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Frontierland

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SARAH HOPKINS

Frontierland

I swipe my gas card through the machine, and it makes an awful crunching sound, displaying a “DOES–NOT–SCAN” screen. I don’t want to go inside. I want to get to work and get the day all over with already. I turn around, leaning my arms over the bed of my pickup truck. Standing on the tip-toes of my oily work boots, I can squint into the smeared windows of the little shop connected to the gasbar.

“Mornin’ Miss,” the woman behind the counter says as I come inside. I nod at her, and I go over to lean my elbows against the counter, my ragged card in hand. There’s a circular, fish-eyed mirror in the corner of the ceiling, stretching out my body and making me look even stranger than I already feel, bending me sideways into a swirl, distorting my oversized coat, my muddy freckles and my long brown braids like tangled ropes. I look away from it.

“Heya,” I say, “My gas card isn’t reading. So, I came in here to see if you could just punch in the numbers or something.”

“Oh yeah, we can do that for you,” the woman replies, “Where’re you parked?”

I point out toward the window behind her.

“I’m in the pickup by eleven.” My truck is tough and red and beautiful, even though it’s filthy and is stuck with a bright orange buggy-whip on top. That’s just to make sure none of the big tankers or dump trucks flatten me by mistake. A work friend of mine, Johnny Angle, got one for me almost as soon as I moved here. He’s lived up here all his life, and he knows too many people who’ve been run down on the highway like accorded safety cones.

“Aw, eleven’s been having some troubles with the cards,” the woman says. “Dunno why. You work in the tar sands? Over at PetroCorps?”

“Oh yeah,” I say, putting my hands in the front pockets of my jeans so that my wrists are leaning out of them.

“It’s kinda a boys club over there, isn’t it?”

I shrug my shoulders and reply, “Guess so. I mean, I work in an office mostly now. That’s where a lotta the girls wind up. You know how it is.” I used to work in an outpost of the Equipment House with Johnny, but I transferred out of it after he did. I didn’t like the way the new guys tried to look down my flannel shirts.

“Sure do. Those’re some tough wheels you got, though.”

“They’re good for driving in the snow, when winter really sets in. Not yet, though.”

“No, not just yet,” she says, ringing me up. “You have a good day, now.”

“Okay, then. You too.”

It’s a long drive from my hotel to the sands, almost forty minutes, but I keep the radio up, even though the music gets grainy and warbly after a while. It’s newly winter and everything looks dead. Everything at PetroCorps *always* looks dead, but everything everywhere else looks dead, too. The trees are reaching their spindly black fingers toward the murky white-gray sky. There’s frost on all the empty fields. I see a dark smudge on the horizon, and that’s how I know I’m going the right way. I follow that smog like it’s the North Star.

I drive straight through the front camps, made of shiny aluminum trailers, and I pull up to a gate to have my ID scanned. It’s on a lanyard around my neck, and I have to lean out of my pickup slightly so that the man behind the wicket can see who I am.

“Okay, then. Have a nice day, Miss Saunders,” he says.

“Will do.”

I park my truck outside a squat, lopsided building and I climb out. My hand jiggles a little bit as my wrist tries to balance the tray of coffee I bought on the way in. The naked piece of wooden pulp-board that ramps up to the door creaks as I walk over it. The office space is tight, with two metallic desks cramped into the receiving area, smashed between the wall and the windows.

“Morning, Peg,” says a woman behind the first desk.

“Morning, Donna,” I reply. Donna isn’t paying attention. She’s squinting at some sort of spreadsheet on her dusty, beige computer monitor.

“Come on now, finish up with that. I got Timmies,” I say, and I put a cup of coffee on her desk.

“Aw, thanks, Peggy,” she replies, “What would I ever do without you?”

I laugh politely. “Dunno.”

I circle to my own desk, which is backed up against the white plastic Venetian blinds. My fingers sweep over the surface, making clean furrows through the fine, black dust. The stuff is always on everything.

“Did you open the windows before I got here?” I ask, even though I know that she didn’t. The dust is always there, waiting for me whenever I

return to the office. No matter how many Windex wipes I use, my desk never stays clean for longer than an hour. The dust comes in through the door, I'm pretty sure, with the people coming in and out. It was the same at the Equipment House. Those dark particles that Donna and I and everyone else swim in and swallow and breathe all day. Donna shakes her head *no*.

Before I can sit down, Harry Crain opens his adjoining office door, banging it against the shredder bin. He's ten years older than Donna, and maybe twenty years older than I am. He must be in his early forties, with the salt-and-pepper stubble on his head and his face. He's one of the Health and Safety Coordinators for the site.

"Health, Safety," he says, pointing at each of us in turn. "Who wants to come with me to get some fresh air?" He bit those words and chewed them like a steak or a good joke. "I need someone to take notes on my walkabout today."

"I'll go," I say, and I shrug my big, blue winter coat on. "I gotcha some coffee if you want, Crain." I take a hardhat and an orange safety vest from the coat hooks near the door. "Where're we headed?"

"Gonna take one of the golf carts up to the north side," Crain replies, "Take a lookit some of the rigs, some of the tailings ponds. Wednesday stuff. You sure you don't wanna come along, Don?"

Donna smiles from behind her computer monitor and says, "Thanks, but I've got some work to get done on my end. You need at least one secretary to hold the fort. Collect complaints."

"Hah! That I do."

Crain and I go back out the door, down the creaky wooden ramp again.

"Nice day out," Crain says, putting his plastic safety goggles on even before we've taken ten steps. "Cold, but nice. Not gonna be very many nice days left no more."

"Nope."

"But you're headed home soon, aren't you? For your two weeks?"

"Sure am," I reply. It's about four hours to the airport in Edmonton, but soon afterward I'll be sitting in my childhood home in Thunder Bay, eating peanut butter and jelly and staring out over Lake Superior. That's the way it is at PetroCorps. Four weeks on the job, two weeks off. Over and over again. I told some people back home about it, and they acted like I got some big holiday every month. It's not like that, though. It's a shit way to spend two years of your life.

"It's a good thing," I say, "Because I'm getting sick of driving all the way out here every morning."

"Aw, please, won't you move to the camps?" Crain says, "It'll make your life so much easier. I mean, not those trailers on the way in, but a nice camp. There's a new one now. Looks like a brand new motel, sitting out there on

the edge of the pine woods. Got a cinema and a bar and everything. Even an indoor pool.”

“It’d just be me and three hundred smelly guys,” I reply. “And I don’t wanna live right next to the sands. It’d depress me too much.”

“Don’t depress me,” Crain says.

I laugh. “Well, you’re morbid already.”

Crain grins, and he says, “Besides, it’s a good break from the wife. And the money I’m saving don’t depress *her* neither.”

“PetroCorps gives me a stipend to pay for some of the hotel,” I point out.

“And they pay for your gas as well,” he replies. “They’re just throwing cash out the window, can’t spend it fast enough. Dunno what to do with it.”

“I like the gas card.”

“I like the money.”

Riding a golf cart through the PetroCorps oil sands is like riding on the back of a white mouse around the feet of a massive, metallic Rube Goldberg machine. It’s a gigantic, sprawling jungle gym of bars and barbs and pipes and tar. At night, it looks like a city, with all the yellow and green safety lights turned on. The Cronenbergian contraptions and industrial machines are suddenly skyscrapers, and the dump trucks and construction vehicles become rush hour traffic, buzzing around at the bottom. When it gets dark, I can squint and pretend that I’m in New York City, or Los Angeles, or Toronto. Or at least home in Thunder Bay. But it’s only midmorning now, and there’s not much fantasy that I can bring to cold sunlight and the grinding of dirt and black sand.

“It smells like shit,” I grumble as though that’s news, and I hold up one of my braids to my nose, trying to cover up the smell.

Crain spins the wheel on the buzzy, little golf cart, maneuvering it so that we narrowly miss a passing bulldozer. I clutch my empty Styrofoam coffee cup as though it’s my heart.

“*Uff-da*, that was a close one,” he laughs. I try to laugh along with him as best I can.

We zip through the central processing facilities, which look like big, round silos, but are stuck through with pipes and cranes and workers in blue coveralls and coats, shouting instructions to one another. Crain catches me staring at a man who is wriggling through two different pipes near the top of one of the contraptions. Looking at him is like having that dream where you’re suddenly falling, over and over again.

“Had a man take a fall from there, few nights ago. Maybe you saw the paperwork?” Crain asks, his voice gentler than usual.

I’m not sure what to say for a moment, but I force a shrug and reply, “Didn’t read much. I glanced at it while I was handing it on. A First Nations guy, right?” Lots of Aborigines work at the plant, since they’re about the only

people who actually live in the area. PetroCorps loves to put them on the covers of their diversity pamphlets.

“He was,” Crain says. “I knew him. His son works here too. You ever met John Angle?”

My stomach twists, and I turn to look at Crain once more. “Yeah, I know him. He’s my age. I used to work in the Equipment House with him. Jesus H. He never said that his dad worked here, I don’t think. Should I...? I dunno what to do. Do you get him flowers or something?”

Crain shrugs. “Depends on how long it’s been since you last talked. Dunno if it’ll give him any comfort. Old Mr. Angle was stabbed. Impaled right through the chest. Wasn’t any sort of clean death, neither.”

Men in gray jumpsuits are shouting out to each other. I imagine their bodies being stuck through, skewered. I blink my eyes. “I don’t want to talk about it anymore.”

Crain nods as we go around a bend, and I hold the legal pad tight in my lap so that it won’t fall out.

“I’m sure John Angle doesn’t want to talk about it neither. Best to let him get on with his work, I think.”

Crain knows that it’s a slippery slope. I look down at the legal pad. You talk about one accident enough, and suddenly you’re talking about all the others.

We arrive near the northern open-pit mines. The open-pit mines at the oil sands look like the Earth, but turned inside-out. The north pit is massive, spreading like a dry ocean all the way to the grim horizon. It’s black and rocky, filled with construction vehicles grinding their gears and scratching at the gooey, dark scabs on the ground.

“This used to be all forests and lakes and stuff,” Johnny Angle used to say. I can remember it so well. The two of us in that little shack; him leaning his chair back at a dangerous angle to stare dreamlike at the pockmarked ceiling. “Not when I was a kid, but when my parents were kids.” He was wrong. It’s been like this forever. For longer than I’ve been alive. For longer than Crain’s been alive, even. The pits just yawn wider and grow older.

“We’re reclaiming them, though,” says Maxon Rhodes, the Sustainability Manager. Crain and I are standing on the edge of a pit, in the rocky ridge between the mine and its tailings pond. The tailings pond is a swamp full of poison, a wide lake of waste and ooze. Lumps of sand and tar residue float in the black water, and there are scaffolds built out over one of the banks from some halted construction project. The golf cart is parked far off, and I miss it. Every time I pull a foot up, the earth tries to suck it back down.

“Reclaiming the pits?” I ask. My face must have looked quizzical. Rhodes points over my shoulder.

“No, the tailings ponds. Not these ones, of course, but the ponds to the south and east, they’re about thirty, thirty-five years old. And they’re ready to be...you know, natural land again.”

“That’s nice,” I say, sticking the legal pad under my armpit and stuffing my hands into the pockets of my coat. “Are they gonna be, like, parks or forests?”

“I think the company wants to put more camps on them, actually,” Rhodes replies. Crain laughs.

Rhodes nods over his shoulder, and he says, “Come and walk to the other side of the pond with me. I wanna show you the new radar machine. Keeps the birds away. I think it’ll work this time. And it won’t be annoying, like when we had those cannons.”

“Hated those cannons,” Crain replies. “Safety nightmare.”

The cannons always gave *me* nightmares. I would imagine these big, white birds being shot out of the sky, landing and sinking in the sludge. Even as we walk around the lip of the tailings pond, I’m winding one of my braids around my hand, trying to distract myself.

Rhodes takes us to a lopsided gray structure on the edge of the pond. I suppress a smile. It looks like it’s sending out a signal to any intelligent life forms floating above us in outer space. Rhodes points to the spinning blades on top, and then to the three flat, circular speakers. They’re quiet right now.

“But when a bird pops up on the radar, this speaker starts up and it makes the sound of an enemy bird. Like a falcon, or an eagle. If the bird doesn’t go away, it makes the sounds of a shotgun or the cannons or something. Then, if the bird *still* doesn’t go away, our third speaker plays a distress call from a similar bird, so that it thinks there’s something really dangerous here.”

That doesn’t sound entirely correct to me. I lean forward and say, “But if it hears another bird in trouble, wouldn’t it just try to find the bird and help it?”

Rhodes and Crain pause, staring at me, until Rhodes says, “Birds aren’t like people.”

Right.

We jump as the radar machine starts grinding out a cawing sound. Crain puts his hands over his ears. Rhodes lifts his head to the sky, looking for birds. He wants to show us how the machine can work. When I look up, I don’t see a bird. I see a man, standing on the edge of the four-story scaffold, right on the other side of the tailings pond. I see him hanging onto the bars. I see his arms shaking. It’s John Angle.

“Jesus Christ!” Crain says.

I drop the legal pad in the mud, but Rhodes scrambles to pick it up.

“What do we do?” he asks, looking at my scrawly notes as though they have the answer. “You’re Health and Safety, you two. What do we do?”

I am certainly not Health, nor Safety, but I turn away from Johnny for a moment to look at the two other men. “I gotta go get him,” I say, and the words feel like vomit as they come out of my mouth.

“What?” Crain says.

“I’m, I’m, I know him, you know. There’s no time...”

Crain looks out over my head and shouts out, “Don’t do it just yet, Johnny boy! Don’t you dare move a muscle!”

“You *know* him?” Rhodes says.

I wish we still had the golf cart. I hear Crain hiss out a curse as I start sprinting through the dirt. My hard hat is jostled from my skull and it falls into the tailings pond, getting sucked into the greasy slime below.

“Shit! *Shit!*”

The automated, grainy falcon noise is screaming behind me, as I run in my puffy coat, the cold slapping my face. I close my eyes against the freezing wind, but all I see is the white bird, being slammed through by the warning cannon. I reach the bottom of the scaffold, and John Angle is looking down at me, confused. The falcon has morphed into the sound of gunshots. Soon it will be the wailing, injured distress call.

“Peggy?”

“Yes...Hello!” I have to shout at him over the sound effects. “Can I come up?”

He pauses for a moment, then says, “No. Of course not.”

“I’m sorry. I have to.”

“...Okay, then.”

I reach into the pockets of my coat, and I put my leather gloves on. I don’t want to touch the metal scaffold with my bare hands in the rough cold. Johnny’s hands are uncovered, and they look almost blue. I think about his dad, squeezing through the two pipes flights above the ground, as I shimmy through the shaky scaffolding toward him. What is it like to fall from that far? To be the bird plunging into the grimy pond?

“Don’t come any closer,” Johnny says as I reach the platform below him. “I don’t want you to grab for me and fall. Get outta here, Peg. Come on.”

“Which is it? Get out or come on?” I ask. “This is...this is my job. I work for Health and Safety now.” He’s not an idiot. He knows that this is definitely not in my skill set, let alone an aspect of my job. I do paperwork more than anything else. And I’ve never seen any paperwork about an attempted suicide at the sands.

“If you work there, you’re shit at your job, then,” he says, and he kicks some splinters down at me.

“Look, I didn’t want to bring this up, but I read about your dad—”

“This isn’t about that! Even if he hadn’ta got killed here, this place still woulda ate his life up. It’s eating mine up too. I want to go home. I want to go home.”

I don’t know what to say. This is his home. Johnny never lived at the camps. He only ever lived a half hour away, in a little house with his girlfriend and his mom. I wonder where they are right now. I remember a picture of them, stuck through with a thumbtack on the old corkboard.

“You can go home,” I say eventually. “It’s close. You can quit your job.” But where else could he get a new one? I could go home to Thunder Bay. Crain could go home to Edmonton. Johnny lives in PetroCorps’s backyard. “Please calm down, Johnny.”

He looks away from me, and he sets his jaw, saying, “No.”

I think I scream before he even jumps, and then he’s tumbling down into the tailings pond. Crain jumps in after him. By the time I’ve raced down to the bottom of the scaffold, Crain and Rhodes have pulled Johnny out of the pond. They’re all filthy with tar and mud, up to their shoulders. Johnny is screaming and writhing as Crain tries to hold him still. I see a part of his bone sticking out of his shin, and I feel even more nauseous than I was already.

“He broke his leg!” Rhodes says as though I can’t tell. “That’s okay. That’s okay, the emergency responders are already coming. I called them while you were running over, Miss Saunders.” His hands are shaking almost as much as mine are.

After the EMTs show up, and pull John Angle in a stretcher into their little PetroCorps ambulance, Crain and I stagger back to the golf cart. Crain takes his hard hat off and puts it on my head.

“You did a good job,” he says.

“Don’t,” I reply. “I coulda killed him. You’re the one who saved his life. I didn’t stop him from jumping. I didn’t know what to say. I’m not used to... talking about feelings here. You know? You spend so much time trying to bury stuff that—”

“Gonna be a hell of a lot of paperwork. And a hell of a long shower.”

I am quiet for what feels like a long time, before I give him what I know he’s looking for, and I force a strained, weak laugh. “Yeah. Listen. I think I’m going to take the rest of the day off. Early Release? Is that okay?”

He nods. “That’s okay.”

Crain tries to hug me when we get back to the bungalow, but it’s awkward and weird. I give him the hardhat and my orange safety vest to hang up inside.

“I’ll see you,” we say at the same time, before I turn and get back into my truck.

When I shut the door, I look into my rearview mirror and claw my hooked, dirty fingers through my two braids, unplaiting them and pulling

them apart. They were giving me a headache anyway. I try to turn the radio on, but it's all static by now. The gates open right up for me to drive out onto the long, wide highway back to the hotel. I steer around the trucks and bucket-wheel excavators like they are mountains, like I am the only one who's moving in the whole world. After a half hour, I see the gas bar again, and I remember the chilly-looking beers in the freezer. Gotta be better than raiding the minibar in my hotel room.

"Oh, you're back, Miss..." the woman behind the counter closes her eyes, like she's trying to read my card from memory. "Margaret!"

"Call me Peggy, thanks," I reply, putting a two-four box of Molson Dry between us.

"Rough day? I feel like I only saw you a few hours ago," she says.

As I am nodding, I feel my head dip down, and I lean all of my weight on my elbows and the saggy two-four. It feels as though I am standing in the middle of a carousel, and the gas bar lady is spinning and spinning around me. She reaches out to touch me, and her hand is as cold as a brass ring.

"Kinda. Kinda rough," I say. I pull out my tatty wallet and dig my fingers around in it. Johnny's words are going around in circles too, spinning around me and spinning inside of me.

"I want to...I'm going home."

"Time for your two weeks, then? That's exciting."

"No, I'm just...going home."

She looks at me sideways, but she still smiles, and she even offers to help me carry the case to my truck.

"No need," I say, "Strong arms."

"See you!" she calls after me.

"See you," I echo before I even realize I'm doing it.

I had intended on stopping back at the hotel, on getting the rest of my clothes and things, but it passes on by and I don't even pause to look at it. I imagine the bottles of beer clinking in the bed of my truck as I speed along, away from the smog-stain in the sky. I've got twenty-four hours ahead of me, and nothing at all behind.