral Content”*) is a futurist and science fiction writer living in Toronto. She is a graduate of the M. Des. in Strategic Foresight & Innovation program the Ontario College of Art and Design University. She has worked with organizations such as Changeist, Intel Labs, the Institute for the Future, SciFutures, Nesta, Data & Society, and others. Her most recent novel is *Company Town* (Tor Books). It was a Locus and Sunburst Award finalist and winner of the Copper Cylinder Award, as well as being a contender in CBC Books’ Canada Reads competition.

AUTHOR’S STATEMENT

In an era when the facts don’t seem to matter, the relationship between a free press and public health is more important than ever. With this story, I wanted to explore how the future of journalism might impact the future of public health. All too often, we consider trends in isolation, as though they have no influence on each other. But trends intersect and overlap, and they produce interesting eventualities. “Viral Content” is the story of how journalists might feel pressured to hide the truth about the dangerous conditions at a detention center that create the perfect incubating environment for a virus that’s especially lethal to young people. As the community wrestles with the sudden loss of a promising young man, it must also acknowledge its role in improving the quality of life for all its members, even the ones who have disappeared. “Viral Content” is dedicated to Don Bartel.



Hannah Lillith Assadi (*“Paradise”*) was raised in Arizona and now lives in Brooklyn. She received her MFA in fiction from the Columbia University School of the Arts. Her first novel, *Sonora* (Soho Press), received the Rosenthal Family Foundation Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and was a finalist for the PEN/Robert W. Bingham Prize for Debut Fiction. In 2018, she was named a National Book Foundation 5 under 35 honoree. Her second novel, *The Stars Are Not Yet Bells*, is forthcoming from Riverhead Books.

AUTHOR’S STATEMENT

I was so inspired by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s comprehensive and holistic approach to the Culture of Health vision. There were so many topics I wanted to explore in my fiction after reading more about it, from mental health to climate change to substance abuse. Ultimately, I thought I could bring the most to bear by focusing on a landscape that was familiar to me—that of the Sonoran Desert and Maricopa County as a microcosm for the broader way in which the fabric of the nation is changing. I wanted to explore how, as Americans, we can and should be more healthy toward our growing diversity, a diversity that has always defined us, and has always made America great. Thus, the story “Paradise,” about a young Syrian refugee adapting to life in America while battling her own mental health issues and PTSD, was born.



Calvin Baker (“*Brief Exercises in Mindfulness*”) is the author of four critically acclaimed novels, including *Dominion* (Grove Press) and *Grace* (Gallery Books). His nonfiction has appeared in *Harper’s Magazine* and *The New York Times*. In addition, he has taught in the MFA program at Columbia University and at Yale College.

AUTHOR’S STATEMENT

I have long been struck by the ways public and private space interact with and reflect the division between our public and private selves. Gentrification struck me as an embodiment not only of the larger contradictions in American society, but also the divisions between who we profess to be and who we truly are. The questions raised by the issue include the material and psychological forces that we can readily observe (or choose not to see), as well as a hidden toll of American history and the attendant myth of self on other, more subtle and profound definitions of happiness and what it means to be fully human.



Frank Bill (“*The Masculine and the Dead*”) is a blue-collar American author who works in a factory in northern Kentucky near where he was born and raised. He finds time to write on breaks during his twelve-hour shifts. Bill’s book of short stories, *Crimes in Southern Indiana*, and his novels, *Donnybrook* and *The Savage*, are published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux. His work has also been featured in *The New York Times*, *Playboy*, *Granta*, *The Daily Beast*, and many other outlets. *Donnybrook*, which centers around bare-knuckle boxing, is his first work to be adapted as a feature film. He is currently working on his third novel, as yet untitled.

AUTHOR’S STATEMENT

“The Masculine and the Dead” was written to shine a light on the Midwest and the opiate crisis in that area. It’s told through the lens of a soldier who deals with PTSD through trail running and strength training, but who has yet to face the feelings associated with the death of his wife and his subsequent estrangement from his son. It’s a story about humanizing masculinity and cultivating human betterment by living a life of discipline—and being able to use tools of discipline to help others, even when we ourselves are flawed. The story deals with forgiveness, discipline, health, abuse, and male identity, but it also deals with how a person of strength must face and conquer his own flaws and weaknesses. “The Masculine and the Dead” is dedicated to Jim Steel, strength and conditioning coach coordinator at the University of Pennsylvania, and Zach Even-Esh, founder and owner of The Underground Strength Gym, two friends who’ve kept me motivated and inspired in my daily life.



Yoon Ha Lee (“*The Erasure Game*”)’s debut novel, *Ninefox Gambit* (Solaris), won the Locus Award for best first novel and was a finalist for the Hugo, Nebula, and Clarke awards; its sequel, *Raven Stratagem* (Solaris), was a finalist for the Hugo. His middle-grade novel *Dragon Pearl* is forthcoming from Disney-Hyperion in January 2020. He lives in Louisiana with his family and an extremely lazy cat, and has not yet been eaten by gators.

AUTHOR’S STATEMENT

One of the aspects of a Culture of Health that struck me was how much data it would require to monitor health outcomes. I have a friend who’s a security consultant, and hanging around her has gotten me to thinking about how that kind of data could be used—or abused. That got me to thinking about a future society in which such data-gathering was an accepted norm, and the more sinister implications of governmental control.



Karen Lord (“*The Plague Doctors*”) is an award-winning author and independent research consultant in Barbados. Her debut novel, *Redemption in Indigo*, won the 2008 Frank Collymore Literary Award, the 2010 Carl Brandon Parallax Award, the 2011 William L. Crawford Award, the 2011 Mythopoeic Fantasy Award for Adult Literature, and the 2012 Kitschies Golden Tentacle (Best Debut), and was nominated for the 2011 World Fantasy Award for Best Novel. She is the author of the science fiction duology *The Best of All Possible Worlds* and *The Galaxy Game*, and the editor of the anthology *New Worlds, Old Ways: Speculative Tales from the Caribbean*. Her newest novel, *Unraveling*, was published by DAW Books in June 2019.

AUTHOR’S STATEMENT

As Tropical Storm Dorian passes on into the Caribbean Sea, I am strongly reminded that my writing is influenced by life on a small island, facing serious risk every year. No evacuation possible, no expectation of help from elsewhere. But it doesn’t take much to turn any place into a small island without a safety net. Rural areas can get cut off, neglected, or completely forgotten. Urban neighborhoods can be deprioritized and semi-abandoned in the fight to keep the heart of the city beating. I wanted a story about how those on the margins—isolated, overlooked, and underestimated—can still survive and even thrive. Thanks to Dr. Adrian Charles for helping me get the medical details right, from patient counseling to plague transmission, in the fictionalizing of a concept we have discussed before: the decentralized, modular, self-sustaining provision of health services.



Like Sharon Stone and the zipper, **Mike McClelland** (“*The Flotilla at Bird Island*”) hails from Meadville, Pennsylvania. He has lived on five different continents but now resides in Georgia with his husband, his two sons, and a menagerie of rescue dogs. His short fiction collection, *Gay Zoo Day*, was released by Beautiful Dreamer Press in September 2017, and other recent work has appeared in the *Boston Review*, *Queen Mob’s Teahouse*, and *Permafrost*. He is a graduate of Allegheny College, the London School of Economics, and the MFA program at Georgia College, and is currently pursuing a PhD in Creative Writing at the University of Georgia.

AUTHOR’S STATEMENT

Learning about the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s Culture of Health vision made me want to write one hundred stories. However, as I started coming up with firm ideas for a project, my mind kept returning to health equity. I wanted to imagine a community of people in which health equity had been achieved, and how starkly such a community would stand out in a future shaped by climate change, poverty, and discrimination—and that’s how “The Flotilla at Bird Island” was born.



Achy Obejas (“*The Sweet Spot*”) is the author of *The Tower of the Antilles* (Akashic Books), which was a 2018 PEN/Faulkner finalist. She has written four other books of fiction, edited two anthologies, and translated more than fifteen books, including works by Junot Díaz, Wendy Guerra, and Rita Indiana. She has been the recipient of a Ford Fellowship for USA Artists, a National Endowment grant for poetry, and many other honors. Born in Havana, Cuba, she currently lives in the San Francisco Bay area.

AUTHOR’S STATEMENT

As I embarked on this project, I kept coming back to how health impacts daily life, both directly and indirectly, even when you do everything you’re supposed to do. In the case of Isa, she learns to use hearing aids, learns to lip read, and takes all sorts of classes to learn to adjust, but the accommodation of her disability is a constant in her life, no matter what else is going on.



David A. Robertson (*"Reclamation"*) is an award-winning writer. His books include *When We Were Alone* (Governor General's Literary Award winner, McNally Robinson Best Book for Young People winner, TD Canadian Children's Literature Award finalist), *Will I See?* (winner of the Manuela Dias Book Design and Illustration Award, Graphic Novel Category), and the YA novel *Strangers*. Robertson educates as well as entertains through his writings about Canada's Indigenous Peoples, reflecting their cultures, histories, and communities, as well as illuminating many contemporary issues. He is a member of Norway House Cree Nation and lives in Winnipeg.

AUTHOR'S STATEMENT

In Canada, I have seen the profound impact cultural disconnect has had on Indigenous Peoples; the effect history has had on us in contemporary society is startling and impossible to ignore. This sort of intergenerational trauma requires intergenerational healing, and working on this project has helped solidify that view for me. In the stories I have seen, through the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, I have felt heartened by tales of cultural reconnection and the ways that this reconnection inevitably leads to a healthier way of life for Indigenous Peoples, both in Canada and the United States. As an Indigenous Person who grew up disconnected from my Indigenous identity, working on "Reclamation" spoke to me directly and left me feeling full and motivated to continue this work.



Selena Goulding (*"Reclamation"*) is a freelance illustrator and sequential artist residing in Toronto. She has contributed to multiple anthologies and short works of fiction but is best known for her work on *Susanna Moodie: Roughing It in the Bush*, her first graphic novel. Selena works predominantly in digital media but often returns to traditional penciling and inking format. Her style continues to evolve, but at its core it is most notable for its attention to detail.



Martha Wells (*"Obsolescence"*) has written many fantasy novels, including the *Books of the Raksura* and the *Ile-Rien* series, as well as YA fantasy novels, short stories, media tie-ins (for *Star Wars*, *Stargate: Atlantis*, and *Magic: The Gathering's* Dominaria expansion), and nonfiction. Her SF novella series, *The Murderbot Diaries*, was published by Tor.com in 2017 and 2018. She has won a Nebula Award, a Hugo Award, an ALA/YALSA Alex Award, and a Locus Award, and her work has appeared on the Philip K. Dick Award ballot, the *USA Today* best-seller list, and the *New York Times* best-seller list.

AUTHOR'S STATEMENT

For this story, I wanted to say something about the people in our society who are denied access to state-of-the-art health care, not because it's somehow impossible to provide it to them, but because corporate profits are deemed more important. I believe health-care equity for all will never be achieved while corporations are allowed to put profit over people.

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