

*AGENESIS: A NOVEL*

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*AGenesis* is a novel of “postmortal fiction” set entirely in an afterlife. Nessie, a recently dead woman, accidentally kills an already-dead man, and in the confusion that follows, sets out to discover how he could have died and what after-afterlife he might have gone to. During her travels, she is raped and then help captive by a city of tormented souls; she descends into madness until rescued by children, and she and her newborn but “undead” daughter set out again, this time to find the end of the afterlife. Nessie’s daughter eventually seeks a way to enter a living world she’s never known, while Nessie tries to end her suffering and find peace.

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PART I  
PREFACE

## Postmortality and the Continuity of Narrative

It is living and ceasing to live that are imaginary solutions.

Existence is elsewhere.

—André Breton

The fictional introduction to Richard Matheson's *What Dreams May Come* explains that the novel itself is actually a dictated message from a man to his estranged brother. Hesitant though the brother is to accept the message, he reads it anyway. That message—the novel proper—opens with these words: “Begin at the beginning’ is the phrase. I cannot do that. I begin at the end—the conclusion of my life on earth.” Though the narrator is already dead, he somehow is able to narrate this story, as though from (or from beyond) the grave. Messages from the beyond are certainly nothing new to fiction—we have been reading ghost stories and otherworldly missives about as long as we’ve been reading, and depictions of an afterlife are among our earliest religious literature—but *What Dreams May Come*, and several recent novels like it, do not present us with a haunting or a religious revelation. Instead, we find what might otherwise be a typical literary adventure story, except that these stories are about, and often are narrated by, the recently dead. Whether trapped in their “heavens” or interacting with the living, the dead are beginning to speak; they narrate our

fiction these days, and the stories they tell are offering a new way of looking at the device of the narrator.

In her short article “The Trouble with Postmortality,” Elizabeth Tallent refers to the phenomenon of “postmortality”—a state of being that follows death—in some recent fiction.<sup>1</sup> I have adapted her term to label what is apparently a new subgenre, which I call “postmortal fiction.” This category of fiction claims a more realistic and more literary approach to “postmortality” than its supernatural forebear, the ghost story: The dead are now the narrators of their own stories, and their stories are surprisingly familiar tales of heartache, desire, confusion, and suffering.<sup>2</sup> But while the dead have replaced the eerie with the mundane, they have not abandoned the fantastic. Instead of employing a Lovecraftian or Poesque sense of the “weird,” these new stories explore the strangeness of the narrative act itself, calling into question the role of the narrator or the structure of a narrative—often, both. One of the several nameless “readers” in Italo Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler* asks,

Do you believe that every story must have a beginning and an end?

In ancient times a story could only end in two ways: having passed all the tests, the hero and the heroine married, or else they died.

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Tallent. “The Trouble with Postmortality,” *Threepenny Spring* (2005): 7-9.

<sup>2</sup> Francisca Goldsmith echoes some of these observations in her article “Dead Narrators: A Look at Some Recent Novels that Feature Voices from Beyond the Grave,” *School Library Journal* May (2004): 46-47.

The ultimate meaning to which all stories refer has two faces: the continuity of life, the inevitability of death.<sup>3</sup>

This new fiction attempts to have it both ways, but it reverses Calvino's formula: It accepts "the inevitability of death," but then it insists on "the continuity of life," even if that continuity is in death. The question it asks—and which I will answer here—is to what purpose do these dead narrators continue telling their stories after their own physical "end"?<sup>4</sup>

This is perhaps a two-sided question, one regarding authorship and the other involving narration. Instead of engaging in the lengthy debate over the distinction between author and narrator, I prefer to distinguish these according to craft, wherein the author has absolute control over the text while the narrator is but another of the characters in the story. From the authorial perspective, I might suggest that we write these afterlife fictions simply because we can—that, as authors, we have the prerogative to set our fiction in whatever environment and under whatever rules we choose. But here I am more interested in the perspective of the narrator as a character: That is, why do postmortal narrators continue their stories beyond death? One answer is that they continue their stories precisely to continue their existence beyond death. Narration is, in essence, an attempt to relay and thereby confirm our existence: As Paul Hernadi notes, both fictional and nonfictional narratives "help us to *escape boredom and*

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<sup>3</sup> Italo Calvino, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, trans. William Weaver, (Orlando, Fla: Harvest, 1981), 258-59.

<sup>4</sup> Tallent phrases the same question: "It's not immediately clear what use the dead are to fiction. Why, especially, should they narrate?" (7)

*indifference*—ours as well as that of other people. Those nearly vacant states of mind at the zero degree of entertainment and commitment bring us frighteningly close to the experience of nonexistence.”<sup>5</sup> This is the central issue these authors and their dead narrators are exploring: Postmortal fiction is about denying the ultimate ending, about carrying on not just a story but a narrative voice beyond what would normally be an end. In many cases this is about plot as much as character—Francisca Goldsmith notes that “when writers move from telling stories of the dead omnisciently to giving the deceased the role of narrator, the tension between having been alive and being dead becomes a typical plotting conflict”<sup>6</sup>—but for the postmortal novel, the primary concern is with the narrative act and so with the character of the narrator. More precisely, the authors of these new postmortal novels are staying with the deceased so that the narrator him- or herself becomes an extension of the natural narrative act. “Quiet is a greater death than death,” Tallent notes, “and we can bear to part with our bodies but not with our inner monologues.”<sup>7</sup>

Given the brevity and rarity of other explorations of postmortal fiction, I have attempted to build a more complex structure within which to examine the subgenre; in doing so, I have developed some specific terminology and must explain how it might differ from other terms related to death in fiction. For instance, the few writers so far to examine postmortal fiction have placed it in the

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<sup>5</sup> Paul Hernadi, “Afterthoughts on Narrative: On the How, What, and Why of Narrative,” in *On Narrative*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 199.

<sup>6</sup> Goldsmith, 46.

<sup>7</sup> Tallent, 9.

context of postmodern fiction, but they assume it fits the model of postmodernism without considering exactly how, or how well.<sup>8</sup> I feel it necessary, then, to explain how postmortal fiction both fits into and diverges from postmodern fiction. Postmortal fiction does play on extremes of some postmodern experiments—paradox, questionable narrators, occasionally fragmented narrative—and in fact the term “postmortal” is an intentional pun on “postmodern.” More importantly, though, postmortal fiction toys with odd combinations of modernist and postmodernist themes: While postmortal narratives overwhelmingly question traditional quests for meaning, they do not parody this quest as postmodern fiction does. Instead, they have adapted the modernist quest for meaning in an existence even more chaotic than the living world.

Nevertheless, the postmortal novel does not exist outside the age of postmodernism, with one possible exception: I begin my discussion of postmortal narrators with William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*, in which the titular “dying” character, Addie Bundren narrates her portion of the novel literally from her coffin. *As I Lay Dying* is in some ways problematic, since we never see an “afterlife” in any traditional sense, but since it contains the earliest example of these new postmortal narrators, it serves as a useful touchstone. The postmortal novel as we see it now, however, begins with Richard Matheson’s *What Dreams May Come* (1978), which, though sometimes dismissed as a fantasy novel, is the

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<sup>8</sup> Tallent, for instance, claims early in her article that postmortal fiction is an outgrowth or manifestation of postmodernism, yet in her final paragraph she suggests that postmortal fiction is a reaction by writers who feel “assailed by postmodern de-rangements,” 9.

earliest example of the kind of postmortal narratives that have appeared with increasing regularity in mainstream literary fiction in through last two decades. The recent novels have appeared much closer together. After J. California Cooper's *Family* (1990), at least four postmortal novels appeared within six years: Will Self's *How the Dead Live* (2000), Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones* (2002), Keith Kachtick's *Hungry Ghost* (2003), and Kevin Brockmeier's *The Brief History of the Dead* (2006).<sup>9</sup>

These "postmortal" narratives are distinct from the "posthumous" narrative, the latter being any narrative "from the grave," which would include letters or narratives discovered after the narrator's death as well as narratives speculating on future death (as in "When I am dead..."). Some of these "posthumous" narrators might occasionally express their desire not to die, if they know their death is imminent or inevitable—hence, the written text as their attempt to extend their influence beyond death—but there is inherent in their act of writing beyond-the-death narratives an acknowledgement of death as final. They accept, however unwillingly, that when they die they will cease as characters—that their story will end save those last, desperate pages. Postmortal narratives, by contrast, are narratives literally uttered or written by the corpse, during (rather

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<sup>9</sup> Kevin Brockmeier, *The Brief History of the Dead* (New York: Pantheon, 2006). William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying* (New York: Vintage, 1987). Keith Kachtick, *Hungry Ghost* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003). Richard Matheson, *What Dreams May Come* (New York: Tor, 2004). Alice Sebold, *The Lovely Bones* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2002). Will Self, *How the Dead Live* (New York: Grove, 2000).

I hesitantly omit *Family* from this discussion since many consider it a young-adult novel. It is worth noting, however, that I have found more young-adult novels than adult, literary novels dealing with postmortality.

than in advance of) the state of being dead, and while the narrators also accept the inevitability of death, they do not assume death is an ending or that their narrative is a last desperate communication: They narrate not because they will soon cease to exist but because they continue to exist and continue to have a story to tell. Hayden White, in his essay on the value of narrativity, has claimed “that the absence of narrative capacity or a refusal of narrative indicates an absence or refusal of meaning itself”<sup>10</sup>; like traditional narrators, who engage their “narrative capacity” to impose meaning on their lives, postmortal narrators narrate in order to impose meaning on their continued existence after death.<sup>11</sup>

In another contrast to postmortal fiction, I might apply the term “postvital” to those narrators who do not realize they are dead. Like postmortal narrators, these narrators or characters do extend their narratives beyond the moment of death, and so suggest a continuation after life, yet often they either inhabit a dreamlike world wherein their purpose is to proceed toward spiritual salvation, as in Mitch Albom’s *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*, or they remain ignorant of their own death, as in William Golding’s *Pincher Martin*. These narratives are invariably focused on the state of an afterlife—hence my term “postvital”—rather than or at least more than on the after-death character arc of the narrator. Even those “postvital” narratives that do adequately present a developed, progressing narrator focus so intently on the spiritual or moral issues of the afterlife that they

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<sup>10</sup> Hayden White, “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” in *On Narrative*, 2.

<sup>11</sup> This is different from ghost-story narratives, in which the dead seek meaning for their death in order to liberate themselves from their after-death existence.

work better as allegory than as fiction. In fact, one of the key distinguishing factors of postmortal fiction is that it dismisses moral interpretations of afterlives, usually describing any post-death state as “heaven” while ignoring the possibility of punitive hells.<sup>12</sup>

The first and most important purpose of postmortal fiction, then, is to carry on a narrative after its biological conclusion and in so doing explore the possibility of continuing our own narratives. Postmortal characters, including narrators, seem to take death as a given; they may not exactly take their death in stride, but they quickly and often unemotionally resign themselves to this new state of deadness. After all, they seem to say, they still have their narratives—the story, as it were, isn’t over yet. In the case of postmortal narrators, this creates a higher self-consciousness for the narrator as a narrator: No postmortal fiction has yet dealt with the dead alone, and the dead often serve as peripheral narrators, describing the actions of the living or reflecting on the former lives of the dead. As Goldsmith points out, “in some cases, the narrator is the moral actor [...] while, in others, the dead observe and comment upon the moral health exhibited by the living. In yet others, the dead are confronted by other dead folks’ moral crises [...]”<sup>13</sup> Strangely, as though taking a cue from Rust Hills’ suggestion

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<sup>12</sup> In those rare instances where the fiction is set in a blatantly purgatorial state, it does not spend much time questioning where the narrators will wind up next—heaven or hell—because it does not concern itself with moral issues. The “purgatory” of these novels is merely an in-between stage, a waiting room or a transition period between life and whatever might come next.

<sup>13</sup> Goldsmith, 47.

that even peripheral narrators are telling stories about their own change,<sup>14</sup> the narrators of postmortal fiction observe living characters who remain preoccupied with the dead—often, on the deceased narrator specifically. Many postmortal narrators, then, manage to be both central and peripheral narrators at once.

The earliest true postmortal novel, *What Dreams May Come*, uses this observer-narrator, though Chris, the dead narrator, does most of his observing between life and the afterlife: For the first several chapters he “haunts” his family as he might in a traditional ghost story. Once he enters the afterlife (a place *What Dreams May Come* calls “Summerland”), his spiritual guide tells him he is cut off from the living world. This later proves misleading, however, as Chris not only manages to contact his living family but also—as we know from the short “introduction” to the novel—to contact a medium and literally narrate his postmortal narrative through dictation.

Perhaps the most in-depth—and certainly the most recent—observer-narrator is Susie from *The Lovely Bones*. As with Chris in *What Dreams May Come*, Susie is in some ways reminiscent of the spirits in more traditional ghost stories: Toward the novel’s end, she manifests by way of corporeal possession in order to fulfill a last wish (romantic sex) and thereby resolve an issue left over from life. Yet this is more a plot trick than anything else, a means not of resolving her personal issues but of resolving the plot itself and moving the novel toward a

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<sup>14</sup> Rust Hills, *Writing in General and the Short Story in Particular* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987; reprint, 2000): “This, I believe, is what will always be the case in successful fiction: that either the character moved by the action will be the point-of-view character, or else the point of view character will become the character moved by the action,” 142.

conclusion. Instead, most of Susie's influence in the world is done—as with Addie Bundren in *As I Lay Dying*—through what she's left behind, her mortal remains as well as the emotions of those who knew her.<sup>15</sup> More important to Susie than temporal issues is how to adapt to her new “life” in death. Like all the most recent postmortal narrators, she never seems especially surprised by the fact that she's dead. Susie is stuck observing, from what she calls “my heaven,” how grief in her friends and family can reduce them all to a kind of living death, even while she explains that, dead, Susie has no real life (she is not granted access to books or entertainment of any sort aside from her window into the living world, as though her heaven) and the afterlife as a whole exists solely for reflection and a kind of psychotherapy.

This suggests another purpose for the narrator in postmortal fiction: To use the opportunity to observe as a means of finding resolution. As I mentioned earlier, a quest for personal or psychological resolution seems antithetical to a postmodern aesthetic. Yet postmortal fiction also adapts the modernist quest for resolution to a postmodern world, so that the quest, however important to the narrative, can sometimes go unfulfilled. This quest begins in the *As I Lay Dying*, in which Addie conveys the only message she has for the living characters—and sets in motion the fulfillment of her final wish—before she dies. Her narration, then, is not about resolving issues with others but about resolving personal guilt—she has no need to manifest in the living world, and her postmortal

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<sup>15</sup> It is perhaps coincidence that Susie's last name is “Salmon,” but even her name recalls her predecessor Addie, whose son Vardaman famously declares “is a fish.”

communication remains unheard by the living. This precedent plays out in most contemporary postmortal fiction, which is as concerned about the psychology of the dead as it is about narrative resolution. If postmortal fiction claims, as Tallent suggests, that “God [is] the ultimately controlling therapist, and the soul a prisoner of its psychology at the moment of death,”<sup>16</sup> what does this say for the impact it has on contemporary fiction? The fact that these new narrators are dead and that the existence of their voices on the page runs contrary to accepted logic is an outgrowth of the postmodern challenge to all accepted knowledge. It is simply a new angle on the issue of perspective, or a signifier of the increasing demand for suspended disbelief. As Tallent writes, “The literature of a moribund culture would of course be narrated by the dead, and postmortal fiction gives to a free-floating sense of loss a local habitation and a name.”<sup>17</sup>

But I suspect that postmortal fiction also signifies a change in tone, an emphasis not on loss or on postmodern cynicism but on desperate hope. Westerners simply aren’t willing to let go after death, and we crave characters and, better still, narrators who share that desperate clinging to life. In most contemporary (and mortal) fiction, the narrator must reject his or her regrets and find some way to understand or even atone for the actions that caused those regrets. The postmortal narrator, however, wrestles more with the transition to this new, dead state—a state they seem to accept or even take for granted—and the ways they might continue their stories in this new state. Postmortal fiction

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<sup>16</sup> Tallent, 8.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

isn't so much about the dead haunting the living as it is about life, with all its attendant psychological problems, haunting the dead. The experience in this fiction is not of death as in the extinguishing of life, but of *being* dead, which serves as a kind of immersion therapy. "Being dead" is the necessary paradox that drives postmortal fiction: What the narrators expect to be a state of "non-being" is in this fiction just another kind of "being."

Suzette Henke argues that everyone suffers some degree post-traumatic stress syndrome. Some of the more dramatic forms include rape or molestation, physical or emotional abuse, the loss of limbs or physiological faculties. But for Henke, even the loss of friends or the deaths of parents can feel traumatic, and so we find solace from the trauma in narration:

As fragile human beings, what can we do with our pain but write it, sing it, or talk about it? Although writing may not provide a panacea, it does seem to offer palliation for symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder by giving the survivor an opportunity to reformulate traumatic memories in the shape of coherent autobiographical testimony.<sup>18</sup>

But what if the loved one lost is the narrator herself? How does a "fragile human being" cope with her own death? For postmortal narrators, according to Henke, the answer remains in story-telling: "[F]or some, at least, autobiographical testimony may prove to be a powerful source of healing and an effective tool in

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<sup>18</sup> Suzette Henke, "Literary Life-Writing In the 20th Century," *Poets & Writers*, May/June (2001): 40.

reconstructing the sense of coherent identity shattered by traumatic experience.”<sup>19</sup>

In *What Dreams May Come*, Chris’s entire afterlife journey centers on his desire to resolve his severed relationship with his living wife, and in *How the Dead Live*, Self’s dead character, Lily Bloom,<sup>20</sup> dies at 65 and finds herself in a cab, on her way to a dodgy London suburb called Dulston which is a manifestation of Bloom’s own broken psyche. There, she begins attending a therapy group called the Personally Dead, an Alcoholics Anonymous-style 12-step program designed to help the newly dead confront their deaths.<sup>21</sup> She complains that the afterlife is the only place in which to find any resolution: “How typical of life—you have to fucking *die* in order for anyone to discuss what’s really bothering you.”<sup>22</sup>

Despite this interest in internal, psychological resolution, postmortal fiction is replete with examples of postmodern narrative non-resolution. This often takes the form of an unending afterlife, whether through the continued mundanity of some purgatorial state or through an unspecified number of “heavens” or “layers” to the afterlife. Interestingly, every postmortal novel that describes an afterlife shies away from determining any kind of ending: Far from trying to answer the question of “what’s next,” the genre actively seeks to confuse the

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>20</sup> Since *How the Dead Live* is a modern hipster rewrite of the Buddhist “Tibetan Book of the Dead,” it is worth noting that “Lily Bloom” is a Westernized version of Lotus Blossom.

<sup>21</sup> Falling firmly in line with the narrative function of postmortal fiction, the program’s third step is “We make a decision to painstakingly remember our former lives.”

<sup>22</sup> Self, 159.

issue by drawing it further into question. None of the dead ever meets God or slips blissfully into Nirvana or burns in Hell; instead, they either carry on indeterminably, as though they'd never died, implying that death is almost irrelevant; or they carry on somewhere else—to another level of afterlife or back to an earthly reincarnation—implying that death is not the end. Of these, the “death-as-life goes on” endings are the most interesting and the most distinctive, because they shatter the common notion of life-and-death duality. Most cultures believe that we live until we die and then, if an afterlife exists, we go to it for eternity. Sometimes cultures will describe an intermediary state, such as the *bardo* states of Buddhism or the “sasha” that Kevin Brockmeier borrows from African societies or the so-called “spirit realm” of ghosts and poltergeists. But every culture that believes in an afterlife believes in the finality of that afterlife: Death is where we're all headed. Yet several postmortal novels end with the supposition that death is just as mysterious and transitory as life and that it is not the final destination.

In *What Dreams May Come*, Chris realizes shortly after arriving in his after-death state that “there is more” than what he is currently experiencing,<sup>23</sup> and later his guide confirms that there are many “higher realms”: “*My father's house has many mansions*, Chris,” the guide explains, quoting Christian scripture to explain the multi-layered reality of the afterlife.<sup>24</sup> In *The Lovely Bones*, Susie

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<sup>23</sup> Matheson, 61.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 101. The scriptural quote Chris's guide refers to is attributed to Jesus but peculiar to the gospel of John—it appears in John 14:2.

leaves what she comes to call her “small heaven” for a grander, “wide wide heaven,” where we presume she is meant to stay. But the “wide wide heaven” is not much different from her smaller, observation-point heaven except that it’s simultaneously grander and minuter in detail. She still watches the living as she had before, for instance. But this new place is less about comfort and resolution than about, essentially, getting on with the business of being dead. Lily Bloom in *How the Dead Live* reincarnates to the body of her own granddaughter, who is born addicted to the crack her mother—Lily’s daughter—used while pregnant. The end returns Lily to life, which Buddhists (Self, anyway) claim is suffering, but her suffering now is greater than in her previous life, suggesting that there is no end to suffering and therefore no end to life and, by extension, no end to any narrative. In *The Brief History of the Dead*, Laura dies and the entire city she’d remembered goes on somewhere else, though we’re never told where that “somewhere else” might be.<sup>25</sup> We also are never told what happens to Laura: Because there’s no one to remember her, does she skip ahead to the “third afterlife” along with everyone else, like a child skipping a grade in school, or does she simply wink out of existence? A worse possibility is more likely, that in death she is doomed to a kind of lonely, hallucinogenic purgatory, as suggested by the final line of her final chapter: “She imagined she could walk forever.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Brockmeier apparently likes to squeeze his worlds-in his short story “The Ceiling,” he describes a massive black object coming down like a “ceiling” on the world, and ends his story with everyone laying flat on their backs, the “ceiling” nearly touching their noses and still descending, and leaves us to imagine the rest. He ends his novel not with a ceiling but with invisible and apparently spherical “walls,” but the effect is the same.

<sup>26</sup> Brockmeier, 235.

Perhaps because in them death is not presented as the finite end of life, postmortal novels also presuppose a continuation of life after death so seamlessly life-like that it becomes mundane. Even in those novels that experiment with the fantastic—strange manifestations, mental control over the afterlife—this sense of mundanity is a primary feature of the “afterlife.” This mundanity allows postmortal narrators to continue telling their stories just as they would have in life, without having to resort to complicated depictions of the “afterlife” as they might in “postvital” novels or genre fiction. Despite the wild visions and detailed explanation of telepathy and psychokinesis in *What Dreams May Come*, Chris continues to walk through the afterlife with an almost blasé acceptance: “I was dead; there could be no question about it any longer. Yet here I was, possessed of a body that felt the same and looked the same, was even dressed the same. [...] This is *death*? I thought.”<sup>27</sup> In *How the Dead Live*, Lily Bloom discovers she must hold down a job and works in a records office. Her residential neighborhood in “Dulston is even more characterless than other inner North East London suburbs I’ve known. [...] Dulston is one of those districts you’re always finding yourself lost in, rather than arriving at. It’s the place you wind up in when your overshoot your destination or take the wrong turn.”<sup>28</sup> In *The Lovely Bones*, Susie explains that “[t]here wasn’t a lot of bullshit in my heaven,” and later she and her “roommate” Holly, find themselves “bored” in their heaven. At the end of the novel, when she’s found psychological resolution

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<sup>27</sup> Matheson, 66.

<sup>28</sup> Self, 175.

and progressed to her “wide, wide heaven,” her experience is not a perfect heaven the way we think it ought to be. It is, instead, a simple sort of reality, mundane in its ordinariness: “I would like to tell you that it is beautiful here, that I am, and you will one day be, forever safe. But this heaven is not about safety just as, in its graciousness, it isn’t about gritty reality.”<sup>29</sup> Brockmeier’s *The Brief History of the Dead* opens with a “crossing” experience, a rarity in postmortal fiction:

When the blind man arrived in the city, he claimed that he had traveled across a desert of living sand. First he had died, he said, and then—*snap!*—the desert. [...] He said that the desert was bare and lonesome and that it had hissed at him like a snake. [...] Then everything went still and began to beat like a heart. The sound was as clear as any he had ever heard. It was only at that moment, he said, with a million arrow points of sand striking his skin, that he truly realized he was dead.<sup>30</sup>

The opening chapter continues with a brief variety of death-and-crossing experiences, each different except for the heartbeat. The heartbeat suggests the reality of the situation—the mundanity, in fact—that each character accepts almost immediately, without surprise or concern or grief. Here, then, is the ultimate expression of postmortal fiction, almost the definition itself: “More and

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<sup>29</sup> Sebold, 8, 19, 324.

<sup>30</sup> Brockmeier, 3.

more people came to adopt the theory that it was an extension of life itself—a sort of outer room [...].”<sup>31</sup>

One of the most significant characteristics of these mundane “heavens” is the unequivocal absence of a God or any religious divinity. As Goldsmith points out, “none of the authors [of postmortal novels] poses a religious context for his or her story. Instead, plots and themes are concerned with interpersonal relationships and moral problems that engage the narrator’s curiosity as well as his or her attempts to see the right thing done.”<sup>32</sup> This also reinforces the narrative act by emphasizing the narrator’s personal control over their “story” in the afterlife. In *What Dreams May Come*, for example, Chris’s guide explains the absence of divinity outside the deceased’s imagination, and in *How the Dead Live*, spiritual hierarchy is replaced by ordinary bureaucracy. In *The Lovely Bones*, Susie hints of some sense of divinity, but whatever it is, it seems mechanical. Eventually, watching the dead drift up from nursing homes and hospitals so that the sky below was “thick and fast with souls,” Susie ponders a sort of higher power, some unseen force directing things: “We came to realize how these deaths seemed choreographed from somewhere far away. Not our heaven. And so we began to suspect that there was a place more all-encompassing than where we were.”<sup>33</sup> It’s the closest Susie comes to postulating a God, but she never gets into theology. Instead, as the controlling

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>32</sup> Goldsmith, 47.

<sup>33</sup> Sebald, 154.

narrator, she focuses on her sense of place, dimension, and geography. And in *The Brief History of the Dead*, it is immediately clear that the afterlife “city” is only that, a place to be after life, and is not a religious paradise or spiritual punishment:

Occasionally one of the dead, someone who had just completed the crossing, would mistake the city for heaven. It was a misunderstanding that never persisted for long. What kind of heaven had the blasting sound of garbage trucks in the morning, and chewing gum on the pavement, and the smell of fish rotting by the river? What kind of hell, for that matter, had bakeries and dogwood trees and perfect blue days that made the hairs on the back of your neck rise on end?<sup>34</sup>

Without a God to dictate the terms of the afterlife, then, postmortal novels instead emphasize the narrators’ almost supernatural control over the afterlife—narrators are able to shape and control their after-death experiences using only their mind, the way an author might imagine a story. This may only be a narrative convenience, allowing the narrators to experience or experiment with storylines and metaphors impossible in straight literary fiction, but because the novel is narrated from the afterlife, the story can deviate in these ways without drifting into the territory of “weird” fiction. It also stands for the broader motif of narrative control—of the narrator’s ability to continue telling his/her story even

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<sup>34</sup> Brockmeier, 7.

after death. This ability to control the afterlife only appears in those postmortal novels that portray an afterlife, but among those, it is nearly ubiquitous.<sup>35</sup> For *What Dreams May Come*'s Chris, this is literally the case, as he was a writer in life; his guide reminds him of a motto in his writing office—"That which you believe becomes your world"—and explains that it is true of the afterlife.<sup>36</sup> As the novel progresses, Chris consistently refers to his manipulation of the afterlife in authorial terms. In *The Lovely Bones*, Susie notes,

When I first entered heaven I thought everyone saw what I saw. That in everyone's heaven there were soccer goalposts in the distance and lumbering women throwing shot put and javelin. That all the buildings were like suburban northeast high schools built in the 1960s. [...] After a few days in heaven, I realized that the javelin-throwers and the shot-putters and the boys who played basketball on the cracked blacktop were all in their own version of heaven. Theirs just fit with mine—didn't duplicate it precisely, but had a lot of the same things going on inside.<sup>37</sup>

Brockmeier's *The Brief History of the Dead* serves not so much as a deviation from but as a moderation of this trend. The dead inhabitants of the "city" seem to have no more control over their existence than they did in life; however, at the end, as Laura moves through her dying experience, she notices

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<sup>35</sup> Self's *How the Dead Live* is a notable exception: Lily Bloom has no more control over her death than she did her life, but for Self, this is the point. Lily's apathy and bitter indifference are the reasons she's in her purgatorial state rather than in a "heaven" or a "hell."

<sup>36</sup> Matheson, 71.

<sup>37</sup> Sebald, 16-17.

a dizzying kaleidoscope of colors, not generic hues but specific shades of memory, like “the creamy off-yellow of her bathroom walls.” She notices them, and quickly discovers she controls them: “She could shuffle the colors at will. It was like her word association game. [...] Everything depended on the fluctuations of her mind, and her mind was not entirely her own.”<sup>38</sup> This illustrates the common contradictory depictions of the afterlife as subject to—perhaps even a product of—the mind as well as a place of rules and sentience of its own, independent of the whims of the dead. Ultimately, as she enters what would ordinarily be her “crossing”—if there were anyone’s memory for her soul to inhabit after death—“She lost sight of the city when she dipped beneath a hill. By the time she climbed to the top and was able to see to the horizon again, it had disappeared. She turned a full circle, but she couldn’t find it anywhere.”<sup>39</sup> This is another illustration of the mind’s connection and subjection to the afterlife: The city depended on her in order to exist, yet some sense of an afterlife—a more permanent state of deadness, perhaps, or a blinding, eternal erasure of self—persists. Even without the city, without other living memories to support her, Laura remains and continues on her journey.

It is tempting, then, to end this discussion of postmortal fiction without an ending—to draw no conclusion since no conclusion can be drawn, no story ever ends. This is, after all, the implication of the postmortal novel: That, without death as a reason to cease narrative, narrative can go on forever. Certainly, I

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<sup>38</sup> Brockmeier, 233-234.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 234

cannot guess at where postmortal fiction might go from here any more than a postmortal narrator can guess at “higher” afterlives. But postmortal fiction does speak to a current contemplative mode in contemporary fiction: We're constantly pushing boundaries in Western society, and examining the continuity of narrative is another way of doing that. Postmortal narrative is a reflection of our need to know, to ask why, to believe there is something else to discover, and since we cannot “know” what happens after death, this is one means of experiencing that continuation of life after death through fiction, in much the same way fiction has helped us through other experiences we may never actually go through ourselves. It is a reassurance, perhaps, that our own “narratives” can continue indefinitely.

#### Critical Analysis of *AGenesis*

My novel, *AGenesis*, differs from the others discussed here in that my dead have nothing to do with the living. Most postmortal fiction (perhaps understandably) cannot leave the living alone; even *How the Dead Live's* dead narrator ends the novel by reincarnating as her own granddaughter in order to somehow affect the living world she had formerly left behind. This connection between the living and the dead serves to emphasize the blurred distinction between life and death and thereby emphasize the continuation of narrative. With that concept now firmly established, however, I have taken the continued narrative for granted and avoided the living altogether. In my novel, only a few characters “leave” (presumably to reincarnate, though I don't go into great detail

on that issue); the living are present only in memory and dream, and never long enough to establish their effect on the dead. One of the strange characteristics of *AGenesis* as a postmortal narrative, actually, is that by the end, everyone behaves as though they were alive, and the progression of this novel is such that everyone might as well have been alive all along. What I hope to accomplish—more, or more effectively, than the postmortal fiction I discuss here—is to erase the distinction between life and death, to suggest that the “lives” of the dead are no different than the lives of the living, with all the same problems, desires, confusion, pleasures, and so on.

To accomplish this, my novel follows what I might call “postmortal metaphysics”: Much of the philosophy of *AGenesis* is taken from the Buddhist text *Liberation on Hearing in the Intermediate States* (or *Bardo Thodol*, the so-called “Tibetan Book of the Dead”), which describes the dissolution of the body and the individual ego as well as ways to relinquish our living cravings.<sup>40</sup> Meanwhile, much of my plot structure is taken from the “Amduat,” a specialized set of instructions related to the nebulous Egyptian book of the dead; the “Amduat” is reserved for pharaohs and organized into the twelve hours of night when the dead pharaoh travels through the underworld and is reborn as the sun. My novel combines these two texts: The internal conflicts between desire and

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<sup>40</sup> The *Bardo Thodol* is a common source text for many postmortal novels: Some of its ideas influenced *What Dreams May Come*, and it appears in the lengthy bibliography Matheson includes with the novel. Its structure serves as the basis for *How the Dead Live*, and Self uses a quote from the *Bardo Thodol* as his epigraph. Finally, the popular Tibetan concept of the “hungry ghost” comes the *Bardo Thodol*, and it is from this book that Kachtick took the name of his postmortal novel.

nonattachment and between illusion and reality come from Buddhism, and the three-book structure reflects the three *bardos*, or “in-between” states, described in the *Bardo Thodol*. The twelve chapters, on the other hand, reflect the twelve-hour night in the “Amduat,” and the characters and their external conflicts come from the journey of the various gods described in the Egyptian text. Although in theory no one will go through any after-death experience in a way that can inform the living—we can never tell anyone what the afterlife is like—these religious texts do presume some knowledge of—even a description of—an afterlife, and they serve as a convenient source for much of postmortal fiction. In fact, most authors of postmortal fiction pose as our new—if literary rather than spiritual—guides, and certainly this is one aspect of my own novel.

In examining these religious texts for structure, however, I have noticed the growing importance of character in a narrative. Even with “idea-driven” psycho-spiritual importance of any religious text, a religious narrative of an afterlife also is necessary plot-driven, as it describes for the readers the sequence of events they will encounter in death. This is useful in structure, of course, but it detracts from the deeper psychological implications of character in a fictional narrative. In relying so heavily on religious source texts for *What Dreams May Come*, for instance, Matheson comes close to creating a flat, uninteresting narrator and focusing too much on plot. But one of the interesting functions of postmortal fiction is that it takes these descriptive narratives and turns them into complex character explorations through re-examining the function

of the narrator. While, like Matheson, I have risked a plot-heavy (and idea-heavy) narrative by patterning my novel after religious texts, I have attempted to further question the role of the narrator by placing the entirety of my novel in the afterlife: If my dead narrator is not telling her story for the benefit of the living, why is she telling it?

Like Will Self's *How the Dead Live*, my novel, takes place entirely in the After (the characters are hesitant to carry the name further, as they aren't sure whether this is an afterlife or an afterdeath), with the dead carrying on much as they had lived. They have bodies; they hole up in buildings and move about in cars through landscapes like a Grant Wood painting. But things are more subdued, like a retirement home or a swanky, low-key mental health facility: People's desires never blossom into outright cravings, they don't need to eat or have sex or sleep, but they seem to sleep all the time.<sup>41</sup> There is no discernible sun, though the sky isn't exactly overcast either—the light just transitions imperceptibly from day to lesser day and is always gray and watery, never calling attention to itself. Also, there is at first a complete absence of wildlife.

Nessie, the first-person narrator, begins the novel hitching a ride from a van full of elderly men and women and winds up at an inn, unsure exactly how she got there. She feels at odds with this new existence, though at first for no more conspicuous reasons than a living person might have for feeling at odds

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<sup>41</sup> Following many "afterlife" depictions in religious literature, some fictional afterlife depictions include a "transition" period between the moment of physical death and the deceased's "awakening" in the afterlife. During this transition, the dead experience periods of narcolepsy. This narcoleptic period appears in *What Dreams May Come* and *How the Dead Live*.

with her life. But she is conspicuously different from everyone else—she seeks to understand her lethargy, she craves food and sex, and so on. Here she also meets two children, Tarah and Hadi, who seem to know more than they're willing to explain.<sup>42</sup> When they try to explain her death, Nessie is at first resistant to the idea, though not in any active denial—she simply dismisses their revelation as the (frustrating) imaginings of children. She begins to accept her death, however, shortly after a man she'd slept with dies, as though of a heart attack. This begins the turmoil in the After, since no one can understand how a dead person can die again, and it begins Nessie's journey, though at first she's unsure whether she's running from the changes she's created in the After or toward an answer to how and why the changes are happening.

As she adapts to the rules of the After, she picks up her own hitchhiker, David, and explains death to him as best she can. But they become lost in their travels, and the After begins to change, most notably when the night appears like a black cap lowered from above. This also begins David's delirium and his obsession with Nessie, which grows until he (unintentionally) rapes her. Nessie takes a more active stance in her journey by murdering David, which further worries the residents of the After because what once was accidental death-in-

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<sup>42</sup> Tarah and Hadi are Nessie's "spirit guides," a common theme in afterlife depictions and near-stock characters in postmortal fiction: An afterlife guide appears in relatively traditional form in *What Dreams May Come* and *How the Dead Live*, as a "caseworker" in *The Lovely Bones*, and as a strange adaptation of the second-person perspective in *Hungry Ghost*. Of the novels I've examined here, only *The Brief History of the Dead* lacks a guide.

death can now be perpetrated intentionally.<sup>43</sup> Later, she discovers she is pregnant—another troubling question mark among the dead<sup>44</sup>—and then becomes captive not only to a group of lost “souls” in a hell-like “City” but also to her own broken psyche. She only breaks free with the help of Tarah and Hadi, who return and remain with her through the rest of the journey.

When Nessie gives birth, she struggles with her unwanted role as mother—to her daughter Mara and to the crowd of worshipful dead who follow her. To escape, she continues her journey, no longer seeking answers but now looking only for an end to her journey: Knowing that death is possible even in death, she seeks a means by which to end her own life, which so far she has been unable to do. After a series of arguments with Nessie, Mara attempts to leave the dead for the living as an experiment, having never been “alive” in the first place. However, she has no intent to affect the living, and when she finds she cannot return to the living at all, she decides to become somehow “more dead”—to venture farther into deadness, to see what comes “after” the After—and so progresses away from the living. While Mara is gone, Nessie endures a racing battle with Phineas, the hellish leader of the “City” (during which Tarah, Phineas, and several from the caravan of worshipers die the final deaths of the novel). Nessie finds the “end” of the After in a large, abandoned coastal city. However, even after Mara returns and “sacrifices” herself in the ocean, Nessie

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<sup>43</sup> As with my intention to avoid depicting the living, my use of death-in-death is unique to postmortal fiction.

<sup>44</sup> Here, too, I depart from other postmortal novels—none depict pregnancy or birth in the afterlife. However, it is worth noting that Lily Bloom, in *How the Dead Live*, carries around a tiny “lithopedion,” the deformed spirit of a fetus she aborted in life.

does not find an end to her afterlife existence. In fact, she has come to accept her new reality and settles in the city to rest in a kind of peaceful detachment.<sup>45</sup>

Here, then, I return to my initial question: If my dead narrator is not telling her story for the benefit of the living, why is she telling it? The answer suggested by recent postmortal novels is that the dead tell their stories for themselves—that they continue the narrative act beyond death as a means of continuing their lives. Certainly this is true of Nessie. But I feel when other postmortal narrators try and account for or even focus on the living, they weaken this stance of personal continuity and reflective narration. I hope that my novel can be among the first to progress into a more purely “postmortal” fiction by remaining with the narrator in an afterlife, where she reflects on the nature of her existence and the meaning—or absence—of death.

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<sup>45</sup> While slightly different from most postmortal novels, which posit a “higher” afterlife state or a return to the living, my novel does follow the “non-ending afterlife” pattern of postmortal fiction. In fact, because many of the remaining dead believe Mara’s “sacrifice” sends her to some “higher” afterlife, I do include that element of postmortal fiction; however, unlike the other novels, I leave Nessie in her original dead world, content with where she is rather than worrying about what comes next or how to go back.

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PART II  
*AGENESIS: A NOVEL*

Look upon the world as a bubble, regard it as a  
mirage; who thus perceives the world, him Mara, the  
king of death, does not see.

—*Dhammapada*, Canto XIII, verse 170

Book 1

## Chapter 1

The only thing I knew was my name. Everything else was new, as though I'd just been born. I had language, I had Nessie—a name—but the rest had just begun: The edge of this wooded road, my thumb in the air, the broad-leafed trees off the highway, the flat face of the sky like a painted ceiling. It would have been blue, if blue were a color here. Everything was empty and soundless, the world drifting. I thought of those old news clips of astronauts floating in a cramped space capsule. The bland news reels, shots of balding men doing tests and writing on clipboards with their space-age pens. So I knew that too: Someone's always observing, noting things on clipboards, doing nothing.

I kicked at the dirt by the road, wanted to see if it drifted or just hung in the air like it would on the moon with no wind to move it up and no gravity to bring it back down. But I wasn't on the moon—a third thing I knew—and the dirt did settle, but it took so long it seemed not to care if it dropped or stayed aloft forever. The more I looked around, the more I felt the whole world was like that. Some lofty pen mark on a clipboard way up in space.

I didn't know if this was a beginning of something, or an end of something. Or whether it was even something in the first place. I felt smack in the middle of nothing.

I put down my thumb, let it settle like dust. I was tired, lightheaded, and my knees hurt. My abdomen ached and clenched like cramps, but I didn't have a headache or that metallic tang that always comes with cramps. I wanted to sit, but the world had no gravity to pull me down. I wanted to walk, but I was afraid to lose contact with the ground, even one foot at a time. And nothing was coming down this road to save me.

There was a van, though.

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On the highway, I learned the trees by the road had been a fluke. The world looked hazy from inside the van, but I could see far enough to see nothing. The highway curled over each small hill like those ribbony strips of white correction tape. Once in a while a road would break off, would criss-cross overhead or dig tunnels beneath us. But they always seemed to loop back and slip into the highway again, going nowhere, and the land out past those roads was all two-dimensional emptiness; no trees, no wildflowers, not even road kill.

I couldn't remember when this trip had started or where we all embarked from. I clung to what I knew: Some vague idea of a roadside, a thumb. They were fading. Now I only knew that when the cramps woke me again, dragged me good and wide awake, I was bouncing on the center bench of big white touring van. Through the front seats, I could see the emblem on the dashboard,

a silver ram's head. It reminded me of those cow skulls you see in cartoon deserts. and I could hear the gravelly chatter of old folks, a half-dozen, maybe nine. Some men, some women, most so old their gender didn't matter, their voices indistinguishable. The windows were tinted, and the van was dim.

For a long time I feigned sleep, gazing half-lidded out my side window, and just listened. Foggy as my brain was—wet and heavy—I tried to figure out what was going on. I knew from somewhere, some imprint, that if I let them talk I'd learn it all. But those blue-hairs and balding men only yammered about the carefree days just after their war, when life had been cigarettes and crystal liquor decanters and happily married sex. Hours upon hours of “Back then, Surgeon General smoked three packs a day,” and “Divorce was a four letter word; if your husband hit you, you took it, and if he cheated, well, you cheated, too, but you never, never split up.” and me trapped in there, trying to figure out why the world felt submerged, trying not to speak. If I opened my mouth I might drown, and as long as I didn't speak, no one seemed to know I was awake.

We rode like this for hours, or days maybe, I have no idea. All their conversations pooled into a doddery poem of repeated ideas. But I started hearing references to some woman—they said “young lady”—and I figured right or wrong, lady or not, they must be referring to me. It was bound to happen, I suppose. I guessed I was the new girl, the rookie in whatever excursion we were on. Finally, an hour or a week in, one of them poked me in the fleshy part of my arm.

“Excuse me dear, but are you married?” This from Mildred, the blue-hair I shared a seat with.

“Nope,” I said. My dry tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth.

“At your age?” Mildred said. “What are you, Nessie, thirty-three? Thirty-four?”

“Thirty-four.” I eyed Mildred, her flowery blouse faded in the dim van. They knew my name. I wondered what else they might know.

“Were you married before?” Yes. “Divorced?” Yes.

Then I got a fresh helping of the “divorce is a four-letter word” sermon. It went on like this. I lost them sometimes, when my eyes fell and I fogged into sleep, but then one of them would mention the hardships divorce pushed on the children, and I’d wake up tense.

“Do you have kids, Nessie?”

“No,” I said. I wanted to give the flower-blouse a hard glare, but I couldn’t focus.

“Oh,” flower-blouse said. “Were you not able to have children?” Her thin hand like baby’s breath on my arm. “Or did he have difficulties, if you know what I mean.”

“She knows what you mean, Mildred,” the balding driver said. “Lot of guys can’t get a stiffy.”

“Harish,” said Frances, a black women with iron curls and one knobbed finger jabbed toward the front, but then the men launched into a discussion of

Viagra that drove the old women to a moral frenzy, and I slipped into a few hours rest.

Later, and often, Mildred would ask about my name.

“Nessie. That’s an odd name. Where did you get it?”

“From my father,” I said, eyes still closed. “Babies need names.”

“Oh, stop being difficult, girl.” Harish said. He eyed me in the rearview mirror, his thick silver hair slicked back so I could see his huge black eyes, shoved back in his jowly frog head but hypnotic in those shadowy sockets. He raised his wide, wiry eyebrows like albatross wings. “Why of all names did he choose that one, and don’t tell us that one name is as good as another.”

This went on and on. It all just kept repeating itself.

“My dad joined up young and flew in the war—your war, against the Nazis—and he made friends with a British pilot over there.” Harish raised a squat hand from the steering wheel and looked at me again in the rearview mirror, but Frances waved him down. “They stayed in touch,” I said. “About five years before I was born, that pilot made this aerial film of what he thought was the Loch Ness monster, and he sent my dad a copy. The old man became obsessed. So now I’m Nessie.”

“What an interesting story,” Mildred. “You should write that down.”

“No thanks,” I said, but the idea stayed with me, made my fingers twitch.

Later, somebody would prod me again, telling me I should write a story about my name or asking me to tell it again. Some of the men who’d flown in the

war asked my father's name, or the name of his friend. I couldn't remember—it was all just gone. I whirled on them, meaning to yell but panting instead.

"Why do you keep grilling me," I said. "I feel like I should be the one asking questions."

"Ooh, maybe you were a detective!" Mildred said.

"Or a reporter," Frances said from the back seat.

"I was a history teacher," Harish said. "Junior high. It's good to remember what you've done, what you are."

"All I am right now is tired," I said.

"That's normal enough," Harish said. "We've been resting ever since retirement, but you're still young—you still need some time to settle down."

My eyes were heavy, and I slumped against my window, the bland world slipping past outside. But I mumbled on, determined to find out something.

"But why am I here, with you people?" I said.

"You flagged us down, Nessie," Mildred said. "You needed a ride, and we figured we were all heading the same direction."

"Where's my car? Why was I on the road like that?"

"We didn't make the rules, girl," Harish said.

"Big surprise." Mildred sniffed and crossed her arms. I pulled my leaden head away from the window, tried to open my eyes. "But where is it we're going?"

Frances leaned over the back of my seat, laid one bony hand on my shoulder and held the other up, her palm pressing back Harish's reply.

"You rest dear," she said. "We'll get there soon enough."

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I don't know how long we drove. I don't remember if we ever stopped. As far as I knew, we never pulled over, not for gas or food or an old-person bathroom break. Then for the first time I woke to a silence, all the old folks lost in thought, and I looked out the windows to recognize the dim hue of dusk spread over the flat sky and, as though he said it for the first time, Harish cleared his throat and announced, "Okay, people, gather your things. We're in for the night."

We exited a highway and crossed on an overpass to a sprawling wood-and-brick inn. It rose in three long, flat levels, its wrapping roofed balconies and narrow windows making it look more like a huge walled-in gazebo than a boxy motor inn. But for all its span and serrated eaves, the inn lay hard against the vertical face of the horizon, a flat representation of itself drawn on some gray dusky backdrop.

We pulled ourselves from the van and wandered into the lobby. The old people chattered and groaned and stretched. Some headed for the complimentary coffee, others settled into wide leather couches in the sunken lounge. A tiny pink piano, a baby grand in bubble gum, hid among wide potted

ferns in a far corner of the lounge. I couldn't see a TV, and the coffee drinkers were ambling away empty-handed—the lobby was empty, not even a brochure rack or a scattered newspaper. Near the entry, a huge oak countertop sat lonely and pale as the rest of the world, no one to greet us. Then Harish himself stepped behind the desk, and the old folks pulled themselves up from the couches and chairs and wandered back to the desk.

“Here,” Harish said, producing a fistful of keys. “The first number is your floor. The rooms run in order from the elevator, down past the lounge there. Have a nice rest folks. We'll see you tomorrow.”

And they dispersed.

I lingered in the lobby for hours. I felt more awake here, in this massive empty silence, than I had on the whole prattle-filled trip, but my head still swam—I couldn't sit still and might never have slept again, but I couldn't concentrate either. I paced the lounge or studied my key, room 305, or pressed a few metallic, child's notes from the pink toy grand. I slipped behind the counter and pulled open empty drawers. I used called lobby phone to call random room numbers, but nobody answered. I stared out the high narrow windows into the parking lot, empty save the van. The dusk lurked in the pale flat sky, no promise night. I searched for a clock but found a pay phone instead, in a small hallway near the elevators. I rummaged my pockets for my cell and then for quarters but found neither, so I lifted the black handset and punched the zero. The phone

rattled through a series of clicks, then a recorded voice said, “We’re sorry, the number you entered is no longer valid,” then static like insects.

I slipped the receiver into its hook and leaned on the black box of the phone. My head ached; my feet tingled. I stared at the phone, trying to concentrate.

Behind me, a girl’s voice: “It’s no use.”

I turned, but the voice had come from around the corner, back in the lobby. I stepped out of the back hallway. Over in the corner, on a leather couch near the piano, two children kicked their feet in the air and watched me. The girl had ash-blond hair, straight and parted on the right and pinned flat against her head with a flapping cream bow. Beneath her pale blue dress she wore tiny dress boots with the laces cinched tight against her stockinged ankles. The little boy beside her wore a long shirt and linen pants; his dark skin and inky hair looked Indian, but when he spoke in his little-adult voice, his accent was faintly British.

“Tarah’s right,” he said. “The lines are dead.”

“This is Hadi,” the girl said. “He’s my brother.”

I crossed my arms. “Really,” I said. Hadi nodded. I shook my head and said, “Okay, if you say so. Listen, what time is it?”

Tarah stared at me, calm and weirdly adult in her tiny body.

“It’s late,” she said, then Hadi followed with “You should get some rest” as though finishing her sentence.

“I slept the whole way here,” I said. My voice was thick, my tongue slow.  
“I’m tired of sleeping.”

“We know,” the boy said.

“But everyone’s asleep now,” the girl said. “You should relax in your room.”

“You’ll feel better,” the boy said. “Things will start to make sense.”

“Where are your parents?” I said.

They both smiled. “They’re resting,” Tarah said. “You should go.”

“Upstairs,” Hadi said. “You can take the elevator.”

My legs were heavy. My shoulders sagged. Those kids—I could barely focus. I felt for the wall behind me, leaned on it as I walked backward toward the elevator. I didn’t want to go upstairs, but I needed to get out of the lobby, away from the children.

I left the room dark, just the thin light leaking through the window. I sat on the edge of my bed, trying to think, wondering why no one in the van had brought in luggage, where I was coming from and why I had been standing on the side of some wooded back road, what I should do next. I heard a buzzing, couldn’t be my head, and I crawled off the bed to trudge the room. I’d been standing by the road. There were old folks in a van, a big white Dodge, dark windows. I had slept a lot, no notion at all how far we’d come.

I couldn’t think: The buzzing was in a vent, a little heater box on the floor near my bedside table, its flaps pressed flat. I stooped and tapped the vent, felt

a thin hiss of air in the flaps, that buzzing loud now. I tugged at the knob to open the flaps, and a thick cloud came at me, a swarm of hairy black flies, their eyes the first distinct thing I'd seen in this place, those millions of microscopic reflections in their millions of black lenses, a galaxy, a black hole, an angry nova. I fell away from the vent and scrambled, staggered to my feet by the bed, but the flies swirled around me, bombed my hair and strafed my neck and bare arms. I fell over the bed, swam through the flies to the sliding glass door, burst onto the balcony and threw my whole torso into the open air, my hips jammed against the railing. The flies made a fast eddy in the air and then swirled off over the parking lot. I breathed.

Down below, in the gray lot, I saw the van. I breathed, watched the pale light, the flat sky, tried to make out the cloud of flies but they had gone. Yet I could still hear them buzzing; I pulled myself back inside then threw the glass door shut, raced to the open vent and jammed that shut, too.

Back at the glass door, I stared down those three floors to the van. I decided. That night, I would leave without them. I would wait a few hours more, till those children left the lobby for bed, then I would sneak into the parking lot and hot-wire the van—my fingers knew how even if I didn't, muscle memory from some indistinct teenage days with some lost delinquent boyfriend—and I would drive off on my own road in search of color and life and decent radio stations. I sat on the bed, then lay on it, sideways, satisfied, and stared at the ceiling, trying to recall which wire under the steering column connected to which.

I couldn't remember the boyfriend who'd taught me, but I knew the car he'd taught me on. A new memory from nowhere: An '84 Mustang with t-tops. Red faded to carrot. Big tires. Only, I couldn't remember the colors of the ignition wires. and I could still hear the flies.

~

I woke in what I guessed was midmorning. My body tingled, my eyes were wood, my stomach ached. Not the cramps anymore, but a squirm of bile in my gut. I hauled myself up on my elbows, wondering how I'd gotten hung over.

The room smelled of stale crackers and mildew and dusty cotton. The weak morning light crawled through dust mites in the air, falling on the thick, mottled carpet at my feet. The room seemed old, hazy, distant, but somehow it had gained a third dimension overnight. Still pale but surely more alive, it lay in an ancient, restful tangibility, like a musty rest home. I lay on my back, awake but exhausted, struggling against confusion. and I remembered the van and the old folks, Harish and Mildred and sweet Frances, the rest of the blue-hairs, all scheduled to leave that morning had I not hot-wired the van first. Which I hadn't.

I jumped to the sliding glass door, dizzy in my rush. The van had gone. I squinted against the light, blanched but definitely yellow though I couldn't find a sun, and held my throbbing head. I wanted to cry, but I had no moisture, not even spit. My eyelids felt like old newspaper. I clenched the draped in one fist,

shook them. I took a deep, shuddering breath, rubbed my temples with my free hand, then pressed my forehead against the windowpane.

“Fuck it,” I said.

A knock, then the door opened behind me and a house-cleaning woman came in to strip the bed. I wandered into the hall, found the elevator, rode down to the lobby.

The whole lobby seemed larger, deeper, more alive in the morning than it had the night before. Several strangers milled about the lobby or lounged in the overstuffed leather furniture. Some fiddled with empty Styrofoam cups, some debated the state of the world, some only sat and stared into corners, moving their lips in concealed whispers to no one. I searched for the bagels, or the fruit bowl, coffee, but I couldn't find anything. I found the children instead. Hadi sat on the floor, his knees to his chest, and leaned against the back of the tiny pink piano. His eyes were closed. Tarah sat on the piano bench, plunking toy notes at random.

“So, what's the deal,” I said. “Does this inn offer breakfast?”

Tarah froze over the keys, and Hadi sat upright, then stood. “You didn't leave with the rest,” he said.

“Yeah,” I said. “I got ditched. I'm stranded. I want food.”

“You're hungry?” Tarah said.

“I don't know, really,” I said. “But I ought to be, so, sure.”

“There’s no food here,” Hadi said. His head tilted, and he squinted at me. He crossed his arms.

“Sorry,” Tarah said.

“Not the greatest inn,” I said, but then I stopped—I didn’t know if Harish had paid my bill, or if I was going to owe for my stay, and I didn’t want to press it until I could figure out how to settle up or find some other ride, skip out on the bill somehow. I hadn’t asked to come to the inn, hadn’t checked myself in. I was just along for the ride, and now I was traveling alone. “I think I’ll walk the access road, try to find a restaurant,” I said.

“There aren’t any,” Hadi said.

“You shouldn’t go out alone,” Tarah said.

“Yes,” Hadi said, “don’t leave the inn.”

“Thanks, kids, but I’ll be fine,” I said. Then, thinking their parents might own the inn, I added, “I’ll be back in a while.”

They followed me to the entrance, then Tarah grabbed my hand in her little fingers just as I reach for the door.

“Nessie,” she said. “We’ll be here when you get back.”

I looked at her up-turned face, then at our hands, then at Hadi, who stood just behind her. I pulled my hand loose, stared at them both, then turned and pushed through the door.

The night before, the van had been alone in the worn asphalt parking lot, but now a half-dozen sedans and minivans lay dull and cold in scattered spaces.

The sky was gray but vivid, like wet streaks of marker ink. I made my way to the overpass, watching for cars as I crossed the access road. None came. The air was stale as before, without a breeze, and the highway was soundless, no cars for miles.

Blocky buildings, old convenience stores or small warehouses, spattered the roadside across the highway, but all looked vacant and uninviting. I looked to the right, toward what I guessed was south, then to the left. I saw nothing in either direction that drew me, so I gave up and walked right, if for no other reason than to head south, back toward the origin of that dismal van voyage. I wondered if the world were dead outside that inn. I'd set out to find something refreshing, and it seemed I'd entered a stalemate world, worse than the dreary inn. There, at least I could feel frustration. Out here, I felt nothing.

I walked for half a mile—it felt like two—before a gust swept against me cold and fast, like a semi passing though the highway was still empty. I shuddered and hugged my arms, and another gust staggered me, and then a steady wind kicked up, blowing hard from the south as though pushing my back toward the inn. I leaned against it and stumbled closer to the shelter of empty buildings. I huddled against a doorway, shivering then turned and pushed a handle on the gray metal door behind me so I fell into the building.

The warmth inside grabbed me. Color lived in there, heat and a golden glow from a fire on the bare concrete floor. A wooden chair and a small bed sat

near the crude hearth. Pots and dishes tilted in stacks at the foot of the bed. and a man stood in the back corner, half in shadow.

“Hello there,” he said in a deep voice, radiant and chocolaty and accented in rolling rs.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “It was getting cold outside. I just thought—”

“I understand,” he said. He held out a smooth, tan hand, his palm open and his thin fingers aimed at the fire. “Are you hungry?”

“Surprisingly, no,” I said, realizing it myself for the first time. “It’s what I came out here for, but now, not so much. I wouldn’t mind a seat by that fire, though.”

“Of course,” he said.

I sat on the chair while he took the bed. “That’s a lovely accent,” I told him. “Where are you from?”

“Accent? I didn’t know I’d brought that with me.” He smiled and bent to the pots on the floor, straightened on stack of them. “Forgive me,” he said. “My name is Aléjandro. I’m from Ecuador.”

“I’m Nessie,” I said. “Wow, Ecuador. All the South Americans I ever meet are always from Argentina or Colombia or something. I don’t meet many people from Ecuador.”

He laughed. “Neither do I.”

We stared at each other. He had curly, dark blond hair, a thin beard around his round jaw, and paler skin than I’d expected in a Latino. He wore the

remnants of a brown wool suit, a woven tie slung loose about his thick neck. He was short, a bit smaller than me even, and he had thin shoulders, but he looked fit like a tennis player.

I squeezed my hands, then rubbed them over the small fire and laughed. "I'm sorry," I said. "I think I was staring."

"Not at all," he said. "May I ask, where are you from?"

"Actually, I don't know." I rubbed my hands up my forearms.

"You can't remember? That's okay. Someday, it will come to you." He took a pot from the top of the stack, held it over the fire, squinted at it, then set it back on the stack. "I want to cook," he said, "but I have no food."

I watched him a while longer as he ran his palms over the thighs of his pants. The wool was smooth with a sheen where he'd rubbed it.

"Aléjandro, have you ever been to the inn?"

He leaned toward me, his elbows on his knees and his fingers folded between us.

"I know it. There was nothing for me to do there. Nothing to keep me busy."

"So you left. Why not keep going?"

"Go where?" he said. He stood and paced in a circle around his bed. "I don't want to go anywhere. I don't need much. Just a hobby. These—" he gestured to the stack of pans as he had to my chair—"cooking is my hobby, even if I have no food."

“But you seem—” I said. I stood from my chair but didn’t walk anywhere.  
“You seem so alone here.”

“You are here,” he said. He smile and stepped around the foot of the bed to face me across the fire. Then his eyes widened and he said, “Do you have a hobby, Nessie?”

“I sleep a lot,” I said. “That’s all I know, really. I can’t seem to remember much.”

“Amnesia,” he said, in four rolling syllables.

“I don’t think so. I think it’s just that there’s not much to remember.”

“No, it is amnesia,” he said. “I think it’s the water, or the air. I have it too, I only know a few things about myself.” I stared at him, picking at my thumbnail and breathing carefully. He smiled. “I don’t think it’s dangerous. I think I prefer not remembering too much. I get to worry only about a few moments at a time, and these moments so far have been pleasant.”

He sat again on the bed and leaned toward me—I thought he was going to reach for my fingertips, but he only folded his hands between us again. He almost smelled of wood smoke and cloves. I’d forgotten that scent existed.

“I collect things here,” he said. “It’s another hobby. I suspect I’ve always collected things, this small storage building seemed so appropriate when I found it. I have something you might enjoy.”

He reached under the bed, pulled two boxes from behind the drab blanket, and rummaged in them, a hand in each box. After a moment, he shoved one

back under the bed and pulled from the other ball of thick thread, finer than string and thinner than yarn. It was a pale bone color, like aged cotton paper. He stood and tossed the ball to me and walked back toward the dark corners of the room.

“I’m not a kitten,” I said, but he rooted through more boxes and didn’t answer. After a moment he stepped around the bed again and handed me two thick, long pins— and the darning needles looked like weathered pearl knitting needles, each capped with a square wooden block. I looked at him as he sat on the bed. “I’m not a grandmother, either,” I said.

“Can you think of anything you’d rather do while you are here?”

I stared at his lips, the wisps of his thin beard wrapped around them and up his the jawline of his apple face. His eyes squeezed into crescents when he smiled. His lips looked warm in the firelight. I swallowed.

“I’m just not a knitter,” I said. “Thanks, though.” I handed them around to fire, but he sat up straight and held his palms out.

“Keep them,” he said. Then he yawned, covering his mouth with the back of one hand, and rubbed his cheeks. “I’m sorry, Nessie, I’m so sorry.” I set the needles and yarn on the floor and was going to ask what was the matter, but as he pressed on his knees and stood up, swaying a bit over the fire, he said, “I feel sleepy again.” He shook his head. “It comes over me so quickly.”

“I understand,” I said. “Believe me.”

“Would you like to—” and he looked at the bed, but he shook his head again and laughed. “No, I’m sorry, of course not.”

I touched his arm and smiled. “Maybe some other time,” I said. “It’s nice here.” I turned my back to him, bent to pick up the needles and yarn. “And thanks,” I said. “I’m not promising anything, but I could do with trying something new.”

He walked me to the door and though he yawned just before he leaned in, he kissed my cheek.

~

In the lobby of the inn, Tarah was at the piano again, only it no longer sounded like a toy piano. She was playing harpsichord, high, eerie strumming that reverberated in the tiny piano case. Hadi saw me enter, though, and he touched Tarah so she stopped playing, and Hadi walked toward me as Tarah turned on her little bench. None of the few strangers in the lounge paid any attention to the music or the silence. They only stared out of windows or into empty coffee cups.

When Hadi reached me, he pointed at the needles and yarn.

“They were a gift,” I said. “Are there other people in those buildings across the highway?”

“No,” Hadi said.

“Besides Aléjandro,” I said.

Hadi’s eyes flashed wide, and he grabbed my free hand and tried to pull me across the lounge. “What the hell, kid?” I said, but he tugged harder and I stumbled after him.

“Tarah,” he said a minute later, “she’s met him.”

“Oh, Nessie,” Tarah said.

I pulled my hand free, set the yarn and needles on the piano, and put my hands on my hips again.

“What’s with you two? I don’t even know you, and you act like you’re my parents, or my friends.”

“We worry,” Tarah said. “We worry you’ll leave the inn—”

“Like Aléjandro,” Hadi said. “Aléjandro is lost.”

“Aléjandro knows exactly where he is—”

“No, he doesn’t,” Hadi said.

“—And I thought you wanted me gone. You seemed pretty upset when the old folks left without me.”

“You’re supposed to leave, Nessie,” Tarah said. “Just not alone.”

“Screw that,” I said. I picked up my needles and yarn. “I don’t see why I’m listening to you two anyway.”

“I’m sorry, Nessie,” Tarah said. “We don’t make the rules.”

“Harish said the same damned thing,” I said. I leaned over her, my free hand a fist on the piano lid. “Who does make up the rules, then?”

“Well, technically,” Hadi said, and I turned my head toward him, “you do.”

“Great.” I straightened up. “Then I make a new rule. You two start acting like kids, and let me be the grown-up here. I can go where I want, see who I want, do what I—”

“Well,” Hadi said, and Tarah finished:

“There are some rules you don’t make up. There are things you can’t do here.”

“And there are things you’re supposed to be doing while you’re here,” Hadi said.

“Like knitting,” I said, and I left.

Hours slipped by in my room. I spent most of my time noting new colors, so much brighter than the day before, despite their half-light. But after a while these colors became drab, as flat and grim as the highway roadside because they now were so ordinary. Edgy, I unraveled Aléjandro’s yarn from its ball and pinched it in my fingers. I dug in the loops and wraps of the ball with one of the needles, but the loose ends of yard just tangled over themselves. I had no idea what I was doing. But when the needles clicked against each other, I tingled, a tiny jolt through my fingers and in my knees. I thought of Aléjandro, and my face burned. I jerked the needles in spasms, not looking at my hands but at the pale yellow wall, at Aléjandro’s round cheeks and crescent eyes, his shaggy curls. Each time the needles clicked together, a shudder struck my lower spine. Each time I pulled a loop through the yarn, I imagined what Aléjandro’s fingertips might

like on my back, remembered the brush of his beard on my face when he kissed my cheek. I looked down, and I dropped the needles and yarn. I had worked the yarn into and around itself in impossible patterns, a narrow strip of thick cloth grown from my fingers. One needle was strung through loops in the cloth like a frame. I stared at it. I studied it. I had no idea how I'd done it.

I ran down the hall to the elevator, tapped my foot all the way to the lobby, and sped into the lounge. Tarah was at the piano, which sounded like a baby grand now, stabbing at notes one moment then draping her fingers along the keys the next.

Hadi saw me but didn't smile. Tarah didn't look up from the piano, but she said, "I'm sorry, Nessie."

"For what?" I said, breathless. "How— Wasn't that a— I don't understand."

"The piano plays what I hear," she said.

"It's one of the rules she gets to make," Hadi said. He offered a thin smile, much smaller than his earlier grins.

"Then we all make rules?" I said.

Tarah kept playing, and Hadi turned to listen. Her boot-and-stockings feet did not touch the pedals. The bars she played were first dancing, then passionate, contemplative, childish. At all times dense and surreal. I slowed my breathing and waited. Then Tarah turned to me, her fingers slowing from a sharp staccato jazz to a moody echo down low on the keyboard.

“I wish you would at least accept the rules there are,” she said.

“I accept what I know. This is what, an electric piano, right? A synthesizer. and you two, homeschooled. Your parents own this inn, right?” I was nodding, agreeing with myself.

“Oh,” Tarah said. She stopped playing, the last notes resonating inside the piano. She turned to face me, her hands in her lap. “I get it. You haven’t accepted that you’re dead.”

“What did you say to me?”

“Dead, Nessie,” Hadi said. He took my hand but I jerked it away. He sighed.

“Nessie,” Tarah said, “you have died. This is what comes next. You need to accept that—”

“So you can move on,” Hadi said, “pick up a new ride and keep going down the highway.

“Great,” I said. “Where those old folks went? and that’s, what, heaven I guess.”

“There are lots of places to wind up,” Tarah said. “Nice forests around some lakes, maybe.”

“A lot of people go there,” Hadi said.

“I’m a city girl,” I said, though I didn’t know that for certain.

The children stopped breathing. They stared at me wide-eyed. Tarah mouthed *No* but said nothing out loud. Hadi shook his head. I slapped the piano

and they jumped, Tarah's little gasp buried in the vibrating whine of strings and wood.

"I'm not dead, you little shits. You're horrible kids—horrible."

And I stormed back up to my room.

I sat outside on my balcony, playing with the needles and trying to recall how I'd managed the knitting. Nothing came. I made a few passes and tied a knot in one end, and it took me five or six minutes to undo the mess, and after that, I couldn't seem to keep the yarn on the hook. I wanted to give up the silly project, but two things continued to haunt me: first, I had knitted a section almost one foot square with the same hands that determined now to destroy the whole project; and second, I had to know what I had meant to create.

A breeze wafted into and between the balconies. I lifted up my head for a moment, closing my eyes and dropping the knitting. I inhaled. The air still tasted bland, but it felt cool in my nostrils and on my tongue, and I was glad for that.

"You won't finish the cloth," a voice said, and I jerked upright as I recognized it. Tarah stood on the balcony adjacent to mine, staring at me.

"What?" I said, breathing fast. I bent to pick up the needles and yarn.

"The cloth," she said. "Leave it unfinished. For your sake."

"Piss off, kid," I said.

"Sorry," Hadi said from behind me. He stood on the balcony on my left, opposite Tarah. They'd surrounded me.

"Sorry?" I said.

“Sorry this is confusing for you. But you need to listen to us.”

I clenched my fists but struggled against shouting. “Where are your parents?”

“Elsewhere,” Tarah and Hadi said together.

“Look,” I said. “Why don’t you two leave me alone, OK? I’m tired, I think I’m getting a headache, and I wish you would go away.”

“You’re not getting a headache, Nessie,” Tarah said. “It’s boredom, perhaps, or confusion. But it’s not a headache.”

“If it isn’t, you two are,” I said, and I went back into my room, slammed the sliding glass door and pulled the drapes shut against the wan light, and fell into the bed.

~

In the morning—what I guessed was morning; I’d lost track of hours and days—I took the stairs to the lobby and peaked around the lounge, but the kids weren’t down yet, and I slipped outside. I had the scrap of new cloth, still attached to the ball of yarn with the needles stabbed through it. I crossed the highway to find Aléjandro.

When he answered the door a thin haze of smoke drifted out over his head. The fire was burning already—looked like it had never gone out. I slipped inside, brushing close to him. He smiled.

“What is that?” He pointed to my fist, and I held up the knitted cloth and needles.

“I brought you something.”

“It’s coming along nicely. I thought you didn’t know how to knit.”

“Well, I don’t.” I blushed. “I got lucky I guess.”

“Would you like to work on it now? I would love to watch you knit.”

“Oh, no, I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Well, I don’t know, really. I got started on it in a frenzy, but now it seems I’ve forgotten how I managed it.”

“Sometimes, when you forget something, it helps to remember the environment you learned it in. When did you begin that cloth?”

I hugged myself, the cloth and needles pinned under my arms.

“In my room at the inn,” I said.

“And what were you doing, besides the knitting or before the knitting?”

“No,” I said, blushing. “It’s no good.” But my fingers tingled.

He chuckled.

“What?” I said.

“What is so embarrassing?”

“Look, Aléjandro, I’d rather not talk about it.”

“Sorry. I was only trying to relax you, to make you laugh. I didn’t mean to offend you.”

“No, it’s just that—” and suddenly, I was telling him.

“So,” he said when I’d finished, “your theory is that you can only knit when you are—” He hesitated. “—aroused?”

“I didn’t say that, exactly.”

“But you implied it.”

“Maybe.”

“Certainly.”

I tried to laugh and looked into the fire, but its heat enticed me to look back at him.

“Nessie,” he said. “This is going to sound impertinent and forward, but would you like to test your theory?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I’m not suggesting we—make love—but you say you are attracted to me, and I like you very much. Perhaps if we—experimented with each other, perhaps kissed or something—”

“Or something?”

He lowered his head but smiled.

“Look,” I said.

“No, it’s OK. If you don’t want to do this, I’ll leave and give you the fire to yourself. I don’t want to alarm you or put you out in any way. I’m sorry if you feel this way.”

I looked at him for a moment, then I glanced down at the yarn and needles. My heart beat one hard thump, and my blood began to warm. My fingers clutched tightly to the cloth, I breathed a deep draught of air, and I looked over at the bed. and suddenly, against my better senses, I stood and went to him and kissed him. He pressed against my lips and pulled me tight against him, his hands on my back and our tongues together. He did smell of cloves, the scent was rich. Finally we both pulled back, and I looked at the cloth, another inch longer, and I said, "OK, I don't know why I'm saying this, and if I decide to stop, you had better back off, but.... Let's try this."

After a while, I don't know how long, I'd knitted another two inches but was forgetting the yarn, enjoying Aléjandro's mouth and his hands. We sat on the bed and wrapped around each other, but then it wasn't working. The knitting just lay there on the blanket. We looked at it, then at each other, and I laughed, but Aléjandro raised a finger and dropped it past my nipple, and I shuddered, and he smiled. I smiled back, but he was looking at my lap—I'd picked up the cloth and needles without realizing it. I stared at him, and he raised his eyebrows, put one hand on my shoulder and one on my breast, and he nodded and I nodded. We pulled our own cloths off, trying to keep our eyes on each other but trying not to stare. He was paler under his suit, a faint tan line at his collar and wrists. My breasts felt heavy and bruised, and my lower abdomen ached, but I moved closer to him anyway and he lay on his back. I climbed over him and he eased inside me. I hissed, and he tensed, but I kissed his neck and then we both heard

it, the clicking of needles. “Slow,” I said, and I sat carefully up on top of him, sighing as I knitted. For long minutes, maybe half an hour, we did this sweaty, careful, mysterious thing, he controlling his thrusts so I could finish my work. He even told me once through gritted teeth that if he came before I was finished, I should go on, fighting to keep himself hard long enough for me to finish the cloth. Finally, he grabbed my hips and clenched me in silence, his teeth gritted and his eyes closed, and I began to rock against him in a delicious struggle to knit. When he went soft, I resorted to rubbing and grinding on top of him, determined to reach the end. Then, as though I’d been robbed of something and was stealing it back, making a getaway, I orgasmed with a surprise, laying sensation upon sensation until I forgot even where I was or what we were doing. I lived only in my own sensual zenith, smiling and moaning through visions of bright lighted tunnels and dark, humming voices that created a tune in time with the blood in my ears.

And then it was done. Whatever I had knitted—and it held no recognizable shape for me, no meaning or purpose—was pressed against my naked breasts, clutched in the final throes of my ecstasy. I crawled down off Aléjandro, panting and sweating and glad to be finished. He lay there, apparently exhausted, perhaps even asleep, with his eyes shut and his hand covering his tender heart. A smile played on his lips.

But I also discovered a growing sense of shame and embarrassment. I realized I hadn’t packed luggage, had been traveling empty-handed, and had

been off my pill in I didn't know how long. We hadn't bothered with a condom; I hadn't expected it to go that far. But even this wasn't my real fear: Whatever I was feeling, it was deeper, like a stomachache but lower, a knot in my throat and a burn to my cheeks. Suddenly I felt wrong. I rushed to dress myself and gather my cloth, my yarn and needles. Aléjandro still lay on the ruined, disheveled bed, and despite the fire the building had grown colder. He was still naked and he had not covered himself; I worried for his health. I went over to him to say a quiet good-bye and pull the blanket to his chest. The terrible chill of his flesh startled me, and I threw the blanket over him.

“Alejandro, are you all right?”

He lay silent, unmoving, unhearing.

“Alejandro, I'm leaving. Should I stoke your fire for you?”

He did not answer.

“Alejandro?”

I nudged him. If only he would snore, I thought, so I would know at least he was alive. But at that thought, it struck me that his chest did not rise and fall as it should after such vigorous sex. My skin shrank against my bones in a plague of goose bumps, and my teeth snapped shut. I reached a trembling hand to his hand and moved it from his heart. It fell limp. I touched my fingers to his neck, but I could feel no pulse.

I screamed.

In a furious terror I ran from the building and down the cold grassy hill crossed the empty highway itself, not bothering with the overpass, and I hurried up the other side to the inn. Surely people were still there. Surely there, eerie as it was, certainly I could find help.

I exploded through the front doors shouting for help over and over like some crazed dimwit in a horror movie, which, of course, this had become.

“What?” a man said. He caught me as I flew toward the lounge, held me fast in his grip.

“What’s the matter?” an old woman said as she hurried over to join us.

Others followed, a dozen maybe, all saying the same things, wondering what my problem was. But there, too, were the children, Tarah and Hadi, staring evenly at me with their arms crossed.

“There’s a man,” I began, deciding on the fly to omit most of the details. “He’s in a building on the other side of the highway, about a half mile back that way. I think he’s dead.” I broke into sobbing and shaking, relieved a bit by the comfort of tears.

For the others, it was the opposite: The whole inn erupted into disorder, shouting disbelief and running mad out the front door or up into their protective rooms. I could hear them all for a few minutes, up in their crying as they gave up on the elevator and pounded up the stairs, or screaming and shouting in the streets as they hurried to find Aléjandro’s body. Only the children remained when I opened my reddened eyes and collapsed into a chair.

“What is that, Nessie?” they said in unison.

“What?” I said, the finished cloth forgotten. “Oh, I, uh, finished—” and I cried a while more. They gave me peace to do it, but only for a while.

“Nessie,” Tarah said. “You had sex with Aléjandro, didn’t you?”

“How did—”

“The people don’t want to believe what they will discover, but we know it’s true, Nessie,” Tarah said.

I covered my face with the cloth.

“The people made such a fuss because they’re worried,” Hadi said.

“Terrified. Nothing like this has ever happened, Nessie. Nobody has ever died on this side.”

“This side of what?” I shouted. “Of the road? Where the hell are we?”

“Not Hell,” Tarah said.

“Only After,” Hadi said.

“After what?” I cried.

“Life,” they both said.

“After life? What are you—” and then it struck me. Somewhere deep, I realized it, and slowly the truth spread up through my brain like a tumor.

“Afterlife,” I whispered.

“Yes,” they both said.

“I am dead?”

“Yes,” they both said.

“Then the van—”

“It’s moved on,” Hadi said.

“It seems they had a different destination than you, Nessie,” Tarah said.

“But that’s unusual.”

“And you,” I said. “You’re dead?”

“We’re all dead here, Nessie,” she said.

“Then Aléjandro was dead, too.”

“Yes,” Hadi said.

“So he’s not really dead now,” I said.

“No, Nessie, he is dead again,” Tarah said.

“We don’t know where he’s gone now, exactly,” Hadi said. “We can only assume there is another place, beyond this one.”

“Or perhaps he went back, launched into his old body again,” Tarah said.

“People go back often, though usually by design and by a much different route.”

“But this has never happened before, Nessie,” Hadi said. “A death on this side? No. We really don’t know what has happened to him.”

“Only Aléjandro knows,” Tarah said.

“And how do you know?” I said, leaning forward in my chair, pointing the needles at them on one hard fist. “Why does he have to be dead? Maybe people don’t die over here, maybe they just seem to.”

“Nessie,” Hadi said.

“Look,” Tarah said, pointing to my hand.

“That cloth you wove with him?” Hadi said.

“It’s a funeral shroud,” Tarah said.

I looked at the pale wool cloth, just big enough to cover Aléjandro’s head and shoulders. The needles slipped from my fist, through my fingers, and clattered on the floor. I wept again, silently now. Then I handed the shroud to Hadi, slow and deliberate.

“We’ll be sure he gets it,” Hadi said.

“Aléjandro would be happy you’ve made for him,” Tarah said.

I cried a while longer, sitting there in the chair with the children standing solemn over me. After several minutes I looked up at them and straightened a little.

“Which way did the van go?” I said quietly. I had an overwhelming urge suddenly to be among the old people again.

~

I stood outside for a long time. The light almost seemed to move, as though there was a sun up there. Tarah and Hadi stayed inside the inn, watching me through a window. It must have been hours before I moved. The people had come back from across the street, some weeping, some murmuring, some crossing themselves. That looked awful in this dim world—the crossing. I kept my hands in my pockets.

I was cold outside as it had been inside Aléjandro's storage building. Before I stepped outside the inn, Tarah had given me a hip-length, multi-pocketed coat from the left-behind box. I asked why she didn't call it the lost-and-found, and Hadi answered for her. "Nothing here is ever lost and so can't, by definition, ever be found. Things simply get left behind."

"Why do I need a coat here, anyway?" I'd said. "I'm already dead. It's not like I'll get hypothermia." I lowered my head for a moment, took a long breath. "Besides, it's never too bright or too dark, too hot or too cold here. It's not really too anything, except dull, maybe."

"Things change, Nessie," Tarah said.

"But people don't age, coffee doesn't get cold—"

"Nessie," Hadi said. "People don't die here, either."

So I left, clutching the coat in my right hand. They rested by my feet, out on the asphalt. I wished—for the dark, guilty comfort of it—that I'd brought the veil, too. Or at least the knitting needles and more of Aléjandro's yarn. The veil was with Hadi, for Aléjandro. The needles were with Tarah, for no other reason than I'd left them behind. Perhaps she had already put it in the left-behind box. Perhaps that's where Aléjandro had found them in the first place.

Who would find Aléjandro? Who would collect the collector now that he was dead. Dead again. Re-dead; deader. I was dead. I died. I was no longer alive.

I stepped forward, headed across the parking lot, but the children shot through the door of the inn and stopped me.

“You can’t leave,” Tarah said.

“Not alone,” Hadi said.

“Maybe there were rules before, kids, maybe rules I had to follow. But they’re broken now.”

“They’re not—”

“Hell, I’m broken. Dead, right? and this is the afterlife?”

“It’s just After,” Hadi said.

“Whatever. None of this makes any sense, but either I’m crazy, or I’m sane and I’ve killed a man, or I’m dead and someone’s just shattered whatever logic might have existed in this place. None of it’s any good, and everything’s broken—”

“Things are what they are, Nessie,” Tarah said.

“We don’t know how any of this works,” Hadi said. “Not yet. We need to relearn the rules, and you need to stay here until we can figure it out.”

“I’m not some homework assignment, kids. and why can’t I leave the inn? What the hell is out there?”

“That, and worse,” Hadi said. “You can get lost out there alone.”

“Aléjandro’s just lucky he stayed close to the inn,” Tarah said. “Some who get lost stay lost for a long, long time.”

“Aléjandro’s not lost, he’s dead, and if I’m damned for killing him, I’d like to get on with it.”

I left them in the parking lot—they followed a few steps but I shoved Hadi hard enough to knock him down, and Tarah stopped to help him. I walked down the slope of grass, toward the highway. My head hurt, my vision wavered like a B-movie acid trip. The highway moved farther as I walked closer; I felt like a character in a slasher film, with heavy breathing and dark music. I could expect to be killed soon. I stood on the edge of the highway.

A bus crawled up onto the road from the horizon. I watched it for a while. I was glad it crawled. It gave me time to think. If Aléjandro could die... I dropped the coat and stepped out into the lane where the bus drove. It came closer, switched lanes, flashed its brights at me. But if I was dead, what would this matter? I had to know. I needed to find out where Aléjandro went, not because I cared terribly for Aléjandro but because he had done something no one here had done, and I wanted to know why. Maybe I was a detective, Mildred had said in the van an eon ago. Maybe I was a reporter, Frances has said. The bus drew near. I jumped.

The bus drove on, past me already. I thought for a second that it had passed through me, that I was a ghost of sorts. It made sense. But nothing so dramatic had happened. It was like I’d blinked in my leap, and in that immeasurable instant that my lids covered my eyes, time had sped up for

everything but me, and the bus had launched by me just before I landed. And I landed alive. I sat on the road with the coat beside me and cried again, for a long time.

## Chapter 2

A hot, black tire rolled in front on me and stopped with a gravel crunch. I could smell the black rubber and the bearing grease and the exhaust. It was such a relief to smell grime; it was so real at last. I nearly forgot in that second that I was dead. I looked up and along the expanse of yellow fender and door and trunk. It was a cab—no mistaking this. A man leaned out the window. He chewed a cigarillo and smiled with stained teeth under his gray mustache. He was older than me—or would have been, anyway—and he reminded me of the kind of uncle that bought you candy and gave you sips of beer when your father wasn't looking. The kind that winked at you when he caught you doing something mischievous and never turned you in. He winked at me now, this Uncle Cabby.

"Ain't never seen one like you, miss," he said. "Nope. Never out on the road like this. What's your story?"

"A long one," I said. "I'd rather not talk about it."

"Hmm." He nodded as though I didn't need to talk about it anyway, as though he knew already. That was what uncles did. "So listen, you headed down the road? Or up, I guess. Not that it matters much."

"You mean, am I going your way?" I said.

"Yeah, something like that," he said.

“I don’t really know.”

“Just found out, did you?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Just a little while ago. Where does this cab go?”

“It goes to wherever it stops, miss. Wish I knew more than that.”

“You been ... here long?”

“Long enough, I guess. So, you want to ride with me? Seems like we could both use the chat.”

I looked back up the grassy hill. I could just see the roof of the inn peaking over it. I looked at the cab, then up the highway. I couldn’t explain the bus, why it hadn’t killed me the way I’d killed Aléjandro. I couldn’t even explain how I’d gotten here, what had killed me. If I was even really dead. But I needed to leave. If I was dead, I needed to find out where I was, and if Aléjandro was dead again, I had to know where I’d sent him. I owed him that.

“Sure,” I said. I stood with my coat in my hand and climbed into the back of the cab.

“Were you a cabby, before?” I said.

“Must-a been,” he said. “Don’t know, really. I just woke up a ways back, grabbed the wheel the way you do when you fall asleep driving, and I been driving ever since.” With that, he pulled forward and moved back up to some sort of speed.

“How did you find out?” I said.

“Just knew, after a while,” he said. “I figured something was up when the car never ran out of gas. At first I thought the needle was stuck, and I kept looking out for a gas station and panicking every few miles or so, but then I realized that there were no stations and that the car would have run out of gas by then. But there we were, moving right along. That’s when I noticed the odometer didn’t roll over either. It just sat there on nine nine nine nine nine nine and didn’t tick at all. After a while I thought about food but figured out I wasn’t hungry, then that I wasn’t thirsty, then that I’d been driving for what must-a been days and ain’t once stopped to sleep. So I just kept driving. Till I saw you, that is. What’re you doing out in the middle of the road, anyway?”

“I tried to kill myself. How about that? A dead woman committing suicide.”

“I suppose where we are, stranger things have happened.”

“Amen, man.”

“Say,” he said, “my name’s Foreman. You got one?”

“Nessie.”

“Well, if that ain’t an interesting name. You swim a lot as a kid?”

“No,” I said, and I told him about my name.

“Pretty interesting,” he said. “Ain’t no story behind mine. Foreman’s just who I am.”

~

We rode for a while. It seemed our obligatory conversion was ended, and we resigned ourselves to staring out the window. The landscape had not changed since the van, except that now, like yesterday morning before Aléjandro, the colors moved a little more, shone a faint bit brighter. But the buildings were gone now. No more warehouses or inns, not even an overpass. Just this crawling expanse of green the sad color of smooshed peas, but a color nonetheless. The sky swelled a little, more domed than during the ride with the old people. I even think I noticed a cloud distinguish itself from the mass of gray incubating the earth.

Foreman drove in silence for a long time. But after what might have been a whole day in the cab, he said, “Say, Nessie, you ever feel the urge to go back?”

“What?” I said. It had gotten so quiet. I don’t think I even remembered he was in there. I’d been thinking about knitting.

“Home,” Foreman said. “Do you ever want to go home?”

“As far as I ever knew, this is home,” I said. “People talk all their lives about ‘going home,’ about ‘passing on.’ I always figured that meant death. I don’t know where else you could go.” I saw Aléjandro, cold and frozen naked on the bed.

“All right,” Foreman said, “then back. You ever want to go back?”

“I guess that would depend on what ‘back’ is—was,” I said. “And like I told you, I don’t remember much of that.” I wanted him to drop the subject, stop

reminding me of what had happened. I sat; he drove. But I also wanted to know what had happened, to find out what this place was or where I was headed next, so I tried to asking why I wanted to know.

“Just curious,” he said, and that’s the last I heard from him the rest of our trip.

I’m not sure how long we drove. I didn’t much care. I sat content in the back seat, waiting for the handful of memories I did have to go away. Harish with the room key, the children at the inn. Aléjandro in the warehouse, dead again, the shroud that should be covering his face. Those damned children—I hoped they’d covered Aléjandro. They had helped me, but they had scared me, and I was glad to be away from them.

And then there was Foreman. We’d been in this car for what? Hours? Maybe we had been on the road for weeks. I didn’t think so, though. I had a gut feeling that even here, my body would tell me time, and I felt only hours. But it wasn’t my body, or anyone else’s body, or even a body at all. It was just me, what I was, pretending all this existed, that I rode in a car that smelled of burning oil and dusty seat covers, that I craved animal crackers, that Foreman was an uncle I’d never met. Illusions. Nothing.

My head throbbed. The sky rippled, and I noticed that it had layered over with clouds till it was nothing but a massive domed cap of fluff over a gray, sleepy world. I marveled that I hadn’t noticed the transition, and that the sky would bother to cloud over at all. Then I lay down and closed my eyes.

~

I rolled over and off the edge of the back seat. I woke with a start.

“Where are we?” I said, my voice thick.

The car was dusty and the dark brown seat covers sparkled dully in the scattered particles as they caught what meager light shown outside. My back was stiff and my hip sore from the hump in the middle of the floor. A candy wrapper stuck to my arm when I pulled myself to a sitting position on the floor, and as I peeled it off, it dissolved, falling apart into nothingness. Foreman had not yet answered.

“Hey, Foreman,” I said as I hauled myself back to the seat. “I said, where—” The driver’s door was open, and Foreman was not in the front seat. I looked out the window and a small car shot past my face, startling me and throwing me back in the seat. I scooted over to the passenger door and opened it, stepping carefully onto the asphalt. Foreman had parked in the middle of the right hand lane, nowhere near the shoulder. The keys were not in the ignition nor anywhere else in the cab. I looked again and realized I’d just done a slow-motion double take. The odometer had rolled over; it read 000000. I closed my eyes and swallowed. My head began to spin. Another vehicle, a red minivan, rolled toward me and flew past in a burst of after-breeze, as though I were some magic slingshot past which everything moved faster. I fell back against the car door,

and my hair buzzed about my head and slapped me in the eyes a few times. I side-stepped off the road and stood for a few moments in the grass near a long ditch, wondering where Foreman had gone. The little bristly tops of the weeds tickled my ankles. I hadn't remembered being barefoot.

About a half mile down the road, another car sat parked on the shoulder. It was red, small. I stepped back into the cab, leaned a knee on the back seat, and fished around on the floor board. I only found the coat, but it was warmer now, so I left it down there. My spinning head began to throb hanging upside down like that, but when I brought myself back up, it wouldn't stop. I looked through to the front; the keys were definitely missing, the glove box was open and empty, and in the ashtray was the single, useless cigarillo butt.

I left the car in the road and started for the red compact up the way.

There was a small breeze now, one not generated by passing cars, and while it felt good on my hot forehead, it felt darkly strange in my gut. I could feel it in my abdomen, hot and slow, as though the air had passed my hot, pained head before moving down. I didn't like this feeling. I wanted to vomit.

Off to the side of the road, on the left, spanned a stretch of trees—not a forest quite, but something that would become a forest farther back beyond my sight. I walked along the edge of the ditch, straying absent-mindedly into the low curve now and then. I began to stumble, to plod along like a drugged woman, and finally, almost at the car, I fell into the ditch itself and passed out.

~

I woke for the second time, and I raised my tender head to stare down the tail pipe of the compact. My clothes were smeared with the green of the grass. I wanted to move, the keep moving. I felt like if I stayed still for too long, I would die like Aléjandro, off the prescribed path but stationary, findable. I wondered if the keys to the compact had been left inside. I pulled myself up. Down by the trees, in the distance, I saw two tiny people watching me. I don't mean they were far away, though they were. I mean they were small anyway, like dwarfs or children. Here, who knew which? I thought of the children at the inn, their eerie silence as I left those few days ago. I thought about their words: "Aléjandro's just lucky he stayed close to the inn. Some who get lost stay lost for a long, long time." I remembered how angry those kids had made me before the incident with Aléjandro. I felt dizzy, and leaned against the red trunk of the compact. Those kids angered me now, inexplicably, and these two in the woods, watching me, infuriated me. I began to think dark thoughts, evils things, angry things. I shook my head, and it throbbed once. Through the back window, I saw the keys miraculously dangling in the ignition of the compact, and I knew I had to leave, now.

I thought, as I climbed behind the wheel and cranked the engine and looked again at the two by the trees, why can we not escape guilt even in death?

I hated this place. The tires squealed a bit as I moved back onto the road. The odometer in this new car read 000001.

~

I drove for a long while—a damn long while—before I realized that I even drove. It was the first time I'd been behind the wheel since I.... and then I realized that I couldn't even think it out loud, not about myself. I could talk about it nonchalantly enough, at least as long as Foreman was around, but thinking meant accepting, and I couldn't get it into my head. I wondered how long it took. I wondered if I had forever to get used to it. I mean, it wasn't like I was going anywhere; and yet, some did. Those old people had driven off god knows where, and the children said some people go back. and Aléjandro—no one seemed to know where he went because people didn't do over here what he did. Now Foreman. But not those kids, never those two. Was it them I'd seen back on the road where the old car stopped and I took this one, them down deep in the woods? They were tiny, so I hadn't seen too clearly, and I was still groggy from passing out at the bumper. I could have been mistaken. and this: the passing out. Why did I do that? I slept a lot in the van with the old folks, and I don't remember much of the inn except the children and the shroud and the sleeping. Then in the car with Foreman, and then at the new car by the field.

I drove.

I checked the rearview once, out of habit, and I saw storm clouds—storm clouds, here where it did not rain, where nothing changed and people did not die. I felt sweat beading on my cold forehead, and I grew sacred. I stared at the mirror too long, drifted off the shoulder and had to swerve suddenly to get back on the lane of the highway, a road I didn't know but had to follow. Lightning flashed in the rearview mirror, and I looked again in a flinching reflex. Now the clouds were gone. I had imagined them, perhaps. But I still sweated a little.

Then I jerked—no, it wasn't me, really. It just sort of happened. The wheel pulled my arms to the right, the car jerked to the shoulder of the road. In a panic I stomped on the break, but even that was involuntary, an impulse from outside myself. I felt like a puppet without strings. The rear of the little car slid a bit and I could smell burned rubber, but I'd already pulled off the brake and let the car straighten itself out. I breathed hard. The sound of it filled the car, echoing off the thinly upholstered roof. I let off the gas and drifted to the side of the road, the crush of grass from the shoulder harmonizing with the sound of breathing in the car.

"Okay," he said, and I screamed, jumped in my seat, grabbed the rearview mirror in one hand and whipped it to face the rear seat. "Sorry, don't freak out."

He was skinny and weathered. His matted black hair looked greasy, and the skin around his bloodshot eyes was wrinkled from constant squinting. He had a shaggy beard over a pockmarked face. He sniffed and pulled at his nose.

He was wearing a gray tee-shirt, or at least I think it was gray—it could have easily been a former white or a former black.

I turned in my seat to face him, my right arm on the passenger headrest. “Don’t freak out?” I yelled. “How the fuck long have you been in this car?”

He wouldn’t quite look at me, more at my cheeks or my chin, but his voice was even, like he was soothing a dog. “I don’t know,” he said. “I don’t know. I’m as surprised here as you are.”

We stared at each other for a moment, or, I stared at him and he kept staring at my chin. Then he straightened in the seat, pulling himself out of a low crouch, and he looked out the passenger window into the wooded fields. He looked left across the highway. He patted his shirt like he was searching for keys, then felt all around his head, fingers in his dirty hair or rubbing at his forehead. He looked behind him, then turned full in the seat and craned his neck to see up out the back window. When he turned back to me, he was smiling.

“What is this?” he said.

“You’re kidding,” I said. I’d made my eyes hard, narrowed the lids. I got the feeling this was how I handled surprise, with suspicion and anger. I said, “Who are you?”

“I’m David,” he said, but he wasn’t looking at me—he was scanning out the windows again, still that smirk.

“No,” I said, “Who the hell *are* you? Where did you come from?”

He furrowed his brow and looked into the floorboards the way I had done in the back of Foreman's cab. He scratched at the stubble of one cheek, then he grinned again and looked at me.

"Well, to tell you the truth, I'm not from much of anywhere."

I wanted to say, *Look, don't be a smart-ass, it doesn't much work around here—I've tried*. But then I thought that maybe, like me, he was slow to catch on and didn't yet know he was dead.

He said, "Lately, I guess you could say I'm from Texas."

"You don't sound Texan." He sounded—I couldn't tell where from, but not Texas. Pennsylvania? Or was that me, was that where I was from?

"No, I'm not Texan. But this is where I am for now." He looked around, the smirk dropping into the furrow again for just a moment before bouncing up, his expression elastic and airy. "We are still in Texas, right?"

"No," I said.

He was grinning, but it was the empty sort, all wheels behind glass.

"No?"

"No."

"So how long was I out? We're in Oklahoma now, right?"

"Look," I said, but I didn't know what I wanted him to know. He was frozen in that smirk, sure this all was a joke that soon he'd get to laugh about, if only I'd let him in on the punchline. He was ready to slough it all off, and I decided to hell with it. "Look, I'm not going to lie to you. You're dead, pal."

His “Wha-at?” was broken by the release of that pent-up laughter, and it even felt genuine. He shook his head for a few moments, chuckling, then he said, “Seriously, Oklahoma, right?”

“Seriously,” I said. “Dead.”

He let his face go slack, and he cocked his head at me like a puppy, trying to size me up. Then he glowered. “Look, lady,” he said, “you better not be stalling to keep from telling me something else, something worse.” We watched each other, and then he said, “I hate that.”

“I’m not shitting you,” I said.

“My ex-wife used to do that, give me some ridiculous news thinking it would soften the terrible shit.” He stared at me. “She pulled that the day I left her. *David, I’m seeing someone else. I’m having an affair* she said. You’re what? I said. *But it’s OK, because I’ve got breast cancer* she said.”

“Wait—jesus christ,” I said. “You left your wife because she had cancer?”

“I left her because she fucked with my emotions, and I’ll be damned if I let you sit here and do the same damned thing.” He shouldered the door and pushed his way out of the car. He was already a few paces in front of the car when I got my door open and stood out to shout at him

“I’m sorry—David?”

He threw a hand up to dismiss me, didn’t even turn around.

“David, I’m sorry, but you’re dead. I’m dead too. This is it, pal.”

Now he did stop, spinning on his toes to face me. “Look— What’s your name?”

“Nessie.”

“Look, Nessie, I don’t know you, but I really hate it when people do this shit to me. So tell me straight, what the fuck’s going on, really?”

“You’re really dead, okay. Everybody here is dead. I’m probably breaking some rule or something telling you this, but that’s what’s going on.”

“Okay,” he said, stepped toward me. “Then how’d I die?”

“How should I know? You tell me. What’s the last thing you remember?”

David sniffed and scratched the back of his neck. “I was just— I went— I...” He stared at the asphalt.

I said, “I can’t remember either.”

“I left my wife,” he said. “I left her and went for a walk.”

“Maybe you got hit by a car or something. Maybe she’s there right now, asking the neighbors to call the paramedics, not that you’d deserve it.”

“No, that’s not it. I’ve walked for three years. I used to live in Ohio. I walked all over the damned place.”

“And the last place you were was Texas?”

“Somewhere in Texas. Somewhere north, like the Panhandle.” He walked back to the car.

“Lubbock?”

“No, farther north. Some little town. Tulip. Tools. Tulia. Something like that. I went other places—I was headed south—but I can’t remember anything past that town. I could have gone to Lubbock.” He leaned on the hood and looked me in the eye.

“One of the Dixie Chicks is from Lubbock,” I said. “So was Buddy Holly. Hey, I wonder if we’ll see him around here somewhere.”

“Oh, I get it, `cause I’m dead, right? I’m dead and I can see all the dead people. Ha. Ha ha. Okay?” He frowned at me. “Are we done here?”

I reached through my door and shut off the engine, then I closed the door and leaned against it. We hadn’t seen a car since he woke up, and the road was empty now.

“I know this is pretty hard to take,” I said, “but you already know it’s true. You’re just in denial, like I was. Hell, I still am a little. A guy had to die before I’d even consider it.”

He eyed me. He kicked at a tuft of dry grass brushing the bumper, then he looked hard at me. “If a guy died, then you aren’t dead, lady. You’re just crazy.” He turned circles to scan the surroundings again. “Now where the hell are we?”

I dropped my head, smiled a sad smile. “Not Hell,” I said. “Just After.”

“After what?”

“I wish I knew,” I said. “Listen, you woke up in the back of this car. Damned if I know why. When I woke up, I was on the side of the road, and the

next thing I knew I'd hitched a ride in van, a white Dodge Ram full of old folks. We drove for—I don't know how long, days I guess—and then we stopped at this inn and I met these kids, these fucked up little kids dressed like something out of a foreign movie, and they told me I was dead.”

“You said somebody else died.” David's voice was flat, and it scared me a little.

“A guy I... A guy I met. Aléjandro. It was a heart attack, or something, I don't really know what, but everyone back at the inn, they freaked out, because you're right, it doesn't make any sense. I can't explain any of this, but being dead is the only thing that seems to make sense, and somehow, I don't know, I just *feel* dead.”

“Lady—Nessie—I've felt dead for a long time now. Everybody does. That doesn't make it so.”

I shook my head. “Look, here's the thing—I don't know how Aléjandro died, back near the inn. I'm trying to find out, even though all I can think to do so far is follow the highway till I find the old folks again. But Aléjandro dying seems to be a fluke, because after it happened I tried to kill myself. Just hear me out. A bus, I jumped in front of it. and it missed. It swerved a little, but it was a bus. I couldn't have swerve enough, it just missed. I can't die here.”

“Because you're already dead.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Yeah.” I could still feel Aléjandro inside me. His hand laying on his chest, his fingernails.

“Okay, then. Well, you seem like an interesting conversationalist, but honestly, I have a thing about hanging out with ghosts—I”

“I’m not a ghost.”

“—So I’m just going to stick with my walking here, but you enjoy yourself.

“Fine, you walk, and I’ll drive.” I got back into the car and fired up the engine.

He watched me a minute, then dismissed me with a wave of his hand and walked out into the road, trying to get his bearings.

I pulled around in a half circle, heading away from him on the shoulder of the road, then I U-ed again and faced him.

He kept walking, ignored me. I kicked the accelerator, glad the engine was small and quiet, so I could sneak up on him. I worried, thinking of Aléjandro and how sometimes, it happened. But this guy felt no different from me, was just as lost as me. Why should he die? He didn’t have that any more than I did. I would run right through him. and if not, at least he was a stranger; I might be able to learn something about what happened to Aléjandro. I got the car to forty before I hit him. It wasn’t very fast really, but it was faster than the bus had been going, and it would make my point. Just as I got to him, though, I let off the gas so I could pay attention. I still wasn’t quite sure what had happened with me outside the inn. How I had not been hit. I wanted to see it. But I didn’t. I know I didn’t blink, but whatever happened when the car came to his body—if these

were bodies we walked around in—I blanked, and suddenly he wasn't there in front but was in my rearview. I'd just gone through him.

He stopped walking. He stared. It had happened. He touched his stomach with one hand, held it there like an old man full from a meal, and rubbed his thigh with his other hand. He looked at his feet. He touched his chest, the back of his neck. I had not missed, and he knew it. I had just driven through him, like a damned ghost in a movie. No, that's not what happened. It was more like this: when the car and he tried to be in the same space at once, one of them ceased to be there, did not take up space, let the other pass by. He wasn't sure which had given way, he or the car. It didn't seem to matter. Whatever had happened made no sense, but it had happened anyway.

I stopped the car finally, shifted to reverse, backed toward him. He no longer walked; he stood and faced me, waited. He knew. I stopped before I got to him. Once was enough.

"Sorry," I said. "Are you okay?"

"I don't know what happened just now," he said. "I don't know—" He was still patting himself. Now he stopped, his left arm crossed over his chest and his hand on his right shoulder. He turned around in a circle, then looked at the car, then at me. Then he shouted. "You bitch!" He came at me, I backed away, he was running and I was trying to run backward, my hands up palms out like I was pushing him away when I was the one almost falling over.

"Whoa!" I said. He looked like a horse, like a charging war animal.

“You tried to run me over, you bitch!”

“But it didn’t happen,” I said, “you can’t die here, you’re already dead, it doesn’t matter, I did the same damned thing!” He was on me—he slapped me hard on the cheek, the heel of his palm catching the bridge of my nose. I stumbled but I caught myself, and I punched him in the jaw. He punched me in the cheekbone and sent me down into the highway. He raised his fist again as I scrambled backward, looking for a way to stand again, but he only held it there and then backed off.

“Fuck you,” he said, rubbing his jaw, and he turned and stalked across the highway toward the fields. I sat in the road. A car was coming up from the horizon, a spot at first.

“Hey,” I shouted. I turned onto my knees, then stood. “Hey, asshole, get back here!” But David kept on into the grass, headed for the trees. The car was coming closer—a big silver pick-up truck, wide grill and four tires spread across the back. I rubbed at my cheek, then touched a finger to my upper lip. My nose hurt, but it wasn’t bleeding. I heard the truck’s horn blare, but I didn’t move—I just watched David stalk across the field. He was nearly at the trees now. I felt a rush of air, a hot metallic gust, and there was the truck driving away from me down the highway. “You see?” I shouted, pointing at the truck. “The same damn thing!” I waited. Then I said, “You prick.” I watched until David slipped into the dark trees, then I turned and walked back to the car, started it, and spit grass as I pulled fast back onto the highway.

~

I tried the radio as I drove, but I only got static. I turned the volume up all the way, the digital numbers in the display scrolling to fifty and then flashing *MAX*; I thought I might catch one wavering voice, a Mexican sportscast or an oldies station, any sound with structure. It was only white noise, voiceless and droning. I left it on anyway, let it scratch through the speakers for miles. I turned in the seat, let the steering wheel rock in its own motion, and I searched the back seat for something of David, some hint of how he'd got in the car. If I could find the way into the After, I might be able to find the way, and then Aléjandro. My foot slipped off the accelerator and the car revved down, slowed to a crawl, but I never left the road, even when it curved into a desert borderland. The car kept us on the road.

I didn't even necessarily want Aléjandro—I just wanted answers. and I wanted to know wherever he was, he'd made it okay. But that was assuming that where he was worked the same as the After, and that wherever I was, I was okay, too. Which I doubted. I should have questions the children. Even if they were just kids, even if they were creepy and much too adult, they had a grip on this place, on what I was going through. I should have brought them along.

The sky had color, some shade of sky more normal than any of the flat, muted hues I'd seen up there since. I died. It wasn't blue, not anything like it,

but for the first time in—I don't actually know how long—I noticed the sky out over the hood of the little car I drove: I wanted to name it sky. I almost wanted to declare the weather, call the day overcast, a lulling, sleeping ochre looming from the horizon. I missed.

Alejandro. I wasn't sure that was even possible, to miss people here, to mourn a nondeath. I certainly wasn't sure what had happened to him. But then, these were the questions of this place. and worse—and this is what those kids had wondered, what had everyone back at the inn so spooked—if this was it, and we were dead, and this was whatever came After, then what came after this?

Here's what I wanted to believe: I wanted Aléjandro to just be gone. A wink. Now you see him, now you don't, isn't that amazing folks. This was a nightmare. This wasn't After, it was Inbetween, a flat, meaningless limbo, all of us ducking under the pole of some fantastic scam and just waiting, our backs bent double, to fall on our asses. A bus couldn't run me over, I couldn't run over David, but I could kill a ghost with sex, rupture a heart he no longer had. I didn't need to eat because I'd lost my stomach somewhere in the earth, but there was my hunger anyway. I couldn't make a phone call but I could listen to bad radio and pull a road beneath whatever tires I chose.

I was. Nessie. I knew that much. I was born to a man obsessed with monsters. I'd died. and then there were the old folks, and an inn full of flies, and a dead man I'd killed with a fuck.

I could feel the dull heat of the glass on my arm as it rested against the driver's side window, same as the dull burn from steering for so long. Forever. Not that I understood why a dead arm should burn, why I should have arms, or a car, or a sky, or. Where I was headed. I sped, no crush of the accelerator, just the easy understanding that it didn't matter if I sped. The lazy fall of an invented gravity, foot on pedal, dust on the moon—just as small a movement, just as inevitable.

The world, the wherever, pulled fast underneath. Me. The window on my arm buzzed with the rush of air outside it. The highway that bent out ahead of the car hissed, the tires pulling at the sharp asphalt, the grit of sand forecasting the coming—the rushing—desert. It winked at me, the hot horizon. But it wasn't the desert, it was a windshield, another car coming on fast. No cartoon trail of billowing dust—the air here was still like the moon, even the earthly particles lethargic—but on it came, getting closer, more familiar. I realized my fists ached, and I unpeeled the fingers of my right hand from the steering wheel, shaded my eyes with my hand, pulled my foot off the accelerator, drifted toward the shoulder. This was the first car I'd seen driving this far in, since those first days, if that's what they were, in the van with the old folks, at the inn on the highway, Foreman and his cab. This car I drove now had only been abandoned, like the rest of us, cold on the road's edge. and now—this. and then there was the van. Again. There, on the highway with me, weaving down onto me fast.

The van.

The car skidded as I pulled hard to the shoulder, rear tires scraping dirt and weeds, and the van did the same across the asphalt, long streak of rubber in the road when it squealed to its halt straddling the dividing line a car length away. It rocked from its arrested motion, the little ram's head silver among all that dust and sand in the dark leering grill, and there was David again, grinning like an idiot child behind the wheel.

I opened my door; I pulled myself out, a hand gripping the door frame up on the roof. The sky held no definite sun, but I put a flat hand over my eyes anyway and squinted at him. He kept smiling, but I kept my pressed and even. David pulled back on the key, let the engine die. When I leaned on my fender, not moving toward him but not retreating to my own driver's seat, David opened his own door and stepped down to the road.

"You don't remember anything," he said. He was reclining on the white side of that van, my old van, and though I tried to watch the dark windows there with suspicion, I was swimming in the comfort of seeing this old thing again, the only thing familiar here. David was shaking his head. "I remembered everything, it took a while, but it's all there. I don't get it."

I shook my head too, reached past him to press a palm against the hot paint and black glass. I said, "David, man, I don't think there's anything to get." He pulled his eyebrows together, and I said, "I'm starting to think there are no rules."

~

As we pushed my car off the road and settled into the van, David explained where he'd been. When he'd stormed off into the trees, he'd wandered through them for what seemed like hours. Sometimes the trees were thick, close together and hung heavy with moss so the branches dipped low and brushed his shoulders. Sometimes the forest opened up into wooded glens, thin trees spiked up out of lush grasses and tan shrubs. He'd taken to noting trees when he walked the living world, and while I could recall only my name and a few random details, he had a field guide in his memory: At first the trees were all conifers, spruces and pines, until suddenly the tall trunks fell away and he walked among twisted juniper bushes and graying live oaks. For a while he walked among maples and pecans, then through a shimmering forest of birches. Once, a heavy river ran into the woods and the trees gave over to gnarled cypress, but when the river ducked away again, the trees switched to willow and then to ash. Sometimes, he thought he was walking at night, but he could never tell because the canopy above his was so thick—he only knew it was day when he entered an open area and the flat light of day fell in like a fog. It was the longest he'd ever walked in one stretch, was all he knew, and after a long, long while, he began to wonder how far he'd gone, or why his legs hadn't gotten sore.

As he first left the pines for the junipers, he realized he'd let go of his anger. He was rubbing his jaw where I'd hit, but he'd forgotten for a moment why

it hurt. When he did remember, he pressed on harder, not noticing the change in trees, but after a while he slowed his pace and turned a short, ambling circle. He wasn't sure where he was heading, or why he'd thought a hike through the trees would help him escape the fury or the confusion. A barrier, was all he could guess, but the barrier was changing and he hadn't even noticed.

Wherever he'd last been before he blacked out and woke up in this place, he'd seen junipers and live oaks. That much he knew. So he figured he was still in Texas. and he remembered walking south through rolling fields and dense forests of pines on his way to the center of the state—that's where he'd seen the junipers—so perhaps that's where he was now, heading south or southwest back the way he must have come.

Had he really walked as long as he'd told me?

Had he really left his wife, Jessica, because she'd had breast cancer?

When his wife told him to get lost, he did. Then and there. His wallet was in his pants, but his keys still on his dresser; he'd walked. and walked. and so on.

It had been years, he said.

He could hear the pop of acorns under his sandals, feel the brush of grass on his toes. He slipped and caught himself, his arms pinwheeling for a moment—the acorns had given way to hard green pecans that rolled his feet from under him. He steadied his pace and watched the ground for a few yards, but he never stopped walking. He remembered pecans in Texas, scattered

among the live oaks and juniper, but they hadn't dropped nuts yet. and now, the maples had come, too—he didn't remember many maples in Texas, not in the central hilly part he'd been walking through.

The sleeping and passing out I'd told him about—he'd done it too, in the living world. He'd walked so far the landscape dropped away until he moved blind through an empty space, and then, without understanding, he'd wake up standing in front of a mirror in a rest stop restroom, rubbing his hand on his dirty trousers and wondering how he managed it. That was a new thing, the sleepwalking, new even to his trips—he hadn't started doing it until the last month or so. and always to a mirror, whatever mirror was closest. He never knew for certain how long he'd been sleep before he snapped to, staring at himself.

The last rest stop he could remember had no shower. He'd washed his face in the sink and had run wet hands through his hair. Outside the rest stop, beyond a string of wireless fence posts, the ground dipped into a wet sound, and he knew water was there. But it wasn't water outside the rest stop, it was water here, wherever he was—a river had curved in among the trees, which now were changing over to cypress. and still, he walked on.

He'd walked this way for nearly six days before he lost time and woke up in the back of my car. He'd come to only one rest stop on the route he took, and the metal mirrors in there had been either too cloudy and rusted to see in or just gone, ripped off the cinderblock walls. and apparently, he was unable to sleep

without a mirror to wake up in, because for weeks he slept only inside the other urine-scented tile tombs along those Texas highways. It was the first time he'd slept indoors in three years, actually, used to the sky as he had become, but toward the end his feet hurt so badly that he couldn't risk the extra walking he knew he'd do in his sleep, so he'd begun seeking out the rest stops to lay down at the base of a sink in the men's room and wait until morning. All he had to do before he woke to his own inverse image in cold reflection was stand.

He'd shuffled out to that last morning and prayed to see a car parked in the off ramp, but there were only the obligatory blue trash barrels and the faded black "Don't Mess With Texas" signs. and flies. I shuddered when he mentioned them, but he didn't notice.

He'd shuffled down the road. It had been early morning and was growing uncomfortably warm already despite the dark clouds rolling up over the western sky. He'd longed for a town or a city, someplace with a shelter he could rest in for a while. His travels were finally catching up to him, and he hated walking in the rain besides. A few dozen miles back he'd seen a sign announcing "SAN ANTONIO—98." That was just before the rest stop. He'd been walking I-10, headed toward that city. There at the end, though, he was more intent on stumbling into a place called Kerrville, a name he'd seen on the sign just two miles back from the rest stop. His feet throbbed. A car had rounded the hill behind him. He'd heard it drawing closer. A gust of hot wind blew up behind him and stuck his neck, breaking his forehead into a chilled sweat. The wind smelled

heavily of ozone and rain, and he knew the storm he would soon be caught in would be terribly dangerous. He'd sighed, stuck his thumb out, and fallen to the ground.

When he'd come to he was leaning his head against the wire screen in the rear of a state trooper car, watching himself in the rearview mirror. A man sat next to him on the back seat, sweating and pale, leaning his head against the window.

"You had a hell of a fall back there," the trooper in the front seat had said. Something about his drawl had smelled sweet. "I must be a regular hero today, huh? You feelin alright?" David did the voice.

"Yes," David had choked, then cleared his throat, then "Yes, thank you." He'd turned his head, his forehead still on the wire divider like a hinge, and he'd looked at the man next to him. "What are you in for?" he said. The man had jerked his head full of wild and bulging eyes and glared at him. For a moment David thought the man had an ominous, panicked look on his face, but the man relaxed some, wiped his own brow, and smiled nervously.

"My name's Ray," he'd said. "I'm in for vomiting on the officer's shoes."

"Thass right," the trooper said in his cedar accent. "Poor guy's been drivin ahead a that storm for a long time now, and his car ain't got A/C. Ray here wasn't even drinkin anything but coffee."

"Yeah, I sort of personally overheated," Ray said. "What's your story?"

“I left my wife,” David had said. “Been walking around a while trying to figure out why.”

“Damn,” the trooper said. “You must think slow, mister. You look like you been walkin for a good long while.”

“About three years,” he’d said.

“Shoot,” the trooper said. “I tell you what! Bet you’d never go that far, eh Ray? Heh heh. Ray here, his wife set up this long road trip to visit some friends a hers, and she goes an gets sick. Sent Ray here to meet em anyway. Bet you’d like to just stay gone for a few years, too, eh Ray? Just disappear for a while?”

Ray didn’t answer. He just massaged his thigh and stared out the window.

“Say, Ray?” the trooper said. “You still feelin alright? Maybe I better take you to a doctor.”

“I’m fine,” Ray said quickly. “I’m fine.”

“Well, listen, maybe somebody oughta look at you anyway. Tell you what, I’m gonna have to run this other fella into the station to check im out real quick— Oh, don’t worry, you’re not under arrest, sir. Just policy. Anyway, there’s gonna be a physician there to check this guy out, Ray, so why don’t we just go there together. I can have that doctor look at you for free, and while he’s doin it, I’ll call your wife’s friends for you. How’d that be?”

“What’s going on?” David had said, lifting his head from the wire divider at last.

“We’re takin Ray here into town since his car ain’t workin, and you’re gonna see a doctor and answer a few questions. You’re not in any trouble, mind you, but you ain’t got ID, and passin out while hitchin rides don’t make me feel to good about lettin you wander the streets. What’s your name, anyway?”

Ray interjected: “Listen, officer, if you could just drop me off at a gas station like we planned earlier, that would be much better.”

“Now, Ray, there won’t be any harm in you seein a doctor, especially when the visit’s free. I’m gonna insist you get checked out.”

“I just want to go,” Ray said.

David had watched, nervous. Ray was sweating too heavily now, despite the heat outside.

“I know that, Ray,” the trooper said, “and you’re gonna go just as soon as you do what I tell you. Now, I’ll arrest you for throwin up on my shoes if I have to— Say, are you alright? You’re lookin awfully pale.”

“I need,” Ray said. “I need to puke. Pull over I need to puke.”

The trooper jerked the car to the shoulder and hit the hazards, then ran around and opened the back door for Ray. Ray grabbed his arm and leaned out the door. He struggled with a few dry heaves, then pitched forward and clutched for the trooper’s waist.

David had sat back in the seat and leaned far to the driver's side, trying to avoid the display. Then a muffled crack snapped and he'd smelled sulfur. Ray's door slammed, and a moment later Ray slid into the front seat and peeled away from the shoulder. He'd looked quickly over his shoulder and had seen the trooper on the asphalt, curled into a fetal position. The smell of sulfur stayed with the car.

"What the hell happened?" David had said.

"Shut the fuck up," Ray said over his shoulder as he pressed the accelerator. "I'm not going to jail. I've come too far now. I didn't mean to kill her anyway, it was an accident, and I'm not going to prison for an accident."

"She?" David had said. "That was the cop you just killed, man! What the hell are you thinking!"

"Not him, damn it. My wife. I didn't mean to kill my wife."

The radio sparked in a divine crackle, as though some greater force now sat behind the dispatch desk. "All units, be advised. Suspected murderer fleeing eastern Arizona in a blue, early-model Ford LTD, last seen heading east on."

Ray cut the sound.

"You," he said. "If I had to kill that cop, I mean if it was inevitable, I should have done it before he ever saw you. This is your fault."

"Hey, man, I'm just along for the ride. I didn't ask that cop to pick me up. All I did was pass out. It's fucking hot out there. What was I supposed to do?"

“Well, I can tell you pretty much what you’re going to do,” Ray said.  
“You’re going to sit back there and not say a word unless I tell you to. I’m in huge shit now, and I may need you to negotiate, but if you say or do one thing, one single thing, before I say so, I’ll shoot you. You got that, chief! One word, I swear. One move. You don’t even scratch your balls unless I say to scratch them.”

“Fuck you, Ray,” David had said.

“Mother fucker, I mean it! Not one word!”

“Man, I’ve been walking too damn long to give a shit.”

“Shut up!”

“I mean, if I’m gonna die here no matter what—”

“Shut up!”

“If you’re just using me as a body shield, then fuck you—”

“Shut the hell up, damn it!”

“I’d like to die doing something good—”

“I’ll fucking shoot you, man!”

“And die before you can do anything with me.” David had hit the cage.

“You hear me!”

“I’ll kill you!”

He’d hit the cage again. “Kill me! Go ahead and kill me!”

Ray swerved to the right, stopping the cruiser nose-first into the shoulder and leaving the trunk straddling the traveling lanes. He turned in the seat and pointed the pistol at the wire screen.

“One more, asshole. Come on. What do you want your last word to be.” He worked the nose of the barrel through the crosswires enough for the bullet to travel clean. “Think hard, shithead. Think real hard. Because when those lips part, I’m pulling this trigger, and whatever you decide to say will be your last word on this earth. So think real hard. Should I put this gun down and start driving again, or do you have something else to say to me?”

They were quite for a moment. The engine idled smoothly. Ray breathed in raspy, rhythmic breaths, short inhales, shorter exhales. They both blinked, Ray twice, David only once. He’d parted his lips, licked them with his tongue. He’d taken a long, deep breath, smelling the car and his own stink and Ray’s thin sweat and the metal of the gun barrel—even the checkered pattern on the plastic of the gun handle had a scent it’s own. He’d closed his eyes and leaned back in the seat.

He’d said, “Unfair.”

Ray fired.

Here in the After, thinking about his own death, David tripped on a cypress root and fell to his knees. He could still smell the smoke from the shot, out here in these woods. The river was close, just a few dozen feet, running lazy through a dark earth. The water pulled at the roots and weeds in a whisper. David felt

his forehead again. He was sweating, but there was no bullet hole, no blood, no brain matter. But he knew nonetheless. Something had happened to him.

He stood again and pressed on through the forest.

He'd come to in the back of my car. He remembered the cloth of the driver's seat, the bristly carpet where his left hand rested on the floorboard. He could hear the hiss of the tires on the highway. Before that—

Ray had squeezed the trigger of the pistol. It was black, it looked like plastic—a Glock? David heard the click of the release, the creak as springs jerked the hammer forward, the snap of the firing pin, the sharp crack as the gunpowder exploded—the metallic scrape as the crimped casing let go of the bullet, the thin whiff of air buried in the echo of the crack as the barrel spit loose the bullet. He couldn't remember the bullet coming at him (had he blinked?), but he felt the press of it on his forehead. No—he'd had his forehead pressed against the wire divider for several minutes. The pressure he'd felt was a ghost of that, just the blood coming back into his scar.

There was no transition. He could not fill that gap between the bullet and the back of my car. It was the same as his sleepwalking. He never remembered the trip, never remembered entering the rest stops or, later, when he slept in them on purpose, never remembered standing up in this sleep. He had no idea how he knew where the mirrors were, but he always woke up facing them. Except in my car. He had forgotten that—in the back of the trooper's car, he woke with his head on the divider, staring at himself in the rearview, but in my

car, he'd been face down on the back seat, staring at black and then, when he pushed himself up, at the gray of the upholstery. When I'd first seen him, after I'd whipped the car to the side of the road, I'd grabbed the mirror and turned it to him. and he'd seen me—not himself—in that mirror. Come to think of it, he hadn't seen himself at all since waking up in the trooper's car. Maybe he was still asleep.

“Stop it,” he'd said. Out loud. He heard his voice. It was tired, and his voice pulled at his throat a bit; he hadn't spoken in—how long had it been now? How long had he been walking? He had no idea.

There was the river. He could find his reflection there. He turned east but the river, even the cypress trees, were gone. The grass was thinning, the sparse trees low, wide things he didn't recognize, the flat canopies sweeping the sky above him like something out of an African movie. Cactus was sprouting, mostly pear cactus like he'd seen in Texas, but off in the distance, he could see other shapes. He looked back, but this was all he could see for landscape. He didn't know how long he'd been walking without noticing the landscape, but wherever the river had come from or gone, it was too far back to find again. A hot breeze pushed at his matted hair.

He pressed on.

His nose began to run, which surprised him; the air had gone dry and was irritating his eyes, which watered and ran sometimes like tears on his dusty face. He sniffed, then gave up and wiped away a thin string of mucus on his arm,

wiped that on his pants leg. The air was bright and seemed to glisten, like steam. He couldn't find the sun, but the sky had gone white with light, the trees gone entirely now, and he was sweating; his thin shirt stuck to his chest, his hair went limp and began to unravel into his eyes. The cacti were thick here, plump like some inflatable props—some of them leaked milk like perspiration.

The horizon broke. At first he thought it was a mesa, but as he got closer—and he got closer fast, much faster than he thought possible—he realized it was a building. Five stories. From this angle, coming on the building from straight ahead, he saw only one door, no windows. He needed to take a piss. He stopped at a cactus, a tall chute of a thing like a thin pillar, no needles at all, and pissed into the hard earth around it. His piss steamed on the ground. The building was still a long ways off, but he turned and headed toward it, and then he was there. Had he fallen asleep again?

It looked like an old office building, a flat box with walls the color of the baked ground and the door gray steel. He walked around it and found on the left side my old van abandoned to the dust, though it didn't look like it had been there long. It was filthy, but it was white, with dark windows. David wiped at his nose again; his pants were soaked with sweat. The van had come in from behind the building, its thin tracks running across a field of desert grass; back there, maybe a half mile off, he could see a road like an exit ramp or an industrial drive. He watched it for a few moments, but it didn't look like many cars ever came down it. This van might have been the last one in a long, long while.

On the fourth side of the building he found a column of five windows, the top three of which connected to a rusty fire escape that didn't reach the ground. The upper windows had no glass, but they were wired in with a lattice grill. The bottom two windows had the grills, too, but their glass was still intact. He peered through the ground window—the room was dark, empty, the floor carpeted in a thin neutral color that looked as rough and flat as AstroTurf. The room looked like a storage closet or a copy room, but it was just an impression. He could see an open door in the right corner, and through it, more dark, empty space. David knocked on the window. The glass was thin and hollow; if he knocked harder, it would crack. His knuckles left a streak of sweat in the glass.

He walked back to the front of the building, his pants sticking to his thin legs, and he tried the door. It stuck in its frame, but it was unlocked, and he shouldered it open, a thick patch of wet from his shirt marking the door, and the scratch of metal on the frame reverberated among the drywall and thin carpeting like the inside of a cardboard box. David's eyes were dripping freely with sweat and tears, and he was swallowing saliva now almost constantly. When he shouted into the dark corridor, his voice was slick and had no echo. He felt along the wall for a light switch but couldn't find one until he'd stepped a few feet into the corridor. He wasn't sure as first that it was a switch; it was round like a peg, with a small knob on the end, and it was surrounded not by a plastic plate but by a round dimple like a medallion around a chandelier. But it was the only switch he'd felt so he flipped it, and a dim yellow buzz flickered overhead, the lights just

bare bulbs dusted over and hot. He wiped his brow with one arm and his nose with the other. When he rubbed his eyes the sweat stung.

The corridor was short, with another door ajar just a yard in front of him; he walked through it into a T-section. The hall wrapped around square corners down either side, and the central room must have been a good twenty feet across. He heard a low bell and a mechanical slide, like an elevator. He shouted hello, but no one answered. Then he heard the doors of the elevator close again and he jogged around the right corner in the direction of the fire escape wall. He saw one door, on the right, which opened on the little copy room with the window below the fire escape, but no elevator, so he kept jogging to the back of the building. There, on the inside room, was the elevator, a flat gray box with a one-panel door. The button beside the elevator was missing, just a coin-sized hole in the flat metal plate, like a hollow eye socket. The elevator had no numbers overhead, no arrows to show direction. But he could hear it moving in there, the slow grind of cables on pulleys and the small bumps as it passed each floor. He called out again, his voice still wet. The elevator moved on without answering. He looked down the hall, back the way he'd come and down at the corner he had not yet rounded; he looked behind him; he looked up at the pockmarked ceiling tiles, the small sort maybe a foot square, their grid dizzying. The elevator gave a ping and the door pulled open. Inside stood a man.

He was dark, an Arab, David wasn't sure. He wore khakis pulled up to the middle of his paunch and a linen shirt open to the sternum, the one breast pocket

stained yellow. He was barefoot. He was nearly bald, only patches of hair on the crown of his skull and a long, thin sweep around the back, and thick eyebrows like small brushes, the hairs black like thread. He had a heavy face, the cheeks and eyelids pulled down—his expression was otherwise flat, without feeling. He was standing back in the corner, away from the door. David poked his head into the elevator then followed it with one foot, his hand on the frame.

“You run this place?” he said.

The man looked at him, then looked around the elevator and shrugged.

“This place seems to be in pretty bad shape.”

The man said, “Sorry, sir, but it’s not my fault, you know.” He had a French accent.

David looked at him. He looked behind him, then back into the elevator.

“Mind if I get on?”

The man shrugged. “No,” he said. David stepped into the elevator. The panel inside had lost its buttons as well, with just a light that pointed up or down. No numbers anywhere.

“This thing go all the way up?” David said.

“Well,” the man said, “really I couldn’t say.”

“You don’t know?”

The man shrugged.

David looked around the elevator. He couldn’t find anything to press, but then the door closed. They waited. The elevator didn’t move. The man was

staring straight ahead, not at David or at the door or at the buttonless panel, but at the space directly in front of his eyes. David watched him a moment, then waved a hand in front of the man's face. The man looked at him.

"How do you make this thing go," David said.

"Ah, you don't come from here?" The man smiled briefly

David shook his head, then laughed. "Jesus Christ, you can say that again pal." He swiped his sleeve across his nose; it came away sopping in a long streak. David rubbed his sleeve on his pants, looked back at the panel, then at the man. "Sorry," he said. "It's the heat, I guess. I'm a bit runny today." The man smiled, then stared at air.

David stabbed at the arrows, but they were only lamps. "Seriously," he said to the dark French man, "how do you get this thing to run?" The man just shrugged. "Aw, you gotta be fucking kidding," David said. He stared at the man, tight-lipped and breathing wet and hard through the one nostril that didn't drip. Then he turned and hit the panel with the side of his fist. The elevator jerked and rose.

The man said, "Thanks."

"Whatever," David said. They rode up a floor, and the car stopped. It opened onto a dark hallway. David grabbed the frame to hold the door and put his head into the hall, craning his neck to see to the corners, but it was black, the only light spilling into the corridor from the elevator. He pulled in his head and

looked at the man. “Your stop?” he said, his voice not so wet anymore but cutting.

The man smiled politely. “No,” he said.

The doors slid shut and the men rode to the third floor, where the door opened and closed again. David said, “You going all the way up?”

“Yes.”

They rode to the top floor, and the door opened. David stepped out of the car and held the door. The man smiled, and David said, “You getting off or what?” The man shrugged. “Fine,” David said, and he let the door shut, and the elevator descended into the building again.

He walked the dark corridor around the wall until he felt the door to the window room, which he opened. The room drifted with a dusty light, but like everything else, it was empty. David walked to the window and shook the grill, but it wouldn't move; it shed rust onto the sill. He went back into the hall and groped his way around to the other side until he felt a second door, which he opened into a small stairwell going up. He followed it to another steel door and pushed his way out onto the roof. His feet crunched loose gravel. In the distance, he could see the road was a tributary leading away from a highway and, if he was reading the cuts in the earth right, the highway ran back the way he'd walked, toward a horizon of trees. Ahead, it drifted off into sand, a hard dessert that pierced the far horizon with thin towers, buildings or plateaus he couldn't tell. Sweat dripped into his eyes; snot fell thin on his lips.

He pushed back into the stairwell and made his way to elevator, but it hadn't arrived yet. He could hear it working in the shaft, though. He wandered around the hall, but he couldn't find any other doors but the one to the stairs and the one to the window and fire escape. He walked back to the elevator and stood at it, wiping his nose and his eyes, waiting. Finally, the door slid open and the man inside nodded at David. "Still here?" David said. The man shrugged. David shook his head and got on, rode to the fourth floor, and got off without saying anything else. He wandered each floor in succession, never finding any doors but the ones to the fire escape. At the ground floor, he stepped out into the blinding day and felt his way around the wall of the building until he could squint out the van among all the white. It was the only thing out there, and it was empty. David walked back into the building and waited for the elevator—when it opened, the man was still inside. David got on and rode facing the man.

"Somebody come here in that van?" he said.

"Yes," the man said.

"So, why aren't they with the van now?"

"Well, she was getting on," the man said.

"So they just left?"

"Good work!" The man grinned like a fifth-grade teacher whose students had just learned to solve for  $x$ .

David thought for a moment—they were descending again. He said, "The people who came in that van, how old were they?"

The man shrugged. "Round about sixty."

"Son of a bitch," David said. He knew it was them, my old folks. The door opened on the ground floor again. He clapped the man on the shoulder and said, "Thanks, man." He turned to get off.

"Good evening," the man said.

David stopped and turned, his hand holding open the door. "Listen," he said, "don't you ever get off this damned thing?"

"No."

"Seems like a waste of time, you ask me."

The man frowned. "Thanks very much."

"Sorry, but seriously, this is a joke. Come on, we'll hotwire the van, I'll drive."

"No."

"You seriously can't get off this elevator?"

"Yes."

David shook his head and turned, the bell of the closing door behind him. He felt his way around the building again to the van. He pulled open the door and hauled himself inside, closed his eyes to the orange glow of his lids, and waited. He opened them, but it was just as bright outside. He pulled down the visor, tried the ignition lock without any keys, and it slid through the turn and fired the dusty engine. Like magic. He drove into the desert, wheeled a sharp right at the highway, and sped back down the road toward me.

### Chapter 3

I explained that I wanted to keep on going, to find an entrance, an exit, a beginning or end. I had no idea where I'd come from, where the spot was I'd woke up waiting for the van to arrive, so I figured that following the road was the other option, at least until we saw something new. Some place with answers, or a way out. Because I knew now there had to be a way out, even if it meant dying all over again like Aléjandro. Even if it meant changing the rules of this place. and David, who preferred to wander anyway, was willing to keep me company.

The van felt right, and I let David drive so I could watch the wakening world flash past, a brighter version of my first few hours here. We hurtled down the highway, my little red car long behind us and a gritty mushroom horizon blooming before us. When we passed the turn-off down the thin off-ramp that led to David's building and that man, the one trapped in the elevator, David pointed but said nothing. I said, "Do you want to go find that guy, try to rescue him?"

David shook his head, said, "He is what he is," then furrowed his brow, shook his head again and laughed. "I mean, the guy seemed content, Nessie. I'm sure he's fine where he is." and he pressed the gas a little harder until the off-ramp had slipped over the edge of my sideview mirror. I considered making him turn around—I wanted to see where the old folks had left this van, and where they might have gone next—but whatever was back there wasn't worth them

sticking around, so I didn't see the point in returning. and David seemed determined, driven; unsure yet just who he was and how he reacted to resistance, I didn't want to try and hold him back.

The sky glowed, though David seemed not to notice, kept complaining about the colorlessness of everything, even when I pointed to the scattered scrub—the last plantlife since either of us had seen since David's return—and the thin green it flashed at us. After a while—time was moving with us again, so everything seemed to happen at once and forever—we saw the nubs of twin mesas on the horizon, the birth of fang-points in the withering gums of earth.

“There,” David said, pointing.

I wasn't sure what he meant, and I didn't much like the look of this new feature, and I said so. But David pointed, insistent:

“That must be something,” he said. “That must be where we're headed.”

Whatever, I figured. As long as we were headed somewhere.

I said, “And there was no sign of the old folks, huh?”

“Don't know,” David said. “Never met them. But as far as I could tell, this was it—just this van outside that old building, and that old building hadn't been walked in for a long, long time, even with whatshisname in the elevator.”

I said, “I wish I could have seen it, that place.”

“No,” David said. “Trust me. You don't.” and he drove on.

As we got closer to the twin mesas, the sky grew more ocher, a broad brush of dust across everything. David's skin had gone tan, then deep red like

an old burn. It was darker every time I looked his direction, just a shade or two at a time, barely noticeable, but it was happening. I said so. David looked at his arm, then just laughed. “You see a lot of strange things, Ness.” So we road without talking for a while.

~

The peaks weren't as tall as I'd thought they would be—not peaks at all, actually, just a sharp rise and break in a single mesa, a pass through rock into a vast pebbly desert, scrub grasses along the edge of a road that was less and less distinguishable from the tawny highway. Off at the sideways lips of this new horizon I could just make out the ugly edges of a few mountains, disorganized as piles of rocks, but in front of us was just the long stretch of the highway lost among all that earth. We rode like that, silent and fast, for a long time, the world outside growing brighter and more arid the farther into it we pushed.

After a while, David reached for the dash, and I felt a push of air rush over me. I looked over at him, his fingers still near the knobs on the dash, blue lines shining.

“Hey, you,” he said. “Aren't you hot?”

“I wasn't,” I said, “not really.”

“I'm dust,” he said, “I'm parched, I'm burning up.”

“Maybe you're too much in the sun,” I said. “Maybe I should drive.”

David craned his neck up to the windshield, then sideways out his door window. “What sun?” he said. “How can you make out where the sun is—it’s all one color up there.”

“Maybe it’s just that you’re new,” I said. “But it’s up there.”

And so we drove, moving through the dust and sand like dust and sand ourselves, sifting our way through the grainy gold.

When we neared the twin mesas, David slowed the van and rolled off the road, the soft crush of dirt and small rocks under the heavy tires like the sound of velvet and packed snow. We stopped a van’s length away from the western peak—the left one, anyway, which had the feel of west for me, our direction south-like—and the old stone crooked over us like a massive thumb, leaning slightly toward the road. It was huge, but not mountainous at all, just a tower like a thin building about to topple. David stared at it, then leaned over the dash to look up at the twin across the highway, a good jog away, a thousand feet maybe. He opened his door, put one leg out then hissed and pulled it in, slammed the door.

“Jesus,” he said.

“You okay?”

“It’s fucking hot out there,” he said.

I tugged the catch on my door and cracked it—David grabbed my near arm hard and jerked me to him. “Don’t,” he said, “I’m serious.” But I opened the door anyway. It felt fine outside, or at least, it didn’t feel hot, didn’t feel anything.

It looked hot, though, the sky alight with a blue like the center of a flame, the ground brassy and gleaming. Then my arm lit up with nerves, the forearm David held tight, tighter, and he was breathing hard, his grip a brand on my skin. "David, christ, let go," but his eyelids had retreated into his head, left nothing but the white balls flashing, and he just held on, panting, and I pried at his fingers. He was bobbing his head fast, pointing with his whole body at the door, and I stopped grabbing at his fiery fist long enough to yank shut my door. His breathing slowed, his gaze relaxed, and I ripped myself away from him, the print of his hand red around the hot muscles of my forearm.

"Jesus christ," I said, "what the hell's the matter with you?"

"Too hot," he said, the breaths still short and forced. "Too hot." He pawed at the air controls, put the AC on full and fumbled till all the vents aimed at him, and he embraced the dash; I cradled my arm.

We sat there, both of us silent for a long time, the van's engine running low and steady, the rush of air through the vents.

The sky faded.

The desert outside quieted.

We waited.

David sat back from the dash, breathed long and even. I lifted myself into a crouch, careful not to touch him, and crawled into the back of the van. Stretched out on the rear seat, back to the dark glass and one arm over the seat back.

~

David said, hushed and without turning around, “It’s getting late.”

I shook my head, said, “There is no late here.”

He was silent. I said, “Even back at the inn, that night before the old folks left, I don’t think it ever got dark. I just didn’t pay any attention to the light.” He turned down the air; the engine sounded louder in the stillness. “It’s like fucking Alaska here, daylight all the time.”

David said, “Look.”

I looked. “It’s just the glass,” I said.

“It’s not tinted up here,” David said.

I leaned over the rear seat to see out the windshield, then scuttled over the seats into the front of the van. The sky had not just faded, it had dropped—a denim indigo swathed the whole sky save for a glowing rim clear around the horizon, no discernible direction, just a uniform halo encircling everything down near the ground.

“It’s like a lid,” David said.

“It’s never done this,” I said. “Not since I’ve been here anyway.”

We watched the horizon, but nothing changed, no fading or onset of night, just that constant halo of cornflower blue.

“Is there news here?” David said. “Like on the radio?”

“I don’t know,” I said, but then I remembered Paul Harvey and the old folks, and I remembered Foreman’s animal crackers. “If you want news, yeah, I think so.” I switched on the radio, but my music was gone. I scanned through the dials, flipped to AM, scanned again, back and forth. Everywhere, without pause, no individual stations; all we heard was the uniform static of dead air, like a needle at the end of a record. Not even silence, just that constant sound. When I looked away from the dials, the halo had deepened to sapphire and the cap on the sky had gone black.

“Where are the stars?” David said.

~

I shouted—not screamed, just a bark—but it was over, the memory, what the sharp crack on my head had triggered. I was awake. I hadn’t been dreaming, I hadn’t dreamed yet here, for all my sleeping: The memory, whatever it had been, had snapped, a flash of something in response to the flat slap of the window against my skull, or whatever this was that contained my thoughts—no idea if I really had a body—and then I woke up.

“What?” I said.

A man drove the van, not Harish, but almost as dark, a deep tan like a surfer or a hippie or a hitchhiker. It was David.

David drove the van.

He said, "Sorry. Had to swerve."

I looked out the window, but it was painted black, glowed neon blue at the corners. There was nothing out there. In front of us, sharp headlight beams like they'd been drawn there, hard and iridescent on the sandy highway.

"Swerve?" I said.

"Sorry," he said.

"Wait"—it was coming to me—"Wait, why did you have to swerve? You can't run over people here."

"Wasn't a person," David said. "It was a warthog, or a javelina, some kind of pig."

"Some kind of pig," I said.

"Are you—"

But I sat up and grabbed his arm, said, "Pull over. Pull over now."

He did, sand kicking up in the headlight beams as we skidded into the shoulder.

"What?" he said. The engine rumbled, a low growl.

"You saw an animal."

"A pig," he said. "Or something. I saw some javelinas in New Mexico, and once in Texas I think I saw a pig, what do they call it, a razorback."

"A pig."

"Something like that. Are you okay?"

“I haven’t seen any animals since—” I was still holding his arm in my fist. I let go, but I turned in the seat to face him. “Go back,” I said. “You have to go back and show me.”

“It was just a pig, Nessie. It’s probably gone by now, and I’m not even sure we could see it in this black anyway.”

“You saw it.”

“I saw something, a flash in the headlights. It could have been tumbleweed.”

“You said it was a pig. Turn back.”

We sat there in the dark, dials on the instrument panel painting David’s face in a chartreuse glow, a hazy blue glinting off the wispy ends of his hair. He was staring at me.

“What?” I said.

“Nothing,” he said. He put the van in gear and pulled hard on the wheel, spun us through the sand-worn asphalt until we were spitting through the black back the way we’d come. I watched the highway, gold in the cones of light and ink all around, a weird indigo bleeding in around the edges of everything I looked at. David slowed. Then he stopped. We sat in the van, idling rough, and we both scanned the road’s edge, David looking out my window as well as his own. Everything was dusty where we could see, a thin brush of sand in delicate sweeps.

“Where?” I said.

“I told you, it’s probably gone.”

“Where are the tracks, David? There’s no wind here, no real gravity, nothing to disturb them. Where are the tracks?”

“You said there wasn’t night here either, Ness. Where were the rules for that?”

“Are you sure this is even the right spot?”

“I watched the odometer.”

“Odometers lie.”

“What is your deal?” He was watching me hard, studying me. “Why are you so freaked by this?”

“Everything’s changing,” I said. “Everything’s different.”

“You can say that again.” He breathed, a sigh maybe but not that intense. “You know, I’m still not really sure where this is, what’s going on.”

“Yes, you do.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

But I ignored him, reached for my door handle and he grabbed my arm again, but there wasn’t the burn and he knew it, eyes wide but already relaxing and breath slow and deliberate. “What are you doing?” he said.

“It’s not day. It won’t be hot.” I pulled my arm free—“Let me go,” I said—and I leaned into my door, pushed my way outside into the dark.

It was nothing. Not hot, not cold—I was swimming in my own skin, or whatever passed for skin now. No temperature at all. The night was me. The

ground was my bare feet, the van in my hand a part of my arm, a huge white appendage spitting exhaust into my night. In the sand blown across the highway, glowing in the headlights, all I saw were thin ruts combed by some wind we now couldn't feel. I touched the van with my other hand, or thought I touched it—I could see my fingers pressed against the steel, but I felt nothing, all out there the same temperature. No idea how I maintained contact, but with that one hand pushed hard against the van, resistance in my dead muscles the only clue of pressure, I dragged my way around the back, where the tail lights glowed a cold, hard red across the sandy highway. Back there, I could just make out the long scraped troughs plowed in by the van's tires and the little hillocks and widened drag marks of the spot where David had swerved, but these were faint, as though they were fading from the memory of the sand.

I leaned against myself, the van. The black buzzed around my like a snow storm, the dark a physical presence pressing in. I realized I wasn't breathing, wasn't sure if I'd ever breathed, and I tried, took a long suck at the air but felt nothing, just the expansion of my chest and the drop of my diaphragm—if there was air rushing into my lung, if I had lungs, the air was the same temperature as everything else, the same as me—it was me. I was inhaling myself; I was inhaling nothing. The only change was the bitter taste of gas in my mouth, the back of my throat—the exhaust.

David said, "Nessie?"

I didn't answer.

He said my name again, came scraping his way along the side of the van as I had; I tipped forward a half-inch, the only way to know he'd touched my shoulder. I turned, but he was looking down. Out around the vermilion edge of the taillights in the sand, the road and the desert beyond glowed with brighter black. I stepped away from the van. The space enveloping us still was a stifling ink, but the ground had lightened in a broad circle, a disk of darkest blue glowing up out of the night.

"It's growing," David said.

"What?"

"I thought it was you, just the color of your skin or something in the dark, some way to see you, but it's been growing. I didn't notice it, really—didn't see it spreading out—but I looked over, and suddenly it wasn't you, it was this big circle of blue on the ground."

"It's not a circle," I said. "It just looks that way. Like in fog, you can only see the light so far."

"Nessie," he said, "I walked into this. It's still dark up at the front of the van, except for the headlights."

"Bullshit." I walked over to the headlights, the ground a blue haze the whole way, and I turned to point this out, but David was gone. I sucked air—airlessness—and made to call his name, but then I spotted the red glow of his sandaled toes in the taillights, and when I stepped back toward him, the bones of

his shins and knees, his hard knuckles, the hard edge of his nose came alight in a pale electricity of blue; I could just make out a thin glint in his eyes.

“See,” I said, walking toward him in the growing light, “like fog.”

David said, “I could see you. You were in the light the whole way.”

“You’ve been driving too long,” I said, then reconsidered: “I’ve been sleeping too long.”

“Nessie,” he said, then he cocked his head and squinted at me. He looked up, gasped. I looked up, too.

Far above up, a sliver the size of a dime, hung the hard bone of a moon, full and bright as though the moon I knew had compressed, had focused itself like a lens.

“Jesus christ,” David said.

“What the fuck,” I said.

~

The moon swung a slow circle, barely perceptible, growing just as slowly, never moving far from its central realm at the apex of night. I rode in silence, my forehead pressed against the glass and my neck twisted, gazing constantly upward.

David experimented, swerving into the desert to try and escape the spot of moonglow or driving sometimes with the headlights off, sliding smoothly through

the haze of blue, which rose like a mist with the sand we pushed in front of us until we discovered the light itself was ascending in a film, the blue ground reaching for the moon. But mostly, he kept his eyes on me, as though he needed to protect me or needed to reassure himself by seeing something close and human even if dead. I couldn't tell what. But he stared and stared.

I wasn't sure if we still were on the highway at all. The desert floor was soft, but in the swelling blue the highway had gone soft as well, and between David's experiments to escape the light and his constant watch over me, he'd either lost track of our direction or the surface on which we moved. It was the movement itself that was more important, as far as I was concerned, and I told him so, so he kept a foot on the accelerator and we slipped quietly through the lifting night.

"It's growing," I whispered once.

"I know," he said.

He touched my thigh, a brush of his fingers. I glanced at him, the briefest reprieve from my vigil of the moon, then shook my head, eyes already upward again, and said, "Don't."

He held tight to the steering wheel, pressed harder on the gas and drove through the blue desert night, sand scraping the sides of the van as it whirled up in our speed.

Still, he watched me.

Then I touched him, a hand firm on his thigh to get his attention—“Holy shit,” I said. “Stop, oh my god, stop for a second.” The van fishtailed in the sand as he braked.

I was out the door, into the night again, and David spilled after me but he landed in my seat. He pulled back and stumbled out his door, spun around the front of the van to find me staring upward, and he looked, too. The moon was huge, a vast slab of light that filled a fifth of the sky. We could hear a rush of air like a machine, like leaf blowers but muffled and far away. The air was tangible, a tinge of warmth. I pointed.

“Jesus,” I said, “it’s not the moon. That’s the fucking sky. That’s a daylight sky coming down on us.”

He stared, too. All we saw was light, no discernible edge between it and the dark of the black cap we’d called night, but the light was solid—it was not an aperture in the black like the night sky opening up; it was a new day falling over us, a massive bowl of light. David panted, and when I looked at him, he’d begun to sweat.

“Get in,” he said.

“David?” But he spun back around his open door and jumped into the van. He shouted through my open door—“Nessie, for fuck’s sake, get in the van!”—and revved the engine; the van lurched and the exhaust spat. I climbed in, hesitant and eying him carefully, but I shut my door and said, “I can feel it too, but David, I don’t think it’s going to be hot like last time.”

He threw the van into gear and spun sand into the glowing edge of black, and we spun a slow circle in the desert before the tires took hold and shot us forward with a grunt of the engine.

~

The sky fell over us faster as we drove, David racing as though he wanted to find the edge and slip under it into night again. He was frantic. I tried to calm him, but there wasn't much I could say—it's not like I understood what was happening. No one had mentioned this too me; no one has said this was possible.

I think what had David scared most, though, was that he couldn't ignore the day. Night calmed him, I don't know, maybe let him pretend this all was a dream, but now he couldn't escape it: This place was not normal. This place was not life.

What scared me most was that I still hadn't figured out what this place was. Those kids had called it After, but they never said what it was after. I knew I wasn't alive, but to be honest, despite what I'd told David—death was the easy explanation—I still wasn't sure I was dead.

But I was glad for the light again. In the daytime I could think; in the light, we could find our way, if there was a way to find. The old folks had gone this

direction, I thought—they'd gone some direction, anyway, which meant there must be someplace to go to.

David sped.

I no longer slept, or hadn't in a while, anyway. I watched the growing light, watched the glow from the desert floor rise higher to meet it until I could see the night as only a ring of black high up, where treetops would have been if there had been trees: Above the black ring, the hard blaze of blue-white day; below, the sepia darkness of the fading night. David pressed harder; I had no idea where he thought we were headed but was glad we were headed somewhere, and soon, the ring had become just the crayon outline defining the dome of day from the fading mist of night, a child's horizon floating above us. Then, even that was gone, the haze fading to tan and then the color of the sand itself while the hard blue of the sky broke into a mist and drifted down to blend what was left of dawn. Soon, the day looked like a settling sandstorm, the earth—or what we assumed was earth—sifting down to rest again, as though it had been day all along.

And then it came again, that creeping sleepiness, David slowing in the face of futility, nothing left to outrun, and the bright sunless lid of day setting hard on my eyes.

I started fiddling with the radio, but there still were no stations, just that gritty static. I tried David's trick of the air conditioner but the air felt stale and made me sleepier. David kept watching me, wondering if I was feeling all right I suppose, though he was beginning to unnerve me, to loom over me like an

uninvited guardian. Sometimes he would make a sharp turn, no reason that I could see, and he would bump me with his shoulder, far apart as we were in the van. "What the hell?" I'd say, but he shrugged or grinned or simply said sorry and drove on. It was childish. It was also far too adult.

Once, he said, "Nessie, do you remember what happened when you died?"

"I told you," I said, "I can't remember much of anything but trivial details or random associations. My name, something about a boyfriend I had once and a Mustang he drove, stupid things."

"I'm not talking about when you were alive," he said.

"No," I said. "I don't know how I died."

"I remember what it felt like to breathe," he said.

"You mean for real, the taste of air, that sort of thing?"

"No," he said. "Breathing period. I don't think I've inhaled in a long time. Not since the day came down, anyway."

I hadn't noticed. I remembered that moment at the back of the van, night crushed in all around me and the taste of exhaust but no air in me anywhere, but since then? I had the sense of breathing, if I thought about it, but it wasn't something I thought about often. Then I said, "Are you breathing now?"

"No," he said. He thought, I could see it in the twisted profile of his face, and then he said, "Doesn't make much sense, really. How am I speaking? Where's the air for words?"

“Maybe,” I said, but I couldn’t finish it—the idea was too absurd. After a few minutes, or hours, I said, “Why’d you ask about my death? I told you I couldn’t remember.”

“I remember mine,” he said.

“I know,” I said, “you told me. The gunshot, the state trooper, that nut.”

“No,” David said. “I remember what happened next.” This was the longest he hadn’t looked at me since he’d returned with the van. “I don’t know how long I’ve known, but I was thinking, and there it was—the transition.”

I turned full in my seat, one knee pulled up on my chair and my back to the passenger window. I didn’t say anything, didn’t ask. After a while, David said, “It’s complicated. It’s too weird.” He didn’t say anything else.

“David?” I said, but he was silent. “David, are you fucking kidding me?” He just shook his head, not even shook, just let it swivel a bit from side to side, his nose moving maybe an inch. “No,” I said. “Come on, man, what do you remember?”

“I wish I knew what it was like to breathe again,” he said. Then he looked at me, hard eyes. “I wish I knew how to feel things. I want to feel you.”

I stared back at him. I had stopped breathing. I was afraid to move; I hoped that I could just fade away. David drove without looking in front of the van—he drove blind, staring dead at me. I wanted to melt from his vision. I was scared if I moved, if I did anything noticeable to break his gaze, he’d snap, he’d do more than graze my thigh or brush my shoulder, and I thought I could handle

him, could handle myself in life, but this after all that, and I didn't know what would happen here.

His eyes went wide. He said, "What the hell?"

I leaned away, pressed myself into my door. I could picture myself creeping a hand behind me, finding the door handle, flinging open the van and spilling out into the desert, letting David's imaginary heat into the van to burn him up. He threw a hand at me and I jumped and twisted away, bent one arm behind me but I couldn't find the handle, fumbled madly and heard my breath coming fast in hisses, knew I looked wild, and I watched him, his hand, ready to duck or jump at him, anything, but he was pointing out my window. "Do you see that?" he said. "There are people out there!" He stamped the brake and I went crashing past his arm into the dash, my body pinning my own crooked arm between me and the big glove box, my hair—I could feel it—brushing against the glass of the windshield. The van spun long rocking circles in the desert, great sprays of sand flashing past my passenger window and cascading across the stubby nose of the van, until we slid to a stop. David was jerking his head back and forth, turning circles in his chair, then he crawled past me to the middle of the van and pointed out the long tinted window on his side.

"There!" he said. "Look, two people just wandering around out there."

I pulled myself up, held my arm though it didn't hurt, looked over my seat but didn't leave it. I saw them, little forms far out at the edge of the desert.

"They've stopped," he said. "I think they're watching us."

“Oh my god,” I said. “It’s the children.” They were so far they were tiny, and I couldn’t make them out for sure, but I could see they were short even from here, too short, child-sized, and I knew—I just knew—they were the kids. Tarah and Hadi. Following me. I wanted David suddenly, didn’t like him much and didn’t know what the kids could do to me that he couldn’t, but they scared me—terrified me, if they’d found me out here lost in the desert and them on foot—and I wanted the guardianship of David, or at least wanted him between me and those kids.

But David said, “Children? No, those are people, adults. Two men, I think.”

“David, those are the kids I told you about, the ones from the inn. Look how small they are?”

“Small?” David said. “They’re huge. They’re far away, but I bet they’re six and a half feet at least.”

But there’s no telling how distorted his view was. Maybe it was the tinted glass. Maybe it was a mirage—maybe neither of us was seeing them.

But I knew they were there. I found the door handle and wrenched it, pushed my way out into the day, and behind me, even after I slammed the door, I could hear David shrieking with heat. I walked around the front of the van, glanced once at the driver’s side windows expecting to see David’s face pressed leering against the glass, lips pulled back in a fiery grimace, but all I saw was black gleaming in the light like a beetle’s shell. The desert was empty too, the

kids disappeared over the horizon or into the sand or from our collective imaginations, who knew. But I wasn't ready to go back inside yet. I was tired, exhausted, but I did not want to sleep again, not yet.

I walked the desert, spiraling away from the van in slow circles. I wanted to figure out why David frightened me. I'd half lived in bars after my divorce, and I could handle men. I kneed my share of groins, even twisted a guy's arm in a wrestling lock once, something my dad had taught me—all these new memories, gone already—and David was wiry with the muscles of a practiced walker but he was thin, small even, only a half inch taller than me. He was nice enough from what I could figure—weird, on edge maybe, but he'd come back with the van to find me. He just wanted company. I couldn't blame him. I wanted company too, not his necessarily, but his would do. I looked around the desert, everything featureless and flat, then out on the farthest edge I saw two shapes again and the thing I thought was my heart jumped, my feet electrified, ready to sprint for the van, but something made me look again, and I realized I was seeing the twin mesas we'd passed through the day before, the gate to the desert. How they'd gotten over there I couldn't figure, but we'd been spinning aimlessly through the desert almost since we'd entered it, and while I wanted to know what else was out here, I was starting to believe we'd only find nothing, just more sand and sky, and those twin rocks were, at least, something to aim at. I walked back to the van, the spiraled tracks I'd left in the sand already fading, and when I got to my side I pounded on the wide cargo door.

“Coming in,” I said, and I slid back the door and crawled in the back of the van, away from David just in case. He was in the driver’s seat hissing, holding fast to the steering wheel; when I pushed the door back along its tracks to shut, he gasped, punched at the controls on the dashboard, and breathed long breaths for I don’t know how long. Many breaths, several minutes, maybe hours.

When he’d calmed down, I said, “Look, thanks for sitting tight. I was feeling cooped up.”

I didn’t turn around. He said to the windshield, “I didn’t sit tight. I was going to leave you.”

I sat forward, leaned over the rear seat, said, “What? You what? Fuck you, David!”

“The van is dead,” he said.

I was ready to yell at him again, ready to crawl over the seat and kick him out—I’d awoke in this van and I was ready to claim it my own—but I stopped just as I was rounding the middle seat, and I sat down, one arm resting on his headrest.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean it won’t start, it won’t turn over, the dome lights are out, the radio doesn’t even give static. The fucking AC. The whole van, it’s shot.”

We sat a moment, and then I said, “At least you’re breathing again.”

“No,” he said. “I’m not. But I wish I could.”

## Chapter 4

We sat in the van for a long time. I didn't want to open the door again and risk getting left, or risk pissing David off, or risk who knows what else. David just sat. Neither of us spoke. For a long time I sat on the middle bench, leaning one arm on the back of David's seat, and sometimes he would glance in the rearview at me. Sometimes he would fiddle with the controls on the dash, try to get the AC to come on, but it never did.

After a long time, my eyes started to blur, the lids heavy, and I crawled back to the rear of the van again and stretched out on the back bench. I drifted off. I was aware of nothingness for a long time, knew on some level I was asleep but saw no black, no orange of closed lids, no visions or dreams—just the clear blank consciousness that I slept. I could hear the sound of David breathing, or trying to breathe, and somewhere in my drifting consciousness I realized he was mimicking breath, sucking in and pushing out like he was giving himself CPR. Then, nothingness again. Then his breathing. and so on, forever.

Then, his breathing. I could smell him, not a distinct smell but a whisper in my nose that said, *This is David. He is here.*

I opened my eyes and he was there, his face hanging over me, the heat of his body—if it was a body—wafting down on me like a breath. I slid back, banged my shoulder blades against the armrest and my head against the wall of

the van, pressed my hands against his chest. “What the fuck!” I said. I pressed harder, but he just hung there, leaning against my palms, one arm on the back of my bench and one on the back of the middle bench, one knee on the seat between my calves. I pushed harder, said, “Get the fuck off of me,” and I was moving my knee to aim it but he sat back away from me, shook his head as though to clear it.

“Sorry,” he said. “Jesus, sorry. I was just getting a little stir crazy up there by myself.” He gave a small laugh. “You’ve been out forever.”

“Get away,” I said. I pulled myself farther against the side wall, sat up away from him. He held up both hands.

“Okay, sorry. You wake up grumpy, you know that?”

“Piss off,” I said, and I pushed him away with my foot. He laughed and stood to a crouch, worked his way around to the middle bench and knelt in it, leaning over the back to face me across the barrier of the seat.

“Listen,” he said. “You want to do something? I wish we had a deck of cards or something. Didn’t you say we could wish for things here and they’d just show up? I can’t seem to manage it—I’ve been thinking about cards for hours and I can’t seem to find any. Before that I was thinking about AC but it’s still out, and before that—”

“God, just shut up!” I said.

David looked at me. Then he grinned at me. “You are grumpy,” he said.

“You were going to leave me, and now you want to play card games?  
Fuck you.”

“Look, I’m sorry. I panicked. I was burning up, you keep opening that  
fucking door—hell, you’d probably be better off without me anyway. Look where  
I got us.”

“Yeah,” I said. We didn’t look at each other for a while. David turned  
around in his seat but stayed in the middle of the van.

~

I pointed past him out the side window.

“You see the twin rocks?” I said.

“What?” He looked, then said, “Is that what those were? I could have  
sworn they were people.”

“I saw them when I was outside. I thought we could head back to them  
and then figure out what to do from there.”

“Not much chance of that now,” he said.

“At least it’s a reference point,” I said. “Do you know anything about  
cars?”

“I’m not going out there,” he said.

“No, I just wondered if you had any idea what might be wrong. I worked on a few engines with an old boyfriend when I was in high school, a few with my dad—”

“You’re not going out there either,” he said. “You’re not opening that door again.”

I glared at the back of his head, but I didn’t say anything. Instead, I decided to wait until he moved to the front seats again, or nodded off, or something, anything to take his attention away from the sliding side door.

But he stayed on the middle bench.

~

When the cap had descended and the After was cool, I thought of running—David was worrying me—but I needed him to help me check the van.

In the inky black, we tried the lights, but nothing worked, and outside, we couldn’t even see the white of the van. David held hard on my arm, and I cursed him for it, but that pressure of his grip was the only way we knew the other was there. So on he held, and I grabbed hard at his arm too. He said it hurt, and I grinned in the black, glad to know I could hurt him too.

After a long time fumbling along the van in the dark, we both leaned against the side, exhausted. David was panting, though I’m sure he still couldn’t breathe and I knew he wasn’t hot out there in the night.

“Can’t you conjure up a flashlight or something?” he said. His voice was flat and cold.

“I’m not a witch, you prick. I don’t know how things work here.”

“Sure, but when you want some fucking crackers you know exactly what to do.”

“Fuck you,” I said, and I shoved him off and stepped away from the van, but suddenly, without contact of any sort and with no sense of temperature—no sense at all—I fell adrift in the black, swimming in an intangible nothingness, a primordial void. It was like my whole body had dissolved, had exploded into molecules and cut me loose. I was no longer Nessie. I was gone. This was death. This was not death. This was extinction. I screamed.

When David found me and grabbed my arm again, I felt like a thunderclap, like I’d slammed back together, fell from the sky. My dead but reformed body lurched, hurling me about like a passenger; I vomited. Dry heaved. Nothing came up, but I kept at it, sick to death, sick of death.

David rubbed my back, but I wasn’t soothed. Still, he held on, and when I’d calmed down, he helped me lean against the van again. I was gasping, weak. I spat several times, no saliva really but I spat just the same.

“What happened?” David said.

“Don’t,” I started, but I caught myself, amended myself: “Don’t take this the wrong way,” I said, “seriously, don’t get the wrong idea—”

“Okay,” he said.

“But don’t let go,” I said. “Not at night, anyway.”

“I won’t,” he said.

After several long, long moments, David said, “Now what?”

“I don’t know,” I said, but I did know, as soon as I’d said it. “We need to get back,” I said. “We need to get back to the rocks, to the gate.”

“We can’t see a thing,” David said. “And the van’s shot—we can’t fix it at night, and I’m not leaving it behind if day is coming down on us again.” He squeezed my arm harder, but I let him.

“So we push the van,” I said. “We know the rocks are off the driver’s side of the van, so we pull the wheel to the left, push until we’ve got it at a right angle, and then straighten out. When the moon—when the day starts coming down again, we’ll be able to see long enough to make sure we’re headed the right direction, and then we push until you can’t take it any more.”

“And what, push by night and sleep by day?”

“If that’s what it takes,” I said. “At least until you come up with a better idea.”

So we pushed.

When the moon-day opened up and started its descent, we corrected our direction—we’d steered too far to the left and the gate was just over the passenger mirror—and pressed hard, our feet sinking and slipping in the sand. Still, we pushed. I stayed by the open driver’s door and pushed against it, one hand on the steering wheel, no risk of the van suddenly working and David taking

off without me; I made sure David stayed at the rear, pushing on the passenger-side taillights. When the cap of day had come too close and David retreated into the van, I looked behind us—we'd pushed for hours, for what I'd have guessed were days if not for the newly changing light, but we'd moved only a quarter mile. In front of us, the gate was still a split mound, small as two teeth stuck upright in the sand.

~

I wanted so badly to sleep, the daylight oppressive and my vision so unfocused it had divided, split like I was drunk, but I kept my eyes open and stayed in some vague state of awake. David waited out the day in the back of the van, panting no-breaths and sometimes pounding on his chest. A couple of times he would shout Fuck! When he beat himself, but then, when the pinprick of night reappeared, he would relax, sprawl across the bench with his arms spread like wings over the seatback, and he would watch me lazily.

When the night cap had covered half the sky I cracked my door, and David didn't move. I pushed it open a few inches. David sat up on the bench, his eyes going wide, but I held the door firm and waited, and soon he sat back. He watched me, but he apologized, said, "I thought you were trying to go outside." I just shook my head and waited.

When the night was a little closer and David had relaxed again, I shoved the door open but stayed in my seat. David jumped across the middle seatback, fell face forward into the middle of the van, his shouts muffled as he landed, but he scrambled up fast and reached for me around my seat, said, “You bitch, what are you—” but then he stopped, a hand on my shoulder like a claw and his eyes bulging but otherwise he was fine, and his grip slackened, and his gasps slowed until he no longer breathed. Finally he sat back on the middle seat, moved his hand from my shoulder to my seat back, and I turned to face him.

“You’re fine,” I said. “Get over yourself.”

He considered that a moment, then said, “I’m hot. I’m really fucking warm. But yeah, I’m okay.”

“I’m getting out to push,” I said, and I slid from my seat to press against the open door of the van. It stayed soft but immobile in the sand, and I leaned into the van, peaked around my seat, and said, “Join me whenever to feel like it.”

David watched me for a moment, but I gave up and went back to pushing against my door, my feet slipping in the sand. After a few more moments, I heard the side door slide open, and soon we were able to rock the van into motion again, shoving it through the desert, inching toward the rocks.

In that evening, night, and morning, neither of us walking, David waiting silently and pushing hard against the coming day, we somehow crossed half the desert, the black desert floor growing rocky under our slipping feet and then the gates suddenly looming out of the dark in the blue moonlight as building-sized

spires. As the moon-day descended, we stumbled up onto the highway, and before David jumped panting inside the van, we'd gotten enough momentum that I was able to push the van myself, one fist tight on the door handle so David couldn't lock me out. This van looked new, and it was an automatic, so I was sure he couldn't pop the engine into life, but then, nothing here in the After seemed to be obeying any rules, not even its own, so I held tight just in case.

The gate rolled faster close, and when the sand gave way to clear asphalt, I got the van to such a running roll I was able to hop onto the running board and ride it for whole lengths, dropping down to push only often enough to maintain momentum. The fourth night was still only a dot, like the period of a sentence, when we coasted through the gate and David had to steer to keep us on the newly winding road.

~

We stopped about a mile away from the gate, the highway's shallow incline slowing my solo progress. David steered off the shoulder, rocks and scrubby grasses crunching under the weight of the van.

Inside, I rested on the middle bench, the van's keyring looped over my index finger and the keys tight in my fist. I panted, amused that I could tire in death, as David watched me from the front passenger seat where I'd made him

sit after he set the parking brake and opened the door for me. The black cap overhead was the size of an old vinyl album.

“Where is this building you found?” I said. “Where you found the van. Isn’t it up the highway here?”

“There’s nothing there.”

“Even so,” I said, “I’d like to see it anyway. and it would be a place to rest—you know, to get out of the day.”

“I don’t want to go there,” David said. “Wouldn’t you rather find a place with a bed?”

“I suppose,” I said. “But the building we know, you know anyway, so at least that’s a start.”

It was like going backward—it *was* going backward—and I worried I might never get anywhere, because the highway seemed to head straight into the desert and disappear, and I hadn’t found any hint of what might have happened to Aléjandro. and now, with the night cap coming and the After changing itself faster every day—Aléjandro might be lost forever, and I’d be trapped in this arid limbo till I became some desiccated plaything for David to ogle.

“Still,” I said, “we made it this far. No thanks to you.” I smiled and kicked a foot in his direction, trying to placate him. Backward as it was, I needed to see what he’d seen at those buildings. I needed to meet the man on the elevator. and seeing those people in the desert, the children maybe, terrified me, because if it was the children they were stalking me, dangerous, and if it wasn’t them, they

reminded me of what the children had said, their warnings of what lay out there in the After. For now, I preferred someplace familiar to at least one of us.

But David was becoming a danger, too.

“What was it you said earlier?” David said. “Don’t take this the wrong way? But you were sexy as hell out there, pushing this van.”

I sat up on my bench, said, “Look, we need to get something straight.”

“I said don’t take it that way,” he said, holding up his hands, and I remembered him leaning over me in the back seat, then backing away apologetically.

“I know you said that,” I said, “but that doesn’t make me feel any better. Let’s be honest here, we’ve been through a lot, and we’re the only ones we know”—I saw Aléjandro and Foreman, one dead, another disappeared—“but we don’t know much. Hell, you barely know me.”

“I’m not saying that,” he said. He wouldn’t look at me.

“You’re just making me nervous, is all I’m saying.”

“I’ll cool it, okay?”

“Good,” I said. But I gripped the keys tighter in my fist.

David turned forward and leaned to gaze up out the windshield. “It’s getting bigger,” he said, “but I think it’s dropping slower than out in the desert. I can’t tell.”

I didn’t bother to look. I knew it was coming, fast or slow, sooner or later, it would be dark again.

~

“Listen,” I said. The sky outside was indigo, only a curtain the height of the van window left under the hard cap of night. “I need to sleep, and I was thinking, since the temperature outside is okay now, maybe you could spend some time out there?”

“Holy son of a bitch,” David said.

“Look, it was just a suggestion, all right?”

“Nessie, there are stars.”

I slipped off the seat, wanted to leap and in my mind did leap, but the rest of me was so heavy I could only drag myself around, and I leaned between the front seats to look up at the night. There were stars, a scattering of pinhole lights like glitter. David cracked the door, testing the air, then jumped out into dusk.

“It’s like snow frozen in the air!” he said. He spun circles, like he was trying to take in the whole dome at once, a big loopy grin on his face like the one he’d worn when he first came back with the van. I crawled up into David’s passenger seat and leaned heavy out the open door, looked up into the glittering night. It didn’t look like snow to me—it looked like tin foil stretched behind a colander, flat and artificial and cheap. But as I watched it, the stars narrowed and focused, and gleamed. If they kept refining themselves like that, they would indeed become beautiful in time, might even look like stars.

We would have to wait and see.

In the meantime, I shut David's door and locked it, pushed the button that locked all the doors, and while he stared at the van and then, stupidly, ran for his passenger door and started tugging on the handle, I fumbled slowly around the seat to the middle bench and curled up in the center of the van like I was riding out a hurricane. Sure enough: David whirled around the van, ran circles, pounding on the glass and the sides, jumping sometimes to drum on the roof, shouting then screaming then bellowing then crying—"What the fuck!" or "Nessie, why?" or the simplistic "You better open up you bitch!"

~

It took him most of the black, black night to calm down; already the ground was aglow with the electric blue of the descending moon-sky when he was quiet enough that I dared to crack a window and speak to him. He was leaning against the driver's door, his knees against his chest.

I said, "This is how I want it." I said, "This is the only way I can get any sleep, and David, I need to sleep." I chewed on the words as though drunk, each one slow and deliberate but still indistinct.

"Fuck you, Nessie," he said.

I rolled up the inch of window and started working my way back into the heart of the van, but David stood and knocked, polite and careful, on the glass

then backed away from the van. I watched him, watched him for several minutes, but then I inched down the window again.

“Sorry,” he said. “I’m sorry. I understand.” I eyed him. He put his hands in his dirty pockets, said, “Just, please let me in when the daylight comes.”

“We’ll see,” I said.

He nodded. We would see.

~

I slept for hours, days maybe except the disk of moon-sky overhead still had not descended. It was taking much longer than before, was pushing down slow and sluggish as I had pushed my way into the van, everything so weary now. I slept and slept, and David paced outside the van forever. Once I thought he left, heard the absence of his gritty footsteps, and I woke to catch him hiking back to the gate. I clung to the inside of the van, my eyes just above the window frame. When he reached the huge sandstone teeth of the gate, he pressed his whole body against the rock, his arms outstretched and his legs spread on the ground, hugging the rock in a distant X. Then he walked back and forth, embracing each gate several times. Then he wiped his brow, looked up into the dome of sky, and started jogging back the mile to the van, picking up a heavy stone along the way, hefting it from one palm to the other as he ran, studying it.

By the time he reached the van I was sitting with my legs dangling out the open side door. He held the stone behind his back and dropped it in his wake, and he slowed to a hesitant walk. He held up his palms as he neared the van.

“Are we cool?” he said.

“Yeah,” I said. I could hear my own voice vaporize in the desert air, weak and out of breath, but I smiled as he approached. “Thank you for the space. I didn’t mean you had to leave, but I appreciate the space.”

He smiled, too, nodded.

“It’s okay. I’m sorry I went nuts—it’s just the heat. It’s like it gets inside me and burns its way out—I was just scared of going through that.”

“I know,” I said. “I’ll only sleep at night.”

He pushed his way into the van, but I climbed out and tossed him the keys.

“Put her in gear,” I said. “I want to get to that building up the road.”

David didn’t say anything. I think he knew I was frightened, no matter how carefully I placated him. He put the van in gear, and I pushed us slow but obdurate up the highway until we stopped again for the descending night, just a mile now from the ramp that led to David’s building and the dark stranger on the elevator.

~

A tattered gauze of clouds too thin to be fog but low enough to gather the light of the street lamps swept down from the black. I heard music floating around outside my head, “Night on Bald Mountain” crawling into my cold ears, and I watched out the dark side window for the stars to shift, the sky to unfurl, and a chalky black satan to loom grinning over me. But there was no satan, there was only David, grunting and thrusting with such fury he must have been in pain. His shirt was off, his chest hollow so I could see the hard knobs of his breastbone and the thin pull of his chest muscles in his orange skin. I pushed, he was thin and my size and I pushed against him, twisted my legs, but he was on me hard, hands pressed into my wrists and his knees on my knees, driving me open, but I was open already, caught in my sleep, and he was shouting and gasping with some horrible pain. I was glad, glad I was hurting him. I prayed for vaginal teeth, sharp little incisors lining me like a lamprey’s mouth so I could chew him bloody, devour him to a stump. I twisted, cried out softly, my wrists ached and my uterus convulsed, and the thought of him in there, bitten off by a rabid vagina and trapped up there forever—I choked back vomit, closed my eyes and the clouds came closer, became fog, I knew though I could not see. The cold knock of his belt buckle tickled my calves; his shoes rubbed coarse against my bare feet. I didn’t know where my clothes were—my pants, my underwear. I still wore a shirt. We were like negative images, me thick and pantless, him bony and shirtless. I kicked up my knees, but he was on me hard, heavy, a burden on my breathing so that I had to concentrate on only that, inhale, exhale, stay

alive—stay dead, whatever I was—just stay, endure, and then I heard a short burst, a blast of air, and I smelled it before I felt its soft warmth against my knee, he'd shat, like a woman giving birth and unable to control any functions but the necessary ones, he'd shat between my legs and whatever was flowing up into me was thinner and warmer than semen, and I did vomit, turned my head, me politer than him, I puked off the edge of the seat while he screamed, but he kept at me, the stink and that horrible burning wet between us nothing worth stopping for, he was driven, for all the new cool drift of night air, the sky out there like a normal night from when we were alive, clouds gliding past and fog on the glass, his precious breeze at last but still he was ablaze, and then I passed out at some point, plummeted into a well of sleep and dreamed that Aléjandro was in the fog, had come down to blanket me, any excuse for the weight but what was really happening.

~

This was how Nessie died. She escaped David by remembering, but remembering was just as bad. She had been writing a Book on men's movements, the bare-chested warriors inventing bloody rites in the deep Appalachian forests. Pseudo-Natives who thought in violence lay their awakening, in pain their brotherhood. and Nessie had infiltrated them, played the thin computer geek trying to find masculinity. Thin theatrical beard, wide glasses,

layers and layers of clothes. They'd ribbed her at first and assumed Nessie was gay but left her alone; some even encouraged her when she came across as shy or embarrassed. Determined to make a man of her. Until they'd seen her piss in the woods.

It was all Nessie knew. The act itself was gone, exorcised in death. Or maybe she'd just shut down as it happened, came the After then the same way Nessie left the After to relive her end. I don't know. But she woke in the woods, her face pressed into darkness and her arms caught beneath her the way she used to in her sleep as a child—except that, as a child, her wrists had never been bound in duct tape. Everything smelled wet and earthy, like leaves and soggy bark and earthworms. The air was pregnant with an autumn breeze, which every so often kicked. Her abdomen was sore and her thighs ached, and she knows without knowing that she had been violated, pulled apart and jabbed deep—too deep, she thought, but it was hard to tell for sure. Everywhere else, out on the surface of her body, the skin was numb with the chill of the wet autumn earth. Her nerves clenched and her arm twitched suddenly, and she knew that somewhere up on her shoulder a nicotine patch is still stuck to the flesh, even though it must have quit working hours ago. She didn't know how she remembered about the patch.

She struggled to stand, and in doing so realized she was wearing a skirt. Somehow that felt strange to her, unnatural, but she could feel the flesh of her inner thighs rubbing together as she moved. She thought that she should shave

when she got home. She wriggled on the ground like a grub, squirmed her knees up and under her so her face was again nose-down in the dirt. She pushed with her shoulders, with her chin, careful not to put the full weight of her body on her face so she wouldn't choke in the earth, and she pushed with her knees. Her legs screamed and trembled, and she screamed and trembled, her voice exploding in the darkness. Birds in the trees above her burst from cover and fluttered through the branches—their flight added depth and echo to her pain. Her groin burned, dripped, and she thought she might be bleeding, but she decided it was only the wet and the mud, so she bit her lower lips and clenched her fists tight and dug her knees again into the ground. She remembered a biology course in college when she learned that a woman's center of gravity is in her hips, not her chest, and with this encouragement, she managed to raise herself to kneeling. She blew air through her nose, but not much dirt worked up into her nostrils. The air carried some new odor, something acrid and dizzying. In a moment she knew it: gasoline and vulcanized rubber. That gasoline smell was strong, like it'd been spilled or just recently poured, but she can also smell how far out she is, hear it in the wind, and up the swells from the little valley she was in she could see only trees and a vast carpet of fallen leaves. It was the car, with a leak perhaps, out of gas now perhaps, having hit a ditch or a rock along the way, so that whoever took her had to walk out on foot. Ha, she thinks as she rocks to her heels, to her knees, to her heels and stands at last in the pliant dirt. She would walk out, too.

She tread the soft, wet earth barefoot, leaning up against the car after a few paces. She was not wearing a skirt. Her cargo pants were open at the seams, rent between the legs clear up her crotch so they hung loose around her. She wore a button-down shirt that once was white and once had buttons going up to her neck. Now the shirt hung open just beneath her bra. She wondered why her breasts weren't bared for the rape, but she saw this bra was a rear-hook thing, and the man must have ripped open her shirt in the middle of the act. Otherwise, she thought, he would have cut it open, too, and she would be bared for the world to see.

The car was long, blocky, a Lincoln perhaps—black like a funeral car, like a government car. She felt weak, and that worried her. She probed along the cold, polished metal for the catch to open the trunk of the car, thinking she might find something to undo her hands. The trunk lid is already open—she must have ridden in there. The carpeting in the trunk was soggy, and underneath it, the tire spongy and porous in the damp. There was no tire iron, no jack lever, no kit of tools. Other than the tire and the carpet and what must have been her smell, the trunk was empty.

She slid along the passenger fender and fell into the car through the open back door. The car had leather upholstery, and it creaked when she sat on the back seat. Her toes were cold. The seats were slick and damp; the car door had been open a long time, and the dome light had drained the battery. That meant no cigarette lighter, no way to burn through her bonds. Thinking about the

cigarette lighter made her want a cigarette, made her yearn for one till she shakes. She wished the patch had not run out, and she thought how funny it was that she never realized how well the patch worked in the first place. and then, from that one floating, disembodied memory, she discovered she did not remember who she was. Not a name, so little past, not anything but her nicotine patch and camping with men and how she slept as a baby and somehow, for some reason, a lake with a monster, like Beowulf or The Creature from the Black Lagoon. But these things weren't enough to tell her who she was, who she is.

She contorted, doubled over herself to hang out the side of the car, and she opened wide her mouth. There was a scream trapped deep in her throat somewhere, but only the bass of it could squeeze past her terror, and a low, shaky moan scratched out into the wind. Her eyes were pinched shut, her cheek flared in cramped fury, and her neck stretched taut. She pulled at her arms and twisted her wrists in a rage, suddenly desperate to wrench them free. Her skin tore and burned above her hands, her breasts shook. The dark in her eyes had a new color now, a reddish gray hue, a blend of the wind in her clothes and the blood in her skin. She pushed and writhed, but her hands stayed bound. Then her head banged against the frame of the rear passenger door, and she fell out of the car to her knees. She stayed there and sobbed, but only for a moment. Soon the wet cut through, and she inhaled long, held the breath until she calmed. Finally, with a warm but hissing exhale, she stood and leaned against the fender near the door.

She pushed off the fender and walked, slipping at first in another muddy footprint. Her feet were cold and caked with leaves, but she was glad to feel them. The rest of her body down there was gone. She didn't know which way to go or even why she was leaving, since she was unsure where she was or where she needed to be. Then, in a flickering panic, she realized the men who took her might still be in the woods. They were walking, too, she thought, and she didn't know how far ahead they were or which direction they went. Or even if they left at all. They were survivalists all. But so was she.

She broke into a dead run, threw her feet into the ground with a fury, pounding out her escape. Let him follow, let him come. If he saw her run he might think she could actually get away, and he might kill her, and then she wouldn't care who she was or where she came from or if he was following her, because she would have escaped her body at least. But almost immediately she slammed herself into a tree and bruised her nose and right cheek. Her heart pounded deep and low, and she choked on a little hiccup. She listened, sure if he were following her, he'd be laughing aloud at this. So she would not die. Not yet, anyway. She heard water, she could smell the stagnant pungency of a creek or a small, slow river. Her nose felt invaded by the smell, but she pushed toward it. Her legs ached; between her legs ached. Then her feet slipped quick down a short slope and found freezing, running water that led into a sucking mud at the bank. She pulled her feet free and stepped forward into the river, onto the icy river rocks that wouldn't let her keep her footing. Her knees were cold; then

her buttocks clenched at the water, then a cold, antiseptic burning pushed past the numbness between her thighs.

She stepped forward again, anxious to get the burning done with and herself across the river, but she tripped on a rock and went under. The water was brown streaked with the gray light of the dying day, and it was beautiful. Her feet touched the bottom, and she bent her knees while blowing out her breath until she was low enough to push off. Bouncing like Neil Armstrong, she pushed her way forward across the river until her nose, then her lips, then her face broke the surface and she breathed the air. Wet from the river, she was nearly frozen, but she didn't care because she also was clear-headed, ready to do what she must do to get away from these woods, to get to whatever home she might have somewhere.

The clouded sky grew darker as she watched, and she knew that night was near. Wet and barefoot and barely covered by her ripped pants and button-down, she would freeze there in the night. Not that she would notice, not that her skin would care. But she knew that if those men could hike out, civilization could not be so far she couldn't walk it, and if she ran in the right direction, she might find it. So she ran in whatever direction felt right to her, her shoulders swinging hard because her hands were still bound behind her. She wheezed, and soon she began to cough, a deep, hacking cough that scratched at the inside of her chest. Her abdomen clenched again, her heart throbbed low inside her, and she still could remember who she is. But still she runs on. Down inside her

abdomen, down below her stomach and back behind her intestines, she felt something that surprised her, she got a bit of insight before she remembered what condition she was in. She knew she had lost the baby. and in that same moment, she found another clue to her past, to her personality: Somehow, the loss was almost a relief.

She could no longer feel her legs—not even her feet—not from numbness of the cold but from a deeper numbness in her limbs, a rotting numbness, as though she were dead and only her legs knew it. Her lungs hurt more even than her groin; they burned against the cold air. Ahead, she saw a dark hill, and across it came sounds strange to the woods but familiar to the spectral echoes of her memory, sounds not made by trees and dirt but by wind on asphalt and gravel. She saw nothing over the crest, but she smelled exhaust haunting the autumn air. She ran up the hill. It was only a small hill, just a short rise in the earth, but it took her a long, painful time to reach the top. When she broke through the treeline at the summit, she fell on her knees, not in weakness but at the sight of the little paved forest road. She pulled herself up and limped to it. The asphalt felt like spikes of ice pushing up into her—the road did not hurt the soles of her feet but reached up deep into her ankles, reminding her that she still had them, that she still stood. She walked forward, down the road toward the lighter part of the sky.

A car came. She heard it around the bend, the sound coming through the trees, and she wasn't sure how far away the car was or even if it was coming her

direction. But it did come her way. She stood in the middle of the road, not moving, not even ready to jump clear. She knew the driver would stop. There was no choice now. She clenched her fists in the sodden tape behind her back. Her hair dripped into her face and she tossed her head to clear it from her eyes. She smiled weakly. Her knees came back to scream for a moment, and her face changed, twisted in pain and confusion, but the knees left her soon and she exhaled suddenly, surprised she'd been holding her breath. Her heart stopped beating too; it just stayed clenched down low in her chest, like it was cramped. But it was going to be all right—the car stopped in front of her. It was a squat dirty bubble of a yellow car, but she couldn't remember the name of this car any more than she could remember her own. But she didn't care, not about the car or even about her own past anymore. The car was here. She limped over to the passenger window and she turned and thrust her bound wrists against the glass. She knew the glass was cold, but her hands had lost feeling now, too. She turned again, pleading with her eyes, waiting for the window to come down so she could explain. The man looked at the driver with wide, worried eyes and whispered something to him. The driver looked at her, then at the passenger, and the passenger yelled so loudly the sound carried outside the car where she could hear it. *Drive!* he yelled at the driver.

She was all alone. She didn't have the strength to run after, not even a few steps. She just stood there, watching. The sound of the car has gone, leaving little in her mind but exhaust, the smell of the fumes. A pain stabbed into

her head, long and jagged from the temple through her brain and back up to her right eyeball. She clutched her head and sat down on the road, not caring anymore how cold the asphalt was or how brisk the evening breeze had become. She could no longer feel any of it, anyway. She coughed a deep, single cough, a loud thing that tore at her lungs and nearly pushed her clear past her rib cage. She coughed again and spit. There was blood on the road now. The pain in her head had subsided, relaxed into a calm throb. She closed her eyes for a moment and tried to breathe. She could not run anymore. Her muscles had gone, left to wherever her skin went, her legs went, her heart went. Besides, there was nowhere to go. She would wait. Another car would come, with other frightened people. Maybe one of them will listen. Maybe. It was getting dark now; the moon was beginning to rise, but it remained obscured by the trees for the moment. She hoped it would rise fast above the trees. and it did. But by then, she had collapsed backward onto the road, flat and twisted with her legs still tucked beneath her. Her eyes were closed. Her breath no longer fogged the cold night air. Because she no longer breathed.

~

As day broke open in the After, clouds floated low, and I tried to slip under again, back to the living world. But I didn't—this time *god* I stayed awake. I gripped the headrest of the driver's seat and pulled myself up from the middle

seat in the van, careful not to look in the rearview mirror, knowing what I would see there: My eyes clouded smoky marble blue like a blind dog's, like the fog against the glass. My legs throbbed against the rough upholstery of the seat. I knew this feeling.

I knew rage. I wanted David—deep in that dull thick mind rage burned, smoking my eyes and slowing my limbs but bringing my thoughts to boil. I wanted David—I wanted his eyes to look like mine, clouded dead blue. I edged off the back seat and knelt in the floorboard with the driver seat on my back. The sliding side door was open, and outside the van, the sun broke the clouds and filtered into the fog, turning everything a hazy morning red. It stuck to me, the mist of this red fog drifting through the wide side door; it wet my skin and turned my shirt and hair dark, murky. I knelt in the back seat, oil, a wet shadow. I lowered my face from the cowl of fog and pretended my tears were rain, condensation on steel. My knees hurt from the carpet of the floorboards. I hurt everywhere down there. The darkness, the red of the fog and the black of the sun, wrapped over the wet of me. and the fog thinned, turned a wounded pink, and then became only a whisper.

I pulled myself up and crawled over the middle seat toward the rear of the van, then crawled over that too, burrowed into floor space at the back, ripping at the carpet and the hinged board over the spare tire, and I dug out the car jack—a scissors-and-screw contraption. I hefted the jack, slid back into the rear seat and then worked my way out the wide door with my sore legs and set bare feet on the

gravelly asphalt drive of the rest stop. The jack felt heavy in my fist. I was sheathed in the black of the sunshine. I went looking for David.

The highway was thick with pebbles, asphalt gone astray. They pushed into my tender feet, feet not used to walking, not like this. But I walked on, walked and walked, because it was the only thing I could do. David had not given me a choice—he'd left open the door and burned out the dome light and killed my engine. So I walked. I walked until the pebbles pressed up into my feet, walked until I bled. My feet mangled, betrayed by my heavy body, I plodded forward on the asphalt, through the lifting morning haze. I would not walk the weeds at the roadside, I would not take that easy path through all this. Bleeding, I could be purged; in the weeds, I would only collect stickers, burred seeds clinging, clinging. But, once conceived, the idea of carrying seed seemed the better way. David wanted that, suddenly, for me to drift into the weeds, to follow him there. I felt it. He forced the idea upon me. I knew where he was.

The jack held down my hand, dug into my grip, but I turned it, hoisted it up to my right shoulder and carried it on my back; this way, I plowed into the thick weeds where the sticker bushes hid. I would wade right through them, push deep into the woods beyond the highway, find that man who raped me.

He raped me.

I felt rivulets of warmth, enraging tickling warmth, on my hand where the jack hung. I had squeezed a cut into my fist, I was bleeding from my palm now. I screamed. I reached back into my lungs, deeper, into my stomach, deeper, to

the deepest part of the woman, the past and future of a woman, and I birthed a horror of a scream, and I ran on my bloody feet through sticker weeds and burred seeds and plunged into the woods with the jack raised high, and I saw a tree, a tall thing split in the trunk, branching up like legs splayed high, and I screamed at the trunk and I swung with the jack and I brought the weight of the screw-and-scissors down hard against the bark. I broke through the sheath of the tree, I split wide the bark at the spot where the trunk split in two, and I tore loose chunks of the meaty wood inside. I cried, I cried, my legs shook and I cried, and I leaned my bloody palm against the torn gash of the tree to hold myself up.

I was the apple in Snow White, plucked and poisoned, a worm burrowed inside.

Ahead I heard the giggle of a stream, a mocking laugh of wet and cool, and I stalked after it, down a slope of sharp grass. When I found the stream, I looked across it, up a slope into a thin wood and beyond it, another road. I'd found a rest stop. I plunged into the waters and I heard a gasp, for minute my own until I recognized it, and I saw the shadows shift in the trees and David emerge walking backward, almost falling up the hill, his hands held up. He was saying something, I didn't know what, all I could hear was a tide of blood in my head, the rush of water at my feet. The weight of the jack in my slick fist. When I raised it, I could see the blood in two long streaks down my forearm. I think I was grinning, or maybe I was grimacing; it could have been tears.

I jumped one-footed from the stream and hit the slope in a sprint, the jack cocked over my shoulder like a baseball, like a shot put. David shouted “Nessie, wait,” but I charged, and he turned to run ahead of me. I could hear him calling over his shoulder: “Nessie, oh christ, I can’t, I don’t know what happened, oh shit I’m sorry, please I’m sorry” and he stumbled coming up onto the road, where the asphalt rose an inch or so off the grass, and I was closer. “Nessie, Nessie, I want to make it up to you, please god you gotta listen—” I pitched the jack and hit him in the spine. I heard the crack like knuckles popping, and he pitched forward the way cowboys do in Westerns when they’ve been shot in the back. He hit the road and rolled and I could see the gouges in his palms and one cheek where his skin had broken and peeled away, no blood in there, just open flesh. I scooped up the jack and ran to stand over him. He lay wincing, then stopped, and breathed. He sat a bit higher, one elbow on the road, one hand raised in salute, in surrender. “Nessie god just wait a minute,” he said. He looked around him, then he looked back at me. “Jesus christ, Nessie, I don’t know what to say, please.” He sat up straight now, picked a bit of skin away from his open palm. He said, “Maybe, I don’t know, maybe I could just let you kick the shit out of me, torture me, I don’t know. I mean, hell,” he said, “you could fuck me over forever, I guess, because it’s not like I can die all over again.” He coughed, but it sounded like a quick laugh, like he was surprised he’d forgotten he was already dead. I put a hand on his shoulder, and he touched my knuckles with his fingertips, and I bent my knees a bit and lifted up and I swung down the jack hard into his skull,

which shuddered in small, quick jerks and then came apart, David's eyes wide but empty and then farther apart than before, his skull a cleft melon, opened like halves of an egg with the skim fluids of his brain cavity running down his nose and cheekbones, pink and streaked with threads of deep red. He hunched over, then fell sideways, his eyes still open, his mouth agape. I knelt to look at his partitioned face, the blood running strong out the rift in his skull but no expression outside, no brain matter on the inside that I could see. I stood and dropped the jack on the street. I cried. Behind me, a door swung wide and a woman came wandering out from the rest stop, her eyes blinking in the light, her hair rustling like dried hay. She looked at me a moment, but I turned away. There was a wide stone, a boulder half-buried in the dirt and bleached in the light, or maybe it was just made that way, or maybe I'd made it that way. I sat on it and put my face in my hands, the tears running down my arms and the blood from my right hand smearing on my cheek, my right eye. I heard the woman say, "Hey, christ, are you okay?" I think she was coming closer, her feet shifting through the loose rocks on the asphalt drive and into the dirt. Then she said, "What the hell? David? Oh my god, David? No, no!" she said. I looked at her. She was kneeling on the drive and flailing her arms over David, like she was doing some holy incantation though I knew she was just afraid to touch his body, and I didn't blame her. She was missing her right breast, I could tell through the dark shirt she was wearing. "Don't," she was saying, "don't you dare, oh god, don't you leave me again!" Her shirt went darker where her breast had been, and I

realized it was blood, David's I figured though she hadn't touched him at all yet, and then I saw the shirt balloon like a wind had gotten caught up in there, but it never settled down—her breast was back, but she never noticed, she just wept and so did I, even as I pulled myself off the rock and went staggering out to the highway.

I stopped watching where I was going. When I wasn't crying, the tears crusted over like dried brine and stuck my eyelids shut; when I was crying, all I saw was a fluid mess of a world. Sometimes I'd stumble off the road through the last of the weedy dirt and into the desert itself, but I'd always drift back onto the highway. I didn't walk long. Just enough. Then I tripped. I fell into the sand and a man shouted and I kicked my way back until I could sit, my breathing came hard, I wished I had the jack again, something to swing. The man's French voice said, "Wait, it's you, wait."

"Back the fuck off," I said. My voice was a wad sticking in my throat, a low croak that frightened me. I stood up quickly, made a hard fist of crusted blood and with my clean hand rubbed away the dust from my eyes. The man was sitting on the ground where he'd been when I tripped over him, his dark skin like wet sand. He was bald and paunchy, but I didn't want to trust him. He wasn't even looking at me—he was looking back down the road, where the woman from the rest stop was limping after me.

"Well, you taught her a lesson, all right, and that's what you wanted, isn't it?"

“What the hell are you talking about?”

He pointed to my bloody fist.

“I didn’t do anything to her. I killed a man.”

“Yes,” he said.

I watched the woman coming on, one arm down low and heavy. I said, “Are you with her?”

“No,” he said.

I watched a bit more. Then I said, “She has the jack, doesn’t she.” He nodded. I said, “She knew David somehow?” He nodded. “She’s going to kill me.”

“Naturally.”

“Good,” I said.

He stood and I drew back my fist, but he smiled at me. He pointed to my fist and said, “You don’t want to leave yet.”

“Fuck you,” I said.

He shrugged. Then he said, “You need to leave this place. Not After, just here.”

“Do you know who that is?”

“That’s not who you need to worry about.”

“I’m not worried,” I said.

“You should be. You should get out of the desert, out of the heat.”

“I’m not afraid of her,” I said. He nodded. I said, “Do I know you?”

“The man in the road did,” he said. “I’m glad you did what you did. He needed to leave.”

I started to cry again, just the hard tears pushing over the lids and my lips set firm against shaking, my jaw muscles tight.

“Look at me,” he said.

“I am.”

“No, look again,” he said. I stopped crying, confused. He pulled his head in a backward nod over his shoulder, and I looked into the desert. The jack lay in the road a few hundred yards off, but the woman was gone.

“Now,” he said, “run.” He started sprinting back toward the rest stop; I stood and watched him. When he got to the jack he stopped and looked back, waved me to him. I turned and started walking away into the desert. I could hear him back there, pounding and huffing to catch up. “Stop,” he called. “Stop,” and two hard, long breaths, and then “that’s not” and more breaths and “a way to walk,” but I walked anyway. He caught up to me, and I whirled on him, punched him in the chest, and he backed off, but stayed with me. “Not that way,” he said.

“There are people this way,” I said. “We saw people in the desert, he did anyway, and I’m going to find them. I’m going to find what’s next.”

He shook his head, still breathing hard and leaning now on his knees.

“They’re out there, so there must be a town, a city maybe, something damn it, and I’m going.”

He nodded now. “I,” he said. “Know it.”

I stepped off the road toward him.

“You’ve been there?” He nodded, his breath coming back to him now. I stepped closer, said, “You know what’s there?”

He nodded again. “A dingy sort of town, to my mind.” He stood up off his knees, took one more long breath, and sighed. “Masses of pigeons and dark courtyards. and the people have washed-out, white faces.”

“Sounds great. People is what I need, washed-out faces or not.”

He shook his head again. “Not them,” he said.

“You sound like some kids I know,” I said. “I fuck them. and fuck you. If whatever’s out there is as scary as everyone thinks, then good, because maybe then I’ll find what Aléjandro found—a way to die.” I turned and kept walking. He did not follow. After I’d gone a few dozen feet he called after me.

“*Au revoir*, then.”

~

I walked forever. It was hot, not David’s heat but I could feel it building, wanting to sweat but dry inside, but I walked anyway. All I could do was walk. If I stopped, I’d feel something between my legs that wasn’t movement; if I stopped, I would be dead, for real, for good. It was all I could do. Walk. Then I picked up a road, and because I no longer wanted to think, I followed it, let it drag me through the desert until I looked up and realized, horror, the teeth of the gates

growing into the hot blue sky. I was back, I had circled or the world had circled, I was caught in a loop, After and After and After. Somewhere ahead was the van, and fuck it, I walked that way, wanted to see where it had happened, wanted to die all over again. After once more. My feet were made of grit. If it was still hot I didn't know it; if it was still hot, it was my heat, coming off me in lines like a mirage—I radiated heat, I was on fire, fuck the moon, I was the sun. Then I saw it, the gleam in the blue, the white of the van, and I trudged on, feet dragged through dirt, kicking at the patches of grasses and rolling my ankles on rocks. But it wasn't the van, not the one I'd died in. It was just the shell of the van. David had said it was dead, but here at last was the corpse, stripped as though by vultures, the rims gone, the hood agape, the doors torn loose, the glass missing, the seats gutted, even the smell, David's smell, his shit and the piss and whatever else he'd left in me, in there, all of it gone to sand. So I turned, and I walked on. Toward the gates, through them, deep into the desert. It was all I could do.

Book 2

## Chapter 5

If the cap came down, I didn't notice. I closed my eyes to light and walked blind, my naked feet buried hot in the sand. I could feel everything for the first time, the heavy swing of each arm, the slick roll of each eye behind its hot lid, the grains of sand catching under my toenails and digging in, the folds of skin enveloping each granule, pearls growing in my feet, the burn of David burrowed inside me, the swollen hurt he'd left up there, the hairs pulling long from my scalp, the soda-fizz tingling from the tiny eruption of each dying cell in what would have been my body if I was still alive. My eyelids hummed orange for miles, then settled blue for miles more, hummed and settled, so something was changing out there, but I kept it walled away, outside me. I stumbled through the desert, hoping that no direction would be direction, that I could wander myself toward the old folks, toward the little silhouettes I'd seen in some forgotten distance, toward whatever city the dark French man had warned me against—somewhere.

I walked down, the surface of whatever dropping at a slow slope. Sand gave way to hard baked clay, to rocks and broken slabs of earth. I waited to pass out. I yearned for that drowsy apathy I'd felt when I first came here. The moments, the days just after I'd died and before I knew I'd died, after I'd been raped and before I'd been raped, that hazy bliss of empty-headedness bracketed

in the hard realities of there and here, then and now, life and whatever this was. Something caught my shins and I spilled into the sand; I thought, finally, I could pass out, or maybe even die for good. My shins hurt, bruised, but then they were fine, and I was standing already, numb to reason, holding onto what I guessed was a short pile of stones, gritty and warm in my palms. I didn't see it—wouldn't see it. I brushed dirt from my knees, put my calves against the stones, and walked on. and on.

I felt bloated, constipated, what good a shit would do me here. My feet shuffled through the sand, my legs rubbed against each other. The vast black of my closed eyes a constriction—I could not breathe, but of course, I didn't need to. Still I sucked at air, pulled in my stomach and pushed my breastbone against the air. I tried to raise my arms to clear the dark away from me like cobwebs, but the arms did not raise. My legs had stopped as well. I was not vertical. I lay, pinned and helpless, and I opened my eyes, the bowl of the night cap nearly on the horizon, only a rim of cobalt left above the desert, and in the cerulean light I saw a bony hand, long fingers like insect legs, press down over my eyes. The thin voice a whispering hiss: "Sleep, my child." and I did.

~

I woke but remained asleep, dead but dreaming anyway. I raised my hand to rub my eyes but my fingers wouldn't connect. I tried again, my arm bent

at the elbow, my wrist turning and fingers stretched toward my face, but I couldn't find myself. I opened my eyes and saw I was strapped to a chair, my wrists corded to the armrest. I said "Wait" then "What the fuck?" but it was only in my head. I couldn't find my voice; my throat had closed, my lips had dried and crusted together. Two men carried my chair from each side, the wood legs straddling their thin shoulders, their arms gaunt but tight with muscles, like cyclists or acrobats. One had a growth like a goiter on his bony nose, the whole structure rotted orange in the sun. The other had massive eyes, shining goggle things that gleamed dark over his bristled mustache. His skin was so pale it looked green like blanched algae in the blistering radiation of the day cap. That voice hissed behind me.

"She's awake."

The chair wobbled and we stopped so I lurched against the straps. The two carriers shuffled like spiders to turn me around, and I faced a spindly woman, her ribcage showing through her thin black shirt, her pale gauzy hair like a Halloween wig over her jaundiced, bony face, her cheekbones twice as wide as her dark eyes and her jaw like a shovel head. Behind her was the cracked, gravelly desert—it was all I could see.

"What's going on?"

"We're taking you home," she said.

"Finally," I said. "Where's home?"

"You'll see soon."

I said, “Lady, cut the crap. I’ve been through enough in this After, and I’m sick of mysteries. I just want this all to be over with. I’m ready to die. Can we do that?”

“Not for you,” she said. “But for others, I hope.”

The chair was pivoting; I strained and crooked my neck but couldn’t see the woman. I said, “No, come on now, just let me the fuck down. I’ll walk wherever you want—I’ve walked far enough—but this is ridiculous.” We were moving. “Where’s the French guy? The balding Arab guy with the French accent?” I could hear the woman behind us, scuttling in the sand on her long, wasted legs, and the two carrying my chair were hustling ahead of her, but no one said a word. I jostled my chair, pulled at the cords on my wrists, tried kicking my feet. We marched on. “Look,” I said to the air ahead, “what if I said I needed to go?”

“We are going,” the woman said.

“No, I mean, what if I needed to take shit?”

“You don’t need to take a shit.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Honestly, I feel pretty bloated. I need to do something.”

The woman darted ahead and turned to walk backward, facing me. Her mouth had cracked into a V; her black eyes shone in the light. She said, “When we get to the City, we’ll see what you need to do.” She pulled her long fingers through her hair, a few wispy strands trailing out, caught in her grasp. Then she

slipped to the side as we bounced along. When I was beside her she raised her hand, those hairs still caught there, and said, “Sleep, my child.”

~

The City was a rabble of mud-brick alleys and useless, solitary pillars, but it felt vast. It might have been the everlasting edge of the After, or its long-forgotten origins. I tried again to leave my breath alone, because here the air was crowded with dust and ash from some unseen fire. The City whistled with the filthy zephyr that pushed and turned through its streets and alleys, its glassless windows and empty doors. I saw a broken cart lying beside a splintered gallows, and I laughed until the woman jabbed her fingertips into my spine.

“There is no laughter here but what he decrees, and he never decrees that any should laugh.”

I said, “You have got to be kidding me.”

“There are no jokes.”

I laughed again, loud and full of breath—my laughs sent the ashen air swirling away from me. The carriers dropped my chair; it cracked and fell at a slant so the seat hit the road, and the two ran for nearby doorways. The woman had stuck a bony finger in each ear, clear to each second knuckle, and she shrieked. I pulled at my straps and managed to fall on my side, but my hands

were secure to the chair's arms. I kicked at the ground until I could kneel, laughing still, and bent and rocked until I'd broken the arms from the seat and stripped my bonds away. I was cackling now, genuine laughter at the absurdity of everything. I stood to face the screaming woman, but behind her I saw a dim lanky creature sprinting toward us, and I turned to run. He caught me from behind, a crack like a crowbar across my shoulder blades, and when I hit the dirt he was on me, scooping me up with something like care, predator and paramedic at once. He clapped a hot, gloved hand over my mouth, and I heard the woman, her hiss raspy now, say her words again, and I slept.

~

The room was dark, but I couldn't tell if we were deep inside away from windows or if the night cap had fallen. I couldn't see anything but graphite walls slanting in toward a low ceiling, and a rough wooden picnic table in the center of the dirt floor. I heard whispers from the corners, but I couldn't decide if it was people talking about me or just insects scuttling inside the walls. I was in another damn chair. I laughed.

“Stop that!”

I craned my neck in time to see the lanky man slide into the room from a door behind me. His voice had been loud and full of bass, but it rattled like the clicking of a June bug. He was tall and fluid in his gestures, but he was skinnier

than any of the freaks I'd met so far, skinnier even than his skeleton ought to have been. He looked like someone at the end of an old movie on TV, where the full width of the frame gets jammed into the tiny TV screen and everything looks stretched and unnatural. He stood between me and the picnic table. His bald pasty head glowed at the crown, which cast the rest of his withered face in shadows, his shrunken upturned nose only visible because of the gray triangle it cast on his wide upper lip. His chin was tiny. When he spoke, it dropped and rose like weights on a winding clock.

He said, "There is no cause for laughter in this place. We are born to suffering until we die."

"You're already dead," I said.

"And still we suffer, so still we live. I will not tolerate happiness in this place," he clicked.

"Not even for a moment?" I said.

"A moment is worse than none at all, a moment is fleeting, and when it is gone, we not only return to misery, we return with the memory of what we no longer feel, and so it adds to our torture." We stared at each other for a while, him glowering with his long gloved hands folded at the hem of his long gray shirt. He didn't breathe. For a few long minutes he watched my feet, his eyes going to slits. I looked away to the corners of the room, tried my damndest to look bored. I heard rustling like wings, but it was only the people in the shadows sifting into

the murky center of the room, congregating behind the picnic table, but instead of watching them, I squeezed shut my eyes and tried to yawn.

The man turned to them once, spinning on his heels, then he swiveled back toward me, thrust out one long arm, and said, “I am rude. You do not know me.” He slid forward one soundless step, his stretched legs draped in ancient linen pants that dragged in the dust, covering his feet, which seemed never to leave the floor. He pushed his open hand at me. I stared at his fingers, then looked at my own hands, which this time were not bound to the chair. I raised one to my face the way I did once as a kid in a tourist cave when they turned the lights out—another memory, no purpose to it at all. I laid the hand on the chair arm and with the other slapped the man’s hand away. I rose from the chair but the man shoved me down again.

“We are not finished.”

The swarm behind the table whispered in clicks and whirs. He slid back from the chair, those pants dragging small ruts in the dust, and he folded his hands at his shirt hem. We both waited.

The swarm hushed. The room itself seemed to breathe, the walls expanding and contracting.

The man watched me. Sometimes I watched him. Other times I watched the people behind the table. Mostly I stared into the corners.

“My name is Phineas,” he said.

“Peaches,” I said.

“You are here for your trial,” he said.

I shot from my chair but was already sitting again when I realized he’d slid forward to push me down. The crowd clicked and buzzed. Phineas composed himself before the picnic table and said, “Please, sit.”

I gripped the arms of the chair. I said, “Asshole.”

Phineas leered at me. “You killed a man.”

I glared.

“You killed a man in the road, just outside our desert.”

“Prove it,” I said.

“Look,” he said, and he laid open one upturned hand to gesture toward the floor beneath me. I looked down and saw David under my chair, one arm loose between my feet and his sallow, naked ass beneath my right elbow. I sucked air and yanked my knees to my chin, my feet on the seat, and I panted wide-eyed. David’s skull was a gaping rift, but inside it was dark and hollow like a chocolate Easter bunny. His head was twisted full around on his dead rubbery neck and his face oozed like soft wax. I gritted my teeth, tears dripping onto my knees, and spat on David. “Fucker!”

“What we want to know—”

“Mother fucker!” I screamed, leaning over the arm of my chair.

“Madam—”

“And fuck you, Peaches!” I screamed, facing the man now. “What the hell do you want with me?”

The man turned, stretched back an arm toward to swarm, and said, "Tanith, please."

The woman who'd ushered me to the City slipped from the crowd and held up both hands and said, "My child, be quiet."

"Piss off," I said, but it was almost a whisper. I pulled my knees tighter against my chest and trembled half with rage and half with nightmarish confusion.

"Now," Phineas said. "We have existed here a long time. None of us knows how long, only that some have been here longer than others. None of us has ever known why we are here. Those of us who remember anything remember only wandering in from the desert, pained and burning almost to blindness. Here, we have found some small respite, though we suffer still. There is no water, of course, nor food, yet always we are thirsty, or hungry. Sometimes, one of us would wander back into the desert, only to return scorched and deformed. Sometimes, one or two of us would disappear altogether. I have seen it. They are there, and then they are not, and there is only a stirring in the dust and ash like a small whirlwind, like a dust devil, and then that too drifts away in the hot desert breath."

"Do it now, then. Blow away," I whispered.

"One thing we know," he said. "It is always light here. Horrible, scorching light, light we could not escape even within the walls of these old buildings. Until some short time ago, when a blackness like a cupped hand came down and

snuffed the light. We drifted in the streets, marveling, cool and refreshed for the first time, and we were near to rejoicing until the hand opened up and let spill again the light. Then came the hand, then it opened, and so on to this very moment. Is this day and night, as some of us can remember from some lost time before this place? We know not, nor do we know how this descending change came to be. Light and heat and this existence are all we've known forever.

“Then a few descents ago, a woman wandered in from the desert. This, of course, we'd known before, but this woman came to us from beyond the desert, which all here had long thought endless. She came to us and said, 'My husband has been murdered.' Murdered! There can be no death in this place, for many of us in our frustration or delirium have tried to kill ourselves or others. We have leapt from buildings, but the ground cushioned our falls. We have strangled each other but never have run out of breath. We have walked into fires only to find ourselves unharmed on the other side of the flames. Our existence here is miraculously tortured. But this woman who came to us had witnessed the impossible.”

“Where is she now?” I whispered.

“Soon after relating her nightmare and directing us to the man, whom she'd dragged into our desert as far as she'd had energy to endure, the woman—like many before her—wisped away into dust and ash. We sent a party into the wilderness to discover the body, and there he lay, glorious in his horror,

blessed in his grotesque death. and we were amazed. So we sent out that same party to discover you, the Bringer of Death.”

“I had to do it,” I said. “He...” I trembled.

“He what?” Phineas said.

“The fucker raped me,” I said.

“Did he?” The crowd behind the table took to buzzing again.

“He raped me, and he deserved to die. Not like Aléjandro.” I was crying as I shook, my thighs crushing my bloated stomach and my knees clenched hard against my breasts.

“Alejandro?” he said. “This is another man? Another you have allowed to die?”

“That was an accident,” I said. “Like a heart attack, except I guess we don’t have hearts anymore, but I didn’t do it, not on purpose.”

“You admit, though, that you have been present at two deaths.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Yes.”

“And this man at your feet—you did this to his head?”

“The fucker,” I said.

“Then you must tell me how. You must tell me what we do not know, you must show me that which we could not perform.”

“No,” I said. The buzz from the people behind him grew more frenzied.

“You do not understand. You are a harbinger. You have whatever this place can give you, yet that was not enough for you. You took the one thing this place cannot offer. You created the power to kill.”

“I don’t want it,” I said. “Leave me alone.”

“You cannot choose. It does not matter if you want it. The power to kill is a problem you must learn to exist with. What we want, as punishment for your murder, if you like, is to share in that power.”

“Maybe I’ll just kill all of you and be done with it,” I said.

“Destroy us all, or make us devoted slaves. It does not matter. But do not punish us for coming into this place too soon, before the After was ready for death. Now is the killing time. Now is the time to claim this place for our own, to command the descent of light and dark as you do.”

I stared at him, the tears hard on my skin, my teeth set firm again. I said, “Peaches, I don’t know how. You’ll have to learn to live with that.” The swarm shuffled and chattered in a fury behind the table. Phineas slid one leg forward and leaned toward me, his long arm and one hard finger aimed at me.

“You are lying!” he said. “You are lying through your teeth!”

I stood on my seat, searched the dim space for somewhere to jump, some way off the chair that didn’t involve stepping on David. Phineas leapt weightlessly backward to stand on the picnic table, his spear of arm and finger still aimed at me. The swarm shuffled backward and spread away toward the corners, hissing and clicking furiously now. Beside the table, Tanith rolled her

eyes back and raised both hands, her lips trembled, but I didn't know what she was trying to do. Put me to sleep again? It wasn't working. Phineas said, "You are guilty of murder, and we all will rejoice in it."

"Whatever you say, Peaches," and I jumped to the empty space between the picnic table and David's noncorpse, landed hard on my bare feet but ready to run anywhere, backward or straight through the throng, but Phineas was already on me, his long fingers strapped around my wrists. Then Tanith had my ankles, and as I screamed, she wrenched my feet from under me and they carried me like meat, the horde singing and clapping around us.

They spread me on the table, arms over my head and feet stretched off the edge and into the air. My stomach ached. I wanted to puke, and I tilted back my neck so I could puke on Phineas. He didn't look at me. He watched the center of the table, looking up at Tanith from time to time, and I writhed and screamed and cried, the pain in my stomach swelling and tearing at the seams of my flesh. I did puke, a watery paste that splashed on the floor, ran in my hair—some trickled into my nostrils and I raised my head, choking on tears and trying to blow the vomit out my nose. I looked down—my stomach was distended and red and pulsing with my crying, thick sobs and snot washing out my nose, sticking to my contorted lips. The others crowded closer and throbbed like a gang of dancers at a nightclub, and they would not let me up, I knew what Phineas that long fucker wanted, his bony fingers and his slits for eyes, it was happening again, it would always happen, I was in Hell and always had been,

even when I was alive, and there was nothing I could do about it. Someone else took my wrists, someone from the frenzied throng, and the long fucker worked his way around the table, tracing his fingertips down my shoulder and ribs then up along my engorged belly, and then someone had taken my ankles from Tanith the bitch and she was running up my thighs oh god and there they both were kneading my stomach and leering at each other, and then Nessie passed out though I remained, a buried witness, and we were two consciousnesses, Nessie and me, but only I heard the words, hissed from that fucker Phineas: “She is growing even now, and soon we will have a murderous Brood.”

~

There were two breaths. One was mine, the other hers. Only I was aware of this. She drifted in a warm oblivion, safe for a time. Nessie, love, you got taken, you'd been had. They had moved us to a larger room, and they were learning to manipulate their reality, I wasn't sure how. They still couldn't think to leave the desert, but they were commanding things into being, and soon, they said, we would have a temple of our own. In some respects, I think I was helping them. Perhaps I wanted a temple; a temple sounded nice. Grand. Spacious. Full of emptiness, room to grow. Yes, they were changing things: Once, they pressed mud into bricks by hand, but now they were thinking great stones into shape. Once, they wore whatever they'd arrived in, but now they were imagining

new clothes, outlandish costumes of tortuous beauty. Nessie never knew she could do as much as they were doing now, but she was the first. Soon, they would learn how to bring forth from the dirt whole buildings, and our temple would be finished. I looked forward to it. Still, I feared them. I knew what their purpose was, I knew their malicious intent. They sought to kill, to have power over death in death, to layer death upon death. They wanted to kill so they could feel something again. I didn't know if they were ready for what they would feel.

Days like that. They called them "descents," but Nessie knew them as days, and I preferred her word. Days and days, nights and nights, a string of Citizens trailing out the door behind our chair. At first they only stared, or touched Nessie's bare toes or the open cavity of David's head, for his body remained undecayed beneath the chair. In time they brought her items they'd created from dim memory alone—stone muffins, alien toys and misshapen chairs, cold torches, mutated chipmunks and rats and miniature poodles—and they destroyed their effects before Nessie as homage to her murderous power. Soon they made only animals, trying desperately to imagine life, and the temple began to smell of urine and fur and saliva and fear, and still they came, bringing and killing javelinas and armadillos and buzzards and wombats, all of them deformed but animate as though they once had lived.

The people argued endlessly with each new creature made, debating whether these creatures were living things dead or a series of new species, born of death and never alive. Fights broke out, and many discovered some

version of injury, some shade or consistency of blood, but none died, and tensions rose.

Then: They burst into our small room, daylight pouring after them like boiled honey, and Tanith pushed through the horde to stand before Nessie. The Citizens were frantic, dancing in a hot panic. Tanith's hair was a wild nest of ashy wisps and her cadaverous face glittered with dozens of spikes and hoops and bars that pierced every ridge or orifice. She held a thin stone leg broken at the knee from some imagined statue and she swung it like a conductor's baton, gesturing with her words like a song. "Bringer," she said, "Too long have you sat silent—you will speak to us now." She swung her stone leg close to Nessie's head, and the horde hushed. Nessie's eyes were open, but she did not see, and I did not know how to make her speak. Tanith said, "What do you know of children who wander the desert?" Nessie flicked her eyes toward Tanith but made no other motion, lulled in our mutual stupor. Tanith swiped with her leg again, pushing air over Nessie's nose. Her hair wafted back. She did not speak. "We have delved into the desert," Tanith said, "probed the limits of our known space, and in the distance we have seen two small children, always still, always afar. But they are getting closer, as though they spiral toward the City. A small girl and a smaller, darker boy. It seems they are watching us, or hunting us. Why?" Nessie stared. "You are the only one since the corpse's wife to have wandered in from beyond our desert, and you know so many things we have yet to learn, so we assume you know something of these children. Who are they?"

Nessie remembered the children from the inn but knew nothing of their purpose. She stared and said nothing. Tanith screamed and bashed the stone leg on the arm of Nessie's chair, splinters scattering into the darkness. "I could learn to kill this instant," she said. "I could kill you now!" She bashed her club on the chair arm again. I was afraid. If Nessie died, I would die. I went deep and brought Nessie forth, her subconscious pressed upward into awareness, awake enough to speak but asleep enough not to care what Tanith did. Her eyes blinked, and Tanith stepped back, the leg frozen overhead, and the crowd behind her hushed. Nessie looked down at the battered arm of her chair, then up to Tanith.

"I really couldn't care less," Nessie said. "Now get out of my face, or swing away and watch me die."

Tanith grimaced and clenched her fists tight, took one long breath, and with a growl swung, and Nessie remained unmoved, and the leg missed her, or went through her, or by some other miracle did not strike. Tanith shrieked and tried to swing again but the crowd was on her, shouting that they should protect the child, and they dragged Tanith from the room.

~

When the temple was finished, Phineas appeared and imagined into being a dark throne, smooth laths of ebony like distorted piano keys that rose in a jagged arc, with a cushioned seat the color of blood and sharp ebony arms that

ended in clawed paws, and a thick base into which Phineas placed David's immaculate shattered corpse. Then the masses lifted Nessie onto the throne and carried Nessie and David beneath her through the baked streets. The City was crowded, all its tortured people clamoring in from the fringes to line the baked and crumbling streets. Some looked frightened, but most were wide-eyed and tense, desperate for answers. Then she was inside again, in a cavernous chamber of dark stone with a slate floor, the only openings the door and an aperture in the domed ceiling. They carried the throne across the chamber, buzzes and hums echoing as the Citizens crowded through the one door. They settled Nessie neatly on the center of the floor, the tawny light seeping down to drape over Nessie and pool out into a dim circle at her feet, the jagged chair back a black corona behind Nessie's head, and the masses spread along the rounded wall then pressed inward, besieging the disk of light.

Phineas slid forward, Tanith at his side. She wore a crimson kimono. Phineas wore a black skirt with a hem of sand where it had stroked the dusty streets, and his skeletal chest was strapped in interwoven leather bands. He leaned into Nessie's face—his breath smelled of putrid onions, and his voice was slippery. He said, "Nessie." She stared. He said, "Yes, darling Bringer, we have learned your name. and we have learned how best to honor you. But you refuse to accept your role." Nessie only looked at him, her eyes dull, her consciousness tired and trying to slip deep again, but I held her up. She looked away from him, stared at nothing. He said, "Nessie." He savored her name, said it again. "Ne-e-

s-s-s-i-eee.” He raised a long finger and touched her jaw, tried to turn her face. She let her head loll in his direction, and she said, “Just kill me, Phineas. You want to honor me, get it over with.” I kicked at her consciousness, drove her further awake—she could not mean this, could not destroy us both. But Phineas only laughed and said, “Never. You have given us cause for joy, cause to celebrate our misery, and laughter breathes once more. I never will kill you.”

The swarming crowd parted to reveal the door, and Phineas and Tanith drifted out through the corridor of people and returned with a woven laundry bin the size of a washtub, and they overturned it like a pitcher of water. The insides spilled out in a fluid smoke, spread over the slate floor, and formed into hissing orbs that congealed and pulsed until, after a minute or two, the floor was crawling with a dozen infant rabbits. Nessie stared at them. Then she looked at Phineas and the woman who’d dumped the rabbits there. Phineas leaned in and whispered into Nessie’s ear: “You killed those rabbits.” Nessie stared again at the floor. Memory, flashing fast-forward in vivid off-colors: A lawn mower, a hot summer morning shortly after the divorce, then under the mower—little ears and heads jumping up in an old arcade game. Whack-a-Mole. Chop-a-Hare. The whirring of the lawn-mower blades, slowed down in a special effect. Up a head, around a blade, then the bloody slash across the nose and one eye. Or lop off an ear. Or take the head clean away, the bunny body falling back into the burrowed nest. Three or four nests in a yard, three or four rabbits a nest. Nessie remembered. Later that afternoon, in a wet blanket of a heat wave, the survivors

had crawled from their stinking holes, where the gathering crows had borne them away in hard yellow beaks. Nessie had seen one do this. Nessie had thought, at the time, that the heat had gotten them all, until she went out to rake the bodies under a tree and cover them with leaves and grass clippings and she'd found the gashed rabbit and the one lone head, no body in sight. A tear piled up in Nessie's right eye, then spilled over to fall on her folded hands. The voice that came from her said, "I didn't know. It wasn't on purpose."

But Phineas and the woman were bringing in another basket. They spilled it, again with the smoky flow, and there formed at Nessie's feet a litter of whinnying puppies, so young they still were only shapeless black lumps like burned potatoes with limbs and tongues. Five of them. Dead from a different heat wave, ages ago when Nessie was twelve, the puppies left out on the back porch because her mother didn't want the smell in the house. It had taken only one afternoon. It had been Nessie's job to bury them. There was Phineas near her ear again, the soft rot of his breath rolling into her unalive lungs as he whispered, "You killed those puppies, the cute little puppies." Nessie's own voice came into her head, a pre-figured text, a mental rough draft: *That wasn't me, that was my mother's fault*—but then there was another memory, a thin daydream Nessie'd had that morning of sneaking out back and bringing the puppies in, mother be damned, to hide their day in the air conditioning. Nessie had changed her mind, had decided to save herself the argument with her mother, had gone to school and forgotten the puppies until the stench of that

afternoon. In the dark stone temple, Nessie's mouth opened and hung there, words altogether gone. The breath near her ear whispered: "You murdering bitch. You glorious bitch." And then there came another basket.

They kept on coming the rest of that day, that night, the next, for days, baskets and baskets of formless things shaping themselves in Nessie's memory. At first it was the pets she'd let die or the animals she'd killed—road kills, a mouse from the shitty apartment she kept in college, a squirrel she'd shot the one miserable time she'd tried hunting, three lizards she'd neglected in her junior-high science class, a flock and a half worth of birds that swelled up and exploded from all the rice she'd thrown at the handful of weddings she'd been to. After a while, the baskets started emptying out the food she'd eaten, all the leather she'd worn: Chickens and turkeys and cows and fish and pigs by the thousands, a few hundred lambs, a snake she'd once tried batter-fried and two more she'd worn as belts, a quail from her first date with her ex-husband, a rabbit he'd given her as linings for some gloves, a few ducks and a few mussels and one slippery oyster, a half-dozen crabs and a handful of lobsters. Then came the insects, swarming around her in the millions, bees and wasps and flies and moths and scorpions and ants and beetles and roaches and grasshoppers and crickets and pillbugs, crushed under her shoes or sprayed with insecticide or laid to waste against the vastness of all her marauding windshields. Each one, a memory, a death to confront. Millions. Hundreds of millions. And for every basketful of death, there was Phineas in Nessie's ear, his tiny chin on her

shoulder and his hissing whisper: “You killed them.” Sometimes he would question her—“Did you feel the pop as you shattered their little exoskeletons?”—or taunt her—“Dead quail, juicy little bird, all that savory blood”—or just make sounds like a child—“A cow goes moooooooooooooo!” the oos rising to a petrifying shriek, Nessie rigid on the chair, neck muscles taut and eyes pinched, bladder tight, until the shriek disintegrated into machine-gun laughter and Nessie buckled into sobs.

~

The belly swelled as Nessie slumped in her stupor. She knew now what was growing inside her, but she hid from it, unbelieving. The Citizens circulated through the temple endlessly, bringing Nessie things they had created and destroying them for her. She stared through it all, trying to hide from the circus. She floated alone in a limbo of awareness, refusing to acknowledge anything but silence and solitude yet unable to find either. And always, even in her quietest moments, I was with her.

~

The throngs bringing offerings turned away and swarmed out the narrow door to spill along the scabrous streets. Nessie woke, or nearly woke, her eyes

wide and her fingers in a fast grip on the arms of our throne—she recognized the shudder and grind of the engine, and a wash of dull memory and fear like driven sleet nearly overwhelmed me, nearly broke our protective symbiosis. Outside, the hiss and rattle of the Citizen horde rose into cheers; inside, Nessie began to sweat.

Tanith strode into the chamber. The cheering horde clamored after her and packed themselves along the walls. Tanith stood before the throne, then stepped aside as Phineas slipped between the onlookers to stand with Tanith, his arms folded behind his back, smiling but silent.

“We have been to the edge of the desert,” Tanith said. “We have found the roads there, the blue sky. Trees. We know now where these people come from, where you came from.”

Phineas said, “We have found your van.” Nessie snapped her eyes to Phineas then to Tanith.

“We have rebuilt it,” Tanith said. “We have created for it a new purpose.” The crowd cheered.

Phineas said, “We have driven it back into the Origins of this place, where we found Newcomers. Many there had heard of you. Many recalled the death of Aléjandro. And we have learned the secret, Nessie. It is a matter of disbelief. Refute the knowledge that we are dead, and we can accomplish things that were only possible in life.”

“No,” Nessie said. “I didn’t even know I was dead when Alé—when I was with him. I wasn’t refuting anything.”

“You were denying the truth,” Phineas said. “As you now deny you are a bringer of death.”

“And a bringer of life,” Tanith said, rubbing her own abdomen while staring at Nessie’s. “We will learn the latter, perhaps, but we first must discover the former. You killed David with an implement from the van, the jack you pulled from the rear. We have found another implement in the van.” She raised her hand, her palm up, and Phineas unfolded his arms and brought from behind him a tire iron, one end angled and ending in a hexagonal cup, the longer end flattened to a chisel. He slapped it into Tanith’s hand.

Phineas said, “We can unmake that which we make easily enough, and so it should be. This is not power but games. To truly honor what you have discovered here in this endless After, we must do as you did. We must undo that which we did not make.” The crowd cheered, then parted again as a gang of Citizens marched through carrying a man aloft, a dozen hands gripping his naked calves and thighs, his naked arms and wrists, his withered buttocks and his thrashing head. The gang lowered the struggling man to the floor, spreading his elderly form in an X and holding him steady. It was Harish, the driver who’d brought Nessie to the inn. Nessie stared at him, his old testicles shrunken and his retreated prick a stub, his sagging stomach clenched, his thin chest quaking. He stared wildly about, his gray balding head gyrating on his neck.

Tanith said, "Do you believe in a god?"

"There is no God," Nessie said.

"So we believed, once we arrived in this City. If this is what happens after life, then where is the god who made us? Where is the god who made all this? We have found no god in all our long existence here, and none of the people who drift into this place has ever met a god in the After either. We have driven to the Origins, we have circumnavigated the desert, we have ventured into regions unknown, where forests grow at the edge of a vast ocean, and nowhere did we find any gods from any of the worldly religions. But we have met you. You appear to be just a woman, dead and arrived here like the rest of us, yet you have killed and you have grown pregnant. If you command life and death, are you not like a god?"

Harish strained to look at Phineas, the veins and muscles in his neck taut and corded. Then he raised his head forward to look at Nessie, tears in his old brown eyes, his mouth open but silent.

"I'm nobody," Nessie said.

"Then we, too, could command life and death," Tanith said. "We too, can become gods. And we are dead no longer."

Phineas stepped back as Tanith raised the tire iron over her head, and Harish cried out at last, a single belch of "No!" before she lunged and hammered the crooked head of the tire iron into his skull, which exploded and sprayed Tanith, Phineas, and the crowd with wet scarlet like gelatin. His body spasmed

on the floor and one arm jerked loose from the spattered gang that held him and floundered wildly until it found and grabbed the ankle of an onlooker, who shrieked and pulled away as the crowd cheered. Tanith handed the tire iron to Phineas, who plunged its chiseled end into Harish's quivering stomach. A sharp whine echoed in the chamber as the iron punched through flesh and struck the slate floor beneath him. The tire iron danced in the body, the crowd roared applause, and Nessie only stared, tears flowing involuntarily.

Phineas and Tanith watched the body flopping freely on the floor. Phineas scratched the back of his neck. Tanith swiped a streak of scarlet gel from her cheek, smelled it, then tasted it, then sucked her fingers clean as she studied the body.

Phineas said, "So he is dead then?"

Tanith said, "I suppose so."

Phineas said, "Nessie, tell us, is he dead?"

Nessie said, "You're all dead."

Tanith said, "Has this man died again?"

But Nessie refused to answer.

The crowd eddied as the giddy Citizens jostled for their turn to view the body. Phineas and Tanith stood to the side, studying, thinking. The body slowed to twitches, then shivers, then settled into stillness and faded to gray. The scarlet gel liquefied over the minutes and dripped freely on the floor.

“He is dead,” Tanith said. She toed the torso, then slapped the motionless tire iron so it wobbled in Harish’s abdomen. “Yes, he is dead, and we are alive.”

The crowd cheered again.

“Yes,” Tanith said. She looked at the body, then she looked at Nessie.

“Now that I know what you know, how it feels to wield this power, I might decide to kill them all.” The crowd cheered.

## Chapter 6

Expanse. Indigo echoes from inside a balloon. Reverberation spiraling out forever. Cosmos. Stellar vastness, empty infinitude. Deep, deeper black, shadow, obscurity. Abyss.

Outside, they still came, droves of killers awash in blood. The growl of the van in its awful homecomings, the spill of cries as Outsiders and Newcomers alike joined the hundreds in captivity, awaiting their executions. The Citizens practiced their creative arts, fashioning organs and skeletons from the hollow shells of the dead, crude but horrible in their likeness. Phineas painted Nessie in gore, her hair a crusted nest of crimson and bone. But she was safe. We both were safe, buried deep inside, Nessie's eyes unseeing, her ears removed from her mind, her flesh numb. We waited for it all to pass, for the Citizens to work through all the dead and finally have only each other to murder, until none were left but Nessie. But the dead were inexhaustible. So we waited still.

Then:

~

The throngs at Nessie's feet fell apart in frantic bisection as Tanith raged into the temple. She held a ball-and-peen hammer in her bloody right hand, and

when she grabbed Nessie's throat she raised the hammer over their heads. The cleaved crowd hissed and cried, and several rushed forward, but Tanith whipped her wide skeletal head to face them and they froze. She turned back to Nessie. The hammer trembled.

"You said you knew no children," she said, her voice shuddering with gritted control.

Nessie only stared, buried and uncaring.

Tanith shook the hammer and a few Citizens shuffled forward a step, eyes wide, but the hammer wavered then fell to crack the slate floor as Tanith screamed and slapped Nessie hard. Nessie blinked and woke to look at Tanith but said nothing.

"Damn you," Tanith said, "you will answer me!"

But the crowd flew apart in a cacophonous frenzy, the rift Tanith had made dissolving into chaos then closing before the door as more Citizens rushed into the chamber. Tanith swiveled around the throne, her grip fast on Nessie's neck, until she stood behind Nessie and grabbed Nessie's hair, jerked her head back against the throne. Phineas slid toward the throne, stooped, and picked up the hammer. He turned it in his spidery fingers, examining it, stroking the ball, then the peen.

"You would harm the Mother?" he said.

"There are children approaching," Tanith said. "I believe they are the children who pursue and observe us from the desert horizon."

“I have seen them. Again I ask, you would harm the Mother?”

“She knows of these children, Phineas. She must know their purpose.”

“They are children, Tanith—”

“Children do not last long in the After, and those who linger have never crossed our desert before. These two approach willingly, with design. They are unnatural.”

“Do not presume to know the nature of this place, Tanith. But you have yet to account for this hammer, or for your fingers on the throat of the Mother.”

“We must compel her to speak, we must know the intent of these children.”

“We will know when they arrive. But we must not harm the Mother for fear of injuring the Brood.”

Tanith swept her free hand around the chair and across Nessie’s swollen belly, rubbing it in broad circles as though divining in a crystal ball. She said, “The Brood is well.”

“Nevertheless,” Phineas said, and he swept wide one arm, the hammer tight in his other fist, down by his stalk of thigh. Tanith released Nessie’s throat and stepped around the chair, and Phineas nodded. He pulled his arm in a long arc and waved his fingers for Tanith to join him. She slipped into his arm and laid her heavy jaw on his scrawny chest, and he raised the hammer and jammed it in her stomach, the arm around her shoulders guiding her over the hammer and dropping her to the floor. She gasped, rolling over her stomach. Phineas

watched her, stroked his tiny chin then pulled his little mouth into a V, and said, “Good. That is very good.”

He looked at Nessie, that grin like a knife on his gaunt head, and he folded his arms. “Now, what to do with you, Nessie. You have become gallingly mute.” He slithered one foot to the throne then drew the other to meet it, leaned high over Nessie’s head then bent to face her, and pulled free one hand to stroke Nessie’s ear, her cheek, her lower lip. “What have we done to silence you so? We have created and destroyed for you, as you have done before us. We have honored you, we have killed for you. What more would you ask from us?”

Nessie lolled her head away from him, let it drop on her shoulder. Her eyes drooped. All she saw were his feet and his impossible shins. Tanith moaned. Someone from the crowd said, “The Body,” then the whole room hummed with murmurs like a hive.

“The Body?” Phineas said. “The David? You are looking to it?”

Nessie blinked, pulled her head up to stare at a corner of the ceiling. She shuddered, tears and bile brimming, her fingers white-knuckled on the arms of the throne because he was still down there, unrotted, one arm lying between the legs of the throne and so between her legs, too. She swallowed, clenched her jaw, and then I had her, pulled her into sleep, and her eyes closed.

Phineas said, “I understand, Nessie. We will finish your glorious task. I will destroy the David.”

~

Clamor woke us. The temple was swarming with Citizens who poured through the door, blocking the ginger light of the falling night cap. They circled the temple in thick ranks like spectators. From the midst of the flow two small children, a dark-skinned boy in linen and a pale pink girl in weirdly old-fashioned clothes—Nessie knew them—walked calmly to foot of the throne, followed fast by Tanith and Phineas. The girl leaned forward and whispered Nessie’s name, but Tanith had swooped around them behind the throne and threw an arm around Nessie’s throat.

“What do you want here?” she yelled. Phineas slipped silently beside her, put a hand on her shoulder.

“I am Tarah,” the girl said, and she pinched the sides of her yellow dress and spread her arms and curtsied. “This is my brother Hadi.”

Hadi pressed his palms together, bowed and said, “Salamu alaykum.”

“You do not look like kin,” Phineas said.

“It’s a long story,” Hadi said. “Please let go of Nessie.”

“You know the Bringer of Death? How,” Tanith said.

“We met her at the inn,” Hadi said. “You have been there.”

“You stole some newly arrived people from that inn,” Tarah said.

“Why have you come?” Phineas said. “What do you want?”

“We will talk,” Tarah said.

“But you need to let go of Nessie,” Hadi said.

Tanith eased her arm from Nessie’s neck but held fast to the back from the throne. She said, “Phineas, I do not like them.”

“Children are rare in the After,” Phineas said. “We have a collection here, in our stables, but none come willingly.”

“So we’ve gathered,” Hadi said.

“They are not a part of the City’s design,” Phineas said.

“That’s good to hear,” Tarah said. “Perhaps we can take them off your hands.”

“Never!” Tanith said, “and you will—”

“The children remain,” Phineas said. “You will not. You are not a part of our design, and you are unwelcome.”

“I’m sorry,” Hadi said. “I understand.”

“But we aren’t leaving,” Tarah said. The crowd hissed and stirred, but Hadi held up his hands, bowed his head. Tarah said, “Unless, of course, you let Nessie come with us.”

Tanith gripped Nessie’s neck tighter, said “Phineas,” her voice rising, the grip tightening at the end of his name.

“Yes, Tanith,” he said.

She screamed: “Take them, raise them up and dash them against the floor!”

The Citizens moved closer, dancing at the lip of some invisible boundary, and the children turned back to back to face the teeming multitude. Hadi put his hands in the pockets of his short linen pants. Tarah crossed her legs and held her hands behind her back. She giggled, not as a girl would but as an adult mimicking girlish delight. A man from the Citizenry, gangly and draped in a ratty brown greatcoat, leaned into a hunch like a sprinter then lunged forward to seize the girl, and though she did not move, he stumbled as though tripped and flew ass over elbows in a high arc to fall into the crowd beyond. Two more made for Hadi and it was the same, both children arching their heads to follow the attackers' flight. Several Citizens followed, and again, until the whole of the swarm was in a roiling undulation like a basin of water beneath a pouring faucet. In the midst of this, the children turned again to face Tanith and Nessie, and Tarah shouted above the din of attacking and tumbling Citizens, "I'm really very sorry, but we will not be attacked."

"I'm sure you understand," Hadi shouted.

Tanith pressed Nessie's windpipe into her chest, squeezing tighter in fury, and Nessie was on the verge of waking in defense, but then Phineas slid beside the throne, raised his hand and the masses fell in a tangled mat, heaving as though alive and out of breath. He eyed the children, his head tilted.

"Do you seek power over this City?" he said. His thin voice echoed in the vast chamber, rising in pitch as it climbed the dome of the temple until it sounded severe as a whip crack. "Do you seek to command her, to subjugate us all?"

“We had hoped to save you all,” Hadi said.

“Do not seek to do so,” Phineas said as he glided from behind the chair in one long floating step. “For I am going to bring disaster upon all flesh.”

“There is no flesh in the After,” Tanith said, “and you know it.”

Phineas loomed over the children, more than twice their height but half their width, a shaft of hoary satin.

“Then I will ruin all essence,” he said. He placed a gangling white hand on each child’s head and leered down at them. “But I will give you your lives as a prize of war in every place to which you may go.”

They ducked from beneath his palms and stepped back but stood firm against him. The Citizens backed away toward the temple door. Tarah said, “Our lives are gone, and our deaths are our own. You can’t give us anything.”

Hadi said, “And as we said, we hadn’t planned on going. Not yet.”

From behind her grip on Nessie’s throat, Tanith shouted, “You must away this instant! We will abide you no more!”

Tarah faced her, leaving Hadi to monitor Phineas. She said, “Abide us or not, you need our help. We’re here to assist in the birth,” and she pointed at Nessie’s distended belly.

Tanith’s grip shifted just as Nessie blinked and erupted into awareness, shrieking and tearing free of Tanith’s hold, leaping from the throne to stagger forward into the room, screaming at the children, “No! I will not—I can’t—you cannot make me have this baby! I won’t give birth to that fucker’s rotten crop!”

Tarah laid a hand on my wrist but I tore it away. “No! You have to get it out of me! Tarah, Hadi, please just kill it, I can’t stand to let loose whatever David put inside me!”

Hadi said, “Nessie, calm down—”

But I pleaded, tears and rage. “The hell I will, this is wrong, he put this putrid thing in me and I don’t want it, I never asked for any of this. Why can’t I just die in peace? Somewhere back there, in the before, that world I used to live in, somewhere there’s a headstone by now, and it reads ‘Here lies Nessie, rest in peace,’ but it’s a lie, it’s always been a lie!”

Tanith was chanting her witch’s lullaby but I wasn’t having any of it—they had to listen, they had to abort this thing. I turned in frantic circles, searching everyone for pity, hunting for the one who would do it.

“You,” I shouted at the trembling mob, “Day in and day out you file through here destroying all these kidnapped people, killing all these restless ghosts. You can do this for me! You’re so fucking desperate to please me, then kill the thing inside me, kill the David-spawn, then kill me too.”

“Nessie,” Phineas said, “I have already destroyed the David itself, as you desired,” I whirled and staggered to him, hands on his shoulders. He put his thin fingers over mine. “Yes, Nessie, I consumed him myself, devoured him as meat and took him into myself.” Hadi and Tarah stared at him, and I lurched. “I am the Father now, Nessie. You cannot destroy my Brood.”

I vomited, a great eruption of bile that coated Phineas and three Citizens behind him. Phineas lifted my hands and started shoving me to the throne but I slapped him off, went reeling in some erratic dance, and I began screaming and beating my stomach. “Then I’ll do it myself, I’ll beat the little fucker to paste and glue myself shut forever!”

The crowd swarmed in but Tarah ran to block them, and I collapsed, my knees gone from under me, tugged to the floor by some cable in my gut, and I was swimming, faint and still nauseous, a pounding like a heartbeat in my head as though there was a heart left in there and dizzy and swimming but muted, muzzled, muffled, and we were safe, safe again, and I had her, clutched her down in the fluid burrow of our consciousness where no harm would find us. Nessie moaned, her eyes gone lazy, spittle pooling on the floor.

The children cradled Nessie’s head as Phineas uncurled her body and laid her on her back. Tanith moved to hold Nessie’s stomach but Tarah stared her down and went to Nessie’s stomach instead. She felt along the expanse of Nessie’s flesh, then looked up to Phineas and Tanith.

“The child is fine,” she said. Then she moved to Nessie’s ear and whispered, soft as breath, “You will be fine, Nessie. You’ll have this baby, and then you’ll bring us all home.”

Hadi placed his little hand over Nessie’s languid eyes and drew her eyelids down.

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The only thing I knew was my name. Everything else was new, as though I'd just been born.

Nessie.

Everything empty and soundless, the world drifting.

Empty, but not alone.

You were in there with me, holding me hostage. Or holding me captive, captivating me. And this was familiar. I am Nessie, and I am trapped, have been all along. Yet I was warm and serene, both of us were, so devastatingly at ease, crushed by comfort. My swollen abdomen, my swollen mind. Birth in death—you were impossible but inevitable. Empty as a thunderclap, you knocked me off me feet.

I wanted to speak to you, directly to you, but there was just no voice in me—you confiscated it, you bottled it up. So much for heaven. I had known about this since the beginning, I think, even as I stalked and murdered your father I knew. At first I thought when you got here, if you got here, you would have such a beautiful voice, the voices angels should have. But I hadn't found any angels; people just didn't sing in the After. They sat and stared a lot, or drove away to disappear. Then they died, and now they killed. And I was so scared of this place, so scared to bring you into it—scared for you and so scared of you. You could have undone it all, if anything that had happened was ever

real enough to be undone. That was the question—because all this was feeling eerily right, frighteningly normal. I could barely remember what came before this, and it would have been so much easier to forget it all, to be there, in that moment, and deny the rest. Deny the past. Deny you.

But you had seen all that the horror. I know. The heat, the lunacy, the butchery. Did you see the beginning, your beginning, too? Here's the scene: you're on the back seat, you think you're lying back but really you're being pounded flat, made thin; the windows coil around your head, close in like a noose; there's music, like a drum beat, like a war song. But underneath that, there's another sound, and that's the one you hear, the one you cling to—it's the sound of time standing still. He's gone now, and you're alone, feeling the fabric of the seat beneath you. It is remarkably stiff, hardened with dried muck from your conception, bizarrely real, and maybe it was. Beneath your desolation and rage you feel such peace and absolute stillness. You sink into that peace, become one with the silent congealed gore of the back seat until the pain doesn't end but slowly drifts away into oblivion. You drift away into oblivion. But your eyes stay open—you cannot ignore the horror. It's dark outside. The sky grows a night like a second skin. I didn't know it then, I was gone into my own death, but there it was, night, a shroud, and I should have been terrified but it was the day I feared, the horror of light, but I was out, gone, and that night up there was there for you. For you alone, not for me anymore, I got protection from nothing, I

was exposed, undone. That memory was yours now, those demons out there were yours, this pain yours, this death yours.

I remembered tiny pieces of my life, tiny fragments disconnected from anything here. I remembered my father's name for me, but I couldn't rebuild his face. I knew the name and the blonde little pigtails of a friend of mine in third grade, a girl named Amanda. I could still see the films I knew in dark theaters and dim living rooms and black, rustled beds. And I could see the eyes watching those movies, the irises gleaming in the dark, the movies bent in reverse. Then suddenly I was in this kitchen, and everything around me was drab, muted flowery wallpaper and mushroom-colored countertops, a lonely stove and a chalky refrigerator. There were voices talking somewhere in the house, murmuring distinctly but just so I couldn't hear them. It was late spring, and I was drifting off to sleep in a sticky vinyl kitchen chair at the yellow breakfast table. There was a woman with me in the kitchen, not my mother—my grandmother? I couldn't remember—she was standing behind my chair with her fingers in my thin ginger hair. Then you were there with me; you had been there all along, and you were everything.

Forget it. Decimate your memory, purge everything I've told you. Here's the new scene: you're in the back seat, lying down; the windows embrace you, the silence is only silence, consoling. You feel such peace and absolution, and he is not here because he never was, it never happened. And when I slowly drift into sleep, don't ever let it end. You are everything.

I am nothing.

Please let me be nothing.

~

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A caw. It echoed, but faintly. It was strange, unexpected. There were no birds.

Nessie stirred, swiped her brow and cheeks before she'd opened her eyes. She shifted and slipped, tumbled from her seat to the muted floor. Her knee and hip ached, bruised but intact. The floor had grown a thin pelt of moss.

The patches of stone stung with the feverish City heat, but the lichen was fresh, cool, and the ground steamed. Nessie sat upright, raised her somnolent head, saw thin vines climbing the distant walls of her temple.

The caw again, and an answering call.

The aperture in the dome was grown over in branches and wide leaves, a canopy branching from the curved walls of the temple, no trunks in sight. One of the birds, huge and fierce, a vulture or hawk or turkey, she had no idea, it swept out of the leaves and dove, Nessie toppled away from it, then it skirted the floor and cruised through the open door. She raised herself to her elbows, stared after the bird, then heard screams from the streets without, terrible tiny screams that fixed Nessie to the stone, her fingers clutching at the moss. The door bared fangs, two sharp silhouettes that broke free and ran for her, groped at her, and she screamed, I screamed, scabbled on the floor like a dog and thrashed against the little hands until the children spoke, *Nessie, it's Tarah and Hadi, Nessie, calm down.* Wheeze. Gasp. Respire. Inhale. The children. Exhale.

Those screams.

"They're trying to show us they still have control here," Hadi said.

"They're raiding the Origins for more children. To remind us of our size," Tarah said.

"I want to see." I was clinging to them, fingers hard to their little bones, but they didn't complain.

"Just sit for now, Nessie," Tarah said. "You need to calm down."

“No,” I said, and I blinked, and I jerked my head, looked around the overgrown temple, into the trees and at the floor and the throne, for what I didn’t know, and I gasped, stammered, tried to make words. “Wait, wait. What? Wait.”

“Nessie,” Tarah said, but I let go of Hadi to grab her with both hands.

“No! Wait. They, wait, they have to stop. I can make them stop.” I pulled on her, dragged one knee under me then tried to stand, my legs loose and trembling, my weight bending Tarah backward.

“Don’t,” Hadi said. “Don’t leave the temple.”

“The temple. It’s humid.”

“It’s changing,” Tarah said.

“Everything’s changing,” Hadi said.

“There are birds,” I said, sitting and scanning the branches again. “There are trees.”

“Just sit down,” Hadi said. “We’re here for you now.”

“Where are the trunks?”

“The trees are growing from the top down,” Tarah said.

“There aren’t any trunks.”

“We know, Nessie, Hadi said.

“Why?”

“We don’t know.”

~

They stayed with me without rest, holding back the throngs of Citizens who tried to visit. When the trunks were low enough for Hadi to jump into them, he clambered up and broke loose branches, sent them crashing to the mossy floor, and Tarah bent and wove them into a tangle heap which they both shoved into the temple door. I drifted. Some days the screams were shrill, they seemed to come from inside me, and I wanted to slip under again, but Tarah and Hadi stroked my forehead, or pulled me off the throne to walk, or yanked at the gore still clotted in my hair, and I stayed awake. For days and days. My stomach ached, churned. I knew that thing in there was growing. Too fast.

The day the trees dropped their trunks to root in the mossy floor, the Citizens returned, the first of them breaking through the plug of brush with axes and machetes. Tarah grabbed my wrist and told me to stay calm, to pretend I was still asleep, and I lolled my head as she and Hadi ran for the door but the Citizens surrounded them, pressed them against the wall where I couldn't see them. For an hour the Citizens prodded or dragged their cowering captives into the temple and speared them to the trees like pinned butterflies, like décor. Some were emaciated, some withered on the vines; all were naked and sexless, the men castrated and the women sliced free of their breasts. When the walls were fully hung with gore, the aperture in the dome opened like a dilated pupil until the dome was gone and the blazing day cap sifted through the canopy to dust the temple in light. The bird that had flown into the City returned to perch in

the canopy and screamed, and the other bird screamed back. A handful of husky Citizens, squat blocks of hair and muscle with thick necks and fingernails black with blood, came and dragged the throne with me in it to a niche opposite the door, tucked me between thick trunks garnished with bodies. When they'd lumbered out, Tanith and a host of rabid Citizens draped in livid muslin like dime-store wraiths encircled the open patch of bare stone where the throne had sat all those horrible days. They made motions with their hands like conjurers, Tanith mumbled through her cowl, then they only sat and stared at the floor until it rippled and froze, rippled and froze, pushing them backward with each little wave in the moss and stone. When they'd finished, they had divided the temple into three concentric rings separated by foot-high sandy walls, each with a brass banister atop it. The conjurers stood in the outer ring, where the floor had crumbled to fine red dirt. The second ring was tiled in alabaster, but the center ring had no floor—it plummeted into darkness, yawning black, the descending cavity ribbed with spars like bones.

Then the Citizens pressed into the temple like water, the drove splitting at the outer wall and wrapping around the temple to constrict me. That tug was inside, I reeled, my brow slick and my eyes stinging, I panted and almost fell inside, desperate for sleep, but the Citizens jostled me, kept me conscious enough, until Tarah and Hadi squeezed through the crowd to hold my hands, a child for each.

“Stay calm, Nessie,” Tarah said.

“Don’t say a word,” Hadi said. “No matter what happens. Close your eyes if you have to.” But I couldn’t.

The temple hushed as though the building itself had sighed. The birds in the canopy rustled their wings then settled. The doorway winked and the thin shape of Phineas slid into the room, his long legs sweeping through yards of shadowy skirt. He was mantled in black, a wool shirt sewn with ebony plates in an arc over his chest and around his shoulders. His long neck was bound in fishnet and his head was strapped by the brow to the rails of an ebony frame like a tiny chair back; the strap on his brow was sewn with ebony chevrons so it looked like a crown. When he reached the banister of the inner wall, he spread wide his arms so the loose cuffs of his sleeves hung down like wings.

He grinned his tiny mouth into a V and said, “So.”

Behind him, a gang of Citizens brought in the wrangled children, three or four dozen of them, naked and bound and muzzled in leather straps or wire cages. Some of the children whimpered limp; the rest kicked in a wide-eyed muffled tantrum. The ring of crowd rustled with applause. Phineas stepped over the banister to the alabaster ring, and the gang shoved or tossed the children over the wall to join him.

Tanith emerged from the crowd and drew back her muslin hood to reveal a swept crescent headdress like an elongated skull in purple steel, a spine of bony plates bisecting it. She leered at me across the chasm, and I slumped deeper into my throne, Hadi and Tarah holding tight to my hands.

Phineas plucked a naked girl from the cowering mass. She squirmed but said nothing; her face had been burned to char, the skin glazed like pottery into a grotesque mask, blood-black and indigo across her cheeks and forehead, her hair a shriveled crust, her eyes melted shut and her lips scabbed together. One bent arm was fused to her little chest. She moaned. Phineas leaned over the girl, undid the straps of her muzzle and let it fall, and he said, "Are you dead?" The girl trembled but made no motion, no nod or shake of her cindered head. "Are you alive?" She bent and whimpered. Phineas looked around the temple, shouted, "All the little children are innocent! All the little children go to heaven!" The girl crouched to the alabaster floor, leaned her head the ground, and was trying to cover herself with her good arm. Phineas squatted, his black skirt opening around his long legs like the hood of a snake, and he loomed over the girl and bellowed, "Is this heaven!"

From beneath her one protective arm she shook her scabby head violently, muffled cries seeping through her fused mouth.

Phineas stood, said, "Then we are not dead," and kicked the girl into the gullet of the temple.

The Citizenry erupted in cheers, and Phineas turned to grab the nearest child, a boy with swollen blisters the size of pancakes on his naked legs and back. I bit my lip, every muscle tensed till it burned. Hadi stroked my hand as the crowd stomped their feet in a thunder. But from within the jubilation a small

voice rose and fought until by some miracle of acoustics it overpowered the applause, and the temple hushed to stare at Tarah.

“Stop this now,” she said.

Phineas cocked his head, then tucked his hands behind his back, leaned his long torso toward her, and smiled. “Make me.”

Hadi shook his head. “You are tampering with things you know nothing about. You can’t accept your own death, but you have no right to deny others their chance for peace.”

“Peace?” Phineas said. “There is no peace! Do you know how long I have festered here? How long I have roasted my weary existence away in the arid streets and gaping desert of this wretched place?” He raised the boiled arm of the boy he held and shook it as the boy screamed. “Though I live not, still I wander in pain, still I feel, and I yearn for freedom from this place. Only now have I discovered alleviation from these long, long eons, and it lies not in freedom but in rule. I have grasped the reality here and can make it my own.” He hoisted the sobbing boy up by his arm but the blistered skin slipped off like a sleeve and the boy collapsed in screams. Phineas looked at him, then shouted across the maw in the floor, “I am God here. You are here by my clemency alone, and you will suffer my whims.”

A handful of the crowd clapped, and Tanith swooned and pressed herself against the banister, but there was weight in the temple, a silent awe and a fetal fear. The Citizens nearest Phineas receded.

Tarah stepped toward the banister, let go of Nessie's hand, and said, "You are not God, there is no—"

"I came out to watch you play," I said. I had slipped, I drifted somewhere between the safety of the children and the vacuum pulling me inside myself, and I was terrified. I could not stand this, but could not stand to watch it. The head, my head, lolled to one side. My left eye was open, but my right eye fluttered nearly shut.

One of the Citizens cried out, "What did She say?" and another said, "What proclamation?"

"Six fifty-eight are you sure where my spark is?" I said.

Hadi rubbed my hand and Tarah turned to touch my shoulder, then tried to lift my head.

"Nessie?" she said, her voice like an echo in my skull.

"What is wrong with the Mother?" a Citizen cried.

"The little ones have seized her mind!" Tanith said. She leapt the banister to stand next to Phineas, to grip his shoulder and arm, to lean into him. "They are trying to usurp our rule!"

"They want the Brood!" Phineas said.

The crowd swelled into agitation, but the children glared at each flank and the crowd wavered.

"Please don't let me die," I said. "Heaven is too bright, and I didn't bring my sunglasses."

“Take the children!” Phineas shrieked, his thin roar waving out to echo like a toy drum over the abyss. “Take all the children and toss them in.” He scooped up the huddled, blistered boy and flung him into the pit, the boy flailing until his head rattled against the bony ribs in the pit and his skull came apart as he plummeted. The crowd rushed for Tarah and Hadi, but they leapt onto to the trunks of the trees that flanked my throne and clambered over the pinned corpses into the canopy and from there, over the temple wall. Phineas shoved another child into the pit, and Tanith heaved in two at a time, but the rest of the burnt children scrambled away, circling the alabaster ring and ducking away from the snatching hands of the Citizens. The children who were blind fell over the banister into the crowd or tumbled into the pit, and when the Citizens started climbing over the banister into the second ring, the children went limp and dropped themselves into the abyss.

## Chapter 7

The soft hums of whalesong. Fluidity and mind. Mass. Boundaries.

Independence.

But isolation. Compression, constricting walls.

Where is the exit, where is the way?

~

All I could see was dim, was brown like the inside of myself, but it was hollow, it echoed, and I realized we were running through a warehouse. I could hear the highway near. It was hot. "Where are we," I said. *We're in the temple*, Tarah said. *We're leaving the City*. "No," I said, "we're in a warehouse. We're near the inn, we're across the highway from the inn." *Just keep running*, Tarah said and I felt Hadi's little palm against my back like we were on a date. My stomach bulged; it had split my thin shirt and I could feel my belly button with my free hand. "Alejandro," I said, "I left him in the warehouse. Where's Aléjandro?" *He's dead*, Hadi said. "I know that," I said, "but where is he?" *He's dead again*, Hadi said, and Tarah squeezed my hand, her small shoes clattering beside my big bare feet. She tugged me right, Hadi at my tailbone to guide me through the turn, and the liquid brown swimming around us whorled and evaporated, leaving

hazy streaks of sepia, amber and ink. “The world’s on fire,” I said, holding tighter to my belly than to Tarah’s hand. *It’s not the world*, Hadi said, driving at the tail of my spine. *It’s just the City*. “What did you do with the body,” I said, but that was ridiculous, there was no body, we were already gone, so I said, “What did they do with the rest of Alé?” They ran, one beside me and one behind, we three rushing into shadow and dust. Then Hadi said, *We left him*. They kept us moving, but Tarah added, *The Citizens never got him, Nessie. Some of the others back at the inn were curious*. “What would happen,” I said. “They wanted to know what would happen.” Yes, Hadi said. “How do you bury a corpse that isn’t there.” Yes, Tarah said. “What did happen?” I said. I was panting, but the air was cooler, and the night had settled to dark like oil, slick and utterly lightless. Hadi spoke, his voice crisp and my skull ringing from the sudden peal of words. “Birds came, Nessie. Buzzards, huge, they came and ate him.”

I staggered and caved in, pulled Tarah hard on top of me, and Hadi tripped to tumble over us. I gasped, hand on chest as though to move my lungs like bellows, I couldn’t breathe, but Tarah was already tugging at my arm and Hadi was shouting, “Get up, Nessie, run.” I looked behind me, into the roaring maw of the City, a bellowing mouth of flame in the black enormity of night. Embers spewed and rolled away from it, some corkscrewing into nothing but others rushing straight at us, and I realized they were not embers but people ablaze. Tarah was yanking harder, and Hadi took my other arm and they began dragging me away from the fire but I pulled loose and crawled to my knees.

“What did you do?”

“Nessie, you need to run,” Tarah said. “Now,” Hadi yelled. They grabbed my wrists and hauled me to my feet, and we ran, and I wanted to make them answer me but I was so tired, and all I could manage was to the revolution of my legs, the rigorous pounding of foot after foot.

~

When the day cap broke open in the apex of night, we slowed; soon we were picking our way over a crumbling ground, the desert gone to rocks and brittle scabs of clay. Every few steps I crunched through the crust and the children had to catch me. I gasped at them to wait, to help me, but they held tight as though they were propping me up by the arms. “Stop,” I said, “just stop a minute,” but they pressed on.

“Just keep moving, Nessie,” Hadi said.

“We’ll be through this soon,” Tarah said.

The day cap was closer and I squinted in the watery gray light. One shredded foot slid into debris. I slipped from Tarah’s tiny grasp and fell to my knee, crushing the ground. The earth was a grainy field of decay, bodies and parts of bodies peppered among dried bones, ribcages clutching like fists at the splayed flats of pelvises and the hard knobs of skulls. A few feet away, a bloated torso of a man lay sprawled over a pile of rags and bones, his one long intestine

trailing away like a root as though he'd been grown in the earth and was freshly plucked. In the distance, huge carrion birds gnawed and pecked at other scraps of flesh. My bulging stomach strained—I vomited, choked on tears and vomited again. Tarah grabbed me, leaned over my belly to wrap her arms around my head, Hadi rubbed my back, and I swam, an undertow of darkness pulling me down and I let it, but there was Tarah's voice in my ear, in my head: Stay, Nessie, get up, we have to keep going; but I didn't want to, I wanted to let go, to be done with it all, but Tarah yelled, "Nessie!"

"How?" I screamed. "How is this even possible? We're supposed to be dead already!"

"Don't worry," Hadi said. "We are."

I broke Tarah's embrace and grabbed Hadi's arm and shook him. "These are bones, Hadi. Bones! Those are guts, those are intestines and blood, oh god!"

"They're not—"

"They are! Those are birds, what are birds doing here? This is real!"

"It's not real," Tarah said. "Just ignore it."

"Ignore? Fuck you!"

"Nessie—"

"You told me this wasn't hell—back at the inn, you said this wasn't hell, but if I'm dead, you lied. You're liars, you little shits." I shoved Hadi away and he spilled over the bones, cracked a shell of ribs, I knocked Tarah down with my

elbow, I stood over my stomach to a stumbling crouch and went reeling among the bones, sobbing and thrashing my arms. “Liar, liar, pants on fire! Stick a needle in your eye! A cow goes moooooooooooooo!” I ran, arms flailing then clutching at my stomach, the ripped shirt like the pupil of a cat’s eye, my jutting navel pointing ahead, driving me on, away from the chasing children; I ran after my stomach like it was a divining rod, pulling me further into death. Then I tripped and collapsed into the gore, rolling off my belly mound to flop on my back, shrieking until my voice broke, scraped to a raspy hiss, and I pounded my fists against the human rubble, cutting my hands on shards of bones and kicking my bloody feet through ribs and shoulder blades until I looked like just another carcass. I laughed as I cried, because it was true. I lay there, throwing bleached knuckles and hollow vertebrae in the air like a kid at the beach: Shells and sand, bones and dust. It’s all the same.

“Nessie,” Tarah said. The children had picked their way over to me. Hadi sat cross-legged beside me and rubbed my exposed stomach. I lay on my back, all out of tears. “Nessie, I’m sorry,” Tarah said. “I know this is hard. But people are waiting.”

“Aren’t we all,” I said.

~

By half-cap the City was gone, a spiral of smoke climbing the sky, strung from the horizon to the line between night cap and day. The children led a few yards ahead of me, walking the bones like a minefield. I stooped, leaned into my steps because falling forward was the only momentum I had. My stomach pulled heavy on me. I ripped apart the hem of my shirt so it flapped open around my stomach. After hours and hours, the lid of the day cap came down to seal the horizon, the heat pressing on us; I flooded sweat, but it vaporized in the desert and came off me in ripples like tendrils of smoke from a snuffed candle. And we ambled onward. Finally, the layer of bones thinned and scattered until we could choose our steps and avoid the jawless skulls and unstrung spines and clutching ribs. The desert floor gave way to tufts of dry weed and smoldered brush, and the brittle soil broke and jutted up in jagged gray spires as though some buried explosion had spewed up the mud and it baked fast in the desert heat. I held my belly like a sack, as though it weren't inside me but was some satchel I'd been saddled with, and I had to pick my way among the brittle peaks, but it was better than the bones. I could feel the thing in there, squirming in my hard sack of belly, an elbow in my navel, a foot splayed so tight against my skin I could make out toes.

"We're getting close," Hadi said.

"Look," Tarah said, and she pointed at a line of crusty mud spires.

"What," I said.

"Those are the mountains."

“It’s just the mud,” I said.

But when the next night cap had blotted a third of the sky, I could make out a thin distinction, a tiny rise in the ridges ahead. In the waning hours of day the ridge rose taller, and I could feel the incline in the ground we hiked. Soon I was leaning into the climb, and when the cap left only a sliver of light on the horizon, the sapphire ring of dusk was broken by the wide expanse of the mountains. We climbed the night until I went numb, my belly heavier but kicking me on like a pack mule, and the children climbed one behind and one above so they could both press and lift me higher, guide me over midnight crests and crevices. By the time the following day cap broke we’d crossed the summit and the light chased us down the scrubby mountain. The rocks on that side were round, the brush dry but alive, the landscape utterly different from the alien serrations of clay the days before. In the foothills stout palms grew between the boulders, thick furry trunks as wide as the stubby fronds like pineapple heads atop them. A tiny pool glittered beside a rabble of shacks, thin scraps of board like crackers strung into rough boxes among the rocks.

They were empty.

“I thought you said people were waiting,” I said.

“They are,” Tarah said.

“They will come,” Hadi said.

“Why?”

“Because they want to.” Hadi said. “You should rest.”

“I’m tired of sleeping,” I said. “I hear voices in my dreams.”

“You won’t hear them for long, Nessie,” Tarah said. “They are near to silence now.”

I leaned against a dead palm trunk, a support for one of the patchwork walls.

I dreamed of nothing.

~

I woke screaming, and there she was, her crown already splitting me in two, rocks and palm branches cobbled beneath my splayed legs. I screamed, and if I had veins or arteries in my neck they were corded and throbbing as though to burst open, blood at both ends of me. I screamed and burned my whole body over, and there was Tarah in my ear, “This is not real, Nessie, you are dead and not in pain,” but I screamed some more, fought to make clear the words “Fuck you,” my words and not for her alone, for all of them, Tarah and Hadi and David and Phineas and Tanith and all the smoldering Citizens and all the piled corpses they’d made and everyone else spread over this loathsome After and all the souls who would ever find their way into this mess and for the baby ripping me open, especially for her. Fuck her, fuck you, fuck them all. Then her shoulders tore at me and as I screamed again I raised my head and through my pinched eyes I saw Hadi sprayed with blood, and I prayed it was

hers, that I'd crushed the baby like an eggshell and yolked the world. And then there was a fountain of gore that left Hadi dripping in crimson gel, but my screams were echoed by the tiny shrieks and wails of the baby. She was alive, if alive was possible, or else she was freshly dead but conscious and animate like the rest of us. She was there, kicking in the After and aping her mother in all her keening fury, and suddenly the whole shack tremorred, the boards rattling along the whole complex of makeshift rooms, and the baby screamed and my legs fell wide around the boulder stirrups and if I had a heart it stopped.

I was ruined.

~

For days I suffered in violent shivers, even when Hadi and Tarah wrapped me in blankets tight as bandages. I sweated and froze, moaned in delirium. Kill it, destroy it, undo it, abolish it, abort it, obliterate it, snuff it out. All these things the Citizens had made and made, brought to me as gifts and then demolished, yet there was the girl, the seed of David's rape, and I was afraid. I cried for days, a deluge that soaked every blanket the children brought and wrapped me in, washed away every swab of slippery ointment Tarah made of my milk and rubbed on my eyes. I deflated. I atrophied. I withered. Yet still I was.

For days.

And for all their protections and comforts, the children still brought that nauseating baby to my swollen breasts, my distended nipples which even in death were pearling with milk. When she pulled a nipple into her mouth I was drawn forth in ache, a burning wire that ran from milk duct to womb, yanked me awake and livid. Then she dropped the nipple, milk spilling into the folds of my blanket bandages, and took up the other one, the wire jerking my uterus into my heart, the pressure on my sternum unbearable, and I wept and beat my fists on the floor. And when she was finished, she spit up on me, spewed on my naked chest as though she'd planned it, the coddled vomit like chowder, like spoiled yogurt. Even when they unwrapped me and swaddled me in fresh blankets, the smell was always with me.

For days and days.

But it took only days for the girl to stand, and only days more for her to walk, and soon she was toddling in to suck on her own, demanding my breasts with pouts, with pokes in my ribs, with hard three-toothed bites on my arm, my neck, my ear, my nose. If I had more energy, if I didn't drift in restless fever, I would have ripped at her auburn hair, pulled her ruddy face into my chest and smothered her.

In less than a month, she strode assuredly into my dreary bedroom and announced not just her first word but her first full sentence:

“My wanna be name Mara.”

~

I had lived and died all over again—a lifetime had passed in agony. Mara my daughter had sucked everything out of me, so whatever woke and crawled wearily into the light of day had kindled and been born in the shell Mara'd left. If I was still Nessie, it was only because Mara and the children had called me so. It was only because when I lifted the rag-patch door and blinked into the light, my stinking ocher blankets clutched around my shoulders, the hundreds of people camped along the shore of the oasis rose at once and cheered my name.

Tarah ran to me, took my free hand, and pulled me toward the shore of the oasis pool. Those furry palm trees loomed among the rocks, their stubby tops offering no shade, so the crowds were mostly on the opposite side of the pool, clustered around the handful of date palms there. They all were standing, some with hands shading their eyes, some with hands clasped on their chest, but after that initial cheer, they were silent. I eyed them while Tarah tugged at my arm.

“What?” I said.

A pair of women was busy stretching a span of cloth over two reed poles, fastening the cloth with twine. Another woman ran along the shore toward the camp.

Tarah said, “Nessie, sit for a moment.”

I sat on a flat rock, pulled my blanket closer around me. Tarah sat in the sand and picked at pebbles and clumps of grass.

“Who are these people?”

“They’re just people, Nessie. But they’ve heard of you, heard what happened at the inn. Some have heard rumors about the City, but no one knows what happened there.

“They’re here to what, judge me? Kill me, finally kill me?”

The women with the poles and cloth looked at us, their eyes wide. One shook her head, then they stood with mallets and began hammering the cloth to two furry trees near the pool.

“Why would they want to kill you, Nessie?” Tarah said.

“For what I’ve done. Alé. David. My daughter, I’m sure she’s an abomination here, I’m sure I’ve broken some rule with her.”

“Nessie, no one knows what’s going on. They don’t know how Aléjandro died, they don’t know how Mara came to be born. They know nothing about David. But no one is blaming you for these things. They marvel at you.”

“Marvel?”

“Before you came, people would disappear, drift off down some road or another and never return, but we’d always assumed they were returning to the Before. Other than that, this place was our fate, and we accepted it. When Alé died, it destroyed that assumption, because if we can carry forward from death to this After, then surely there is something else, some new Beyond. At least, most

people have to believe so. Otherwise, Alé had simply ceased to exist, he is gone, destroyed.”

“What else is there?” I said.

“Exactly,” Tarah said.

“I didn’t mean that,” I said, but Tarah was already talking over me—

“Some are frightened, Nessie. Most are confused. These people here, though. They’re convinced you’re special, that these changes in the After, the coming of night and day, even in this bizarre form, the appearance of birds, the amplification of color, these people are convinced that you caused them.”

“I didn’t,” I said. “The only thing I’ve ever caused is death. And animal crackers once. That’s it.”

“It’s more than they’ve accomplished here.”

One of the women shouted that they were ready, and I looked into the pool where they stood ten feet out, chest deep in the water with their backs to us, holding the poles up so they spread the cloth from the trees and between the poles to make a huge square curtain in the water.

“Come on,” Tarah said. She stood and yanked the blanket from my shoulders. I grabbed at it, jumped from the rock to back away, but Tarah held tight and pulled me toward the water. “Nessie, you need a bath.” She jerked on the blanket and spun me once, unraveling a section. I clutched at the blanket but she said, “You smell like baby vomit,” and pulled me to my knees. She walked around me, unwrapping the rest of the blanket, and I frantically scanned the

shore, but Tarah touched my shoulder on each pass, calming me. The cloth room the women made in the pool blocked anyone from looking at me, and soon I was naked, my arms enfolding my sticky breasts and my filthy thighs tight against each other. Tarah touched my back, leaned her little head against my shoulder. "Are you ready?" she said.

"I'm ready," I said.

I waded into the water, warm from the desert, and sank below the surface. The light went creamy as I stirred the sand into the water, and I closed my eyes. The water filled my ears, muted everything to the sound of alone; I felt like I had when I drifted half-unconscious in the City, but there was no terror pushing me down, no voice keeping me under. I floated free. When I opened my eyes, I could see my reflection on the surface of the water, as though I was standing over it instead of drifting submerged. My eyes hung heavy with bags, my hair floated away in fluid strands like lake weed. I could see my cheekbones hard against my skin, something new for me, as though I had starved. As though I had cheekbones.

I stayed under for a long time, staring at myself on the shiny undersurface. I never felt the need to breathe, no burning in the lungs or tug in the stomach. I began to think I could just stay down there, submerged forever, lost and alone and done with life, or death, or the After. Done with myself. How pitiful. I curled myself into a ball underwater, drifted and wept.

When I waded back to shore, Tarah stood on my rock seat with a white linen shirt-dress open like a robe in front of her. She helped me into the sleeves and buttoned the skirt while I buttoned the top. The women in the pool brought back the poles and cloth, then helped me dry my hair. The third woman, who'd run off to the camp when I first emerged, returned with a bowl of dates. I took it, lifted it up to see the cracks in the white underside, then studied the pores along the rim.

"It's a skull, Nessie."

I dropped it but Tarah caught it, lost only a handful of dates.

"It's perfectly all right, Nessie. They cleaned it, they've eaten from it themselves." The women who'd dried my hair, who crouched by the pool washing my old ocher blanket, turned to nod and smile at me. Tarah said, "And it's not real anyway, you know. None of it is." She picked one of the spilled dates from the ground, blew the sand off it, and ate it. She held the bowl out to me.

"If it's not real," I said, "if none of it's real, then why am I hungry?"

"Good question," she said. But I was hungry, so I took the dates and began eating.

After a few minutes, Tarah said, "Do you feel better?"

"No."

"Well," she said. "Okay."

"Where's Mara?" I said between dates.

“She’s on the mountain, playing with Hadi,” Tarah said.

“Hadi plays?”

“You’d be surprised,” Tarah said. “They’re looking for caves, I think.”

“I hope they find one,” I said. I hoped she’d fall into it and disappear. And I hoped I would, too.

## Chapter 8

We stayed at the camp for weeks, eating dates and flat, dry bread. The people kept their distance, talked mostly to Tarah and Hadi, though Mara liked to run among them, asking questions or climbing the date palms. Their side of the oasis was sandier, and Mara made sand tents and sand shacks and sand mountains, sad little replicas of the only things she knew, until one of the men, a tiny man with sinewy muscles in his skinny arms and tattoos like a shirt, showed her how to make a sand castle. She kept her distance from me, too, now that she'd moved on to solid food.

I slept in the shacks, a different room each night though never the one where I'd birthed and nursed Mara. I lay flat on the dry earth floor, staring at the insides of my eyelids. When it was day, I slipped outside to wander the base of the mountain or wade in the shallows of the pool. Sometimes I talked with Tarah or Hadi. Mostly I kept alone. The day caps and night caps fell, but other than that, nothing changed.

Then Mara made a sand castle big enough to stand inside, a playhouse of wet grains, and when she climbed her sandy tower and leaned out from the turret, she called across the oasis, "Nessie, look what I did!"

The people over there had crowded around the castle, and I could hear their murmurs from my side of the pool. The tattooed man looked like he was

clapping, but then I realized he'd only pressed his palms together and was smiling wide-eyed at Mara. Hadi walked up from behind me, stood on the rock stool so his head was level with mine, and we stared across the pool at her.

"It's beginning," he said.

"What," I said.

"The people over there. Your daughter has made that castle, solid as though it were real, through sheer force of will. This is the sort of miracle they'd prayed for."

"Prayed to whom," I said. "And don't call her my daughter."

For days Mara played, adding rooms to her castle, including a stable with four sand ponies, then building sand ships that rose from the floor of the pool to sit at the surface as though they floated there, the sand sails billowing out in the wind, suspended on sand ropes only a few grains thick. Her hands were coated in a constant skin of sand, her knees caked. The people cheered each new creation, then began goading her, trying for more outlandish miracles. Make the sails wave in the wind! Grow a sand tree! Make a bridge over the pool! She made the bridge by building a wave over the pool, then carrying buckets of sand out onto the crest and packing sand onto the end, back and forth, until the long sweep of sand had spanned the pool and she dumped buckets of sand on my shore to connect us. She might as well have flown over. The people were elated, dancing and singing, some of them dashing over the pool to test the bridge. Mara brought me her buckets and said, "Want to play?" It was the first

time I'd seen her in a week, and she'd grown to half my height. She could have been eight years old.

"I don't want to play, Mara. Thanks."

She watched me for a moment, then sat in the dirt and rocks of my shore.

"Nessie, why don't you try to make something? Everyone over there says you can make miracles. Show me one?"

"I don't know any miracles," I said. "You wouldn't like my sort of miracles."

"Maybe I would," she said. "Try one?"

I looked at her, then looked at her bridge, then back at her. I said, "Mara, really, I don't know how."

"If you did know how, what would you make?"

I wanted to make her disappear. I wanted find the farthest corner of the After and rip it up, pull it back like a page, go back to when I first met David, him in the road and me trying to run him over, and I'd run him over for real, plow him through so he'd spill across the hood. I'd go back to Alé and just sit and talk with him forever, I wouldn't sleep with him, wouldn't let any of this mess happen. I'd go back to the inn and never wake up.

"I'd make this place make sense," I said.

"I don't know what you mean," Mara said.

"Me either, kid."

"Would you make an ocean? Everyone over there says they've heard rumors of an ocean."

“Mara, for you, I’d make a deluge.”

She giggled but jerked her head around at the screams, then jumped up in tears. The dozen people who’d run onto her bridge had plunged into the water; the sand had collapsed to a ribbon of mud, sinking in the pool.

~

Hadi kicked my bare foot, leaned over me in the black. “Nessie,” he whispered.

“I wasn’t asleep,” I said.

“Come outside. Someone is coming.”

The people on the other side of the oasis scuttled about their camp, smoke billowing as they kicked their coals back into campfires. The day cap had broken and hung like a moon, washing the desert blue. A silhouette came shuffling from the far edge of the mountain, headed for the oasis. When he’d gotten several dozen steps closer, the camp quieted and watched, staring as though waiting for fireworks or the second coming of christ. He had a slight limp, his left foot heavier than his right. Hadi grabbed my wrist. “It’s Zamir,” he said.

“Who’s Zamir?”

Tarah walked over to join us. She said, “Nobody knows.”

“You two know everything. Or do you just make it up as you go?”

“A little of both,” Tarah said.

“But Zamir is beyond us. We have no idea who he is, or why he’s been here so long.”

“Great,” I said.

Mara came running from the other camp; when she got to us, she jumped to the rock stool and stood on it. She was as tall as me, standing on that rock. She peered out into the night then looked at me, her eyes wide and glinting with tears.

“I don’t like this, Nessie. I don’t want anyone else here.”

“You’re the little miracle worker,” I said. “Do something about it.”

But Tarah grabbed Mara’s arm and pulled her yelping off the rock.

“Mara, leave that man alone,” she said. “Please.”

Mara looked from Tarah to me, back and forth, then pouted and slipped behind me, her arms around my waist.

By the time he neared camp, the day cap and dropped to the size of a dinner plate, and the light was growing. He was dark, mostly bald, barefoot, his khakis rolled up past his ankles.

I pointed at him, turned to the children agape. “I know that guy,” I said. He was almost to us, and I turned to him and said, “I know you.”

He raised his thick, wiry eyebrows and stopped a few steps away from us. He touched his brow with his fingertips then put his hands in his pockets.

“Zamir,” Tarah and Hadi said together. Mara clung to me. Zamir tilted his head toward each of us.

“You’re here to see Nessie?” Tarah said.

Zamir shrugged and offered a thin smile, his eyes sagging at the corners.

“In any case,” he said, “for years she’d never had a word to say to me, and I could see she was moping, with no one to talk to.”

“You could see—who the hell are you?” I said. Mara was whimpering.

He shrugged again.

“He’s not much for words, Nessie,” Hadi said.

“What do you mean, I haven’t spoken to you in years,” I said.

He smiled again and pointed to the day cap.

“He’s not much for time, either,” Hadi said.

“Meaningless here, anyway,” Tarah said.

Zamir waved the back of his hands at us, shooing us back, and said,

“Shall we go in now?”

I backed up, Mara shuffling behind me, but Tarah and Hadi turned to walk into the shacks. Mara kept me as her barrier so that when I turned around she was in front of me, her face in my stomach. She walked backward as I walked forward, her little feet sometimes stepping on or falling beneath mine, until I reached behind and pried her hands loose and pushed her away from me.

“Don’t let him in Nessie,” she said.

“Back off, Mara. Stop hanging on me.”

“Please,” she said. “Mommy?”

“Nice try, kid,” I said. “No dice.” I ducked into the shacks and left Mara crying outside.

We worked our way through the rooms until we came to the one I called the dining room, where I’d built a table and benches from palm stumps and one of the scrap walls at the edge of the shacks. I’d punched a hole in one wall to let some light in, but with the day cap still so high, the room was dim. Tarah and Zamir slid onto one bench, and Hadi and I sat at the other, so we faced each other across the table.

“Listen,” I said, but Hadi put a hand on my arm and said, “Have you been to the City?”

Zamir closed his eyes and nodded.

“Is it done in?” Tarah said. “Did we manage to burn them all?”

Zamir opened his eyes, clasped his hands on the table. He was looking at me.

“It was fine,” he said.

“So, what are you then, the janitor?” I said. “You just go around cleaning up other people’s messes?”

He smiled at me, but it was thinner than before, his eyes heavy. “Right,” he said.

“Nessie,” Tarah said. She shook her head.

“What?” I said. “I’m supposed to revere this guy? Treat him like a saint? I don’t know anything about you, mister, except that you wander in from the

desert and seem to have all the fucking answers.” Hadi squeezed my arm hard, but I ripped it away without looking at him, my eyes locked on Zamir. “You know all about this death shit, you’ve got the key to everything in the After. Is that it?”

Hadi grabbed my arm and pulled it so hard he turned me on the bench, made me look at him. But Zamir held up one hand and waved it, shook his head. Hadi let go; I stared at him for a full minute, then looked back at Zamir.

Tarah said, “Nessie, Zamir doesn’t so much clean up the After as keep it safe, keep it organized. He’s something like an archivist for everyone here, and yes, he knows pretty much everything there is to know about the After. Yes, we do revere him.”

We looked at each other, Zamir and I. For a long time. We breathed.

“Okay,” I said. “Then you tell me. What happened to Alé?”

He stared at me.

“What happened to David? What happened to Harish when that bitch bashed his head in? Did you know about that?”

He closed his eyes and nodded.

“What happened to all the people they killed? What happened to the children? What happened when the City burned to the ground?”

His kept his eyes closed, lowered his head as though in prayer. I slammed my palms on the table.

“What happens next!”

He licked his lips, opened his eyes and took my hands in his. “It’s common knowledge that life isn’t worth living anyhow,” he said.

I pulled my hands away, crawled off the bench and stumbled backward across the room.

“This isn’t life, asshole! It’s death that’s not worth living!”

He raised his eyes to me, his eyebrows high. He nodded.

I screamed at him, head forward like a barking dog, fists clenched. Hadi and Tarah looked from me to him to each other. For a few minutes my seething was the only sound. Then I turned and went to stare into the corner of the room, my arms across my chest.

“So,” Tarah said, “What’s next?” I didn’t hear any response—he was probably shrugging or nodding or smirking or giving me the finger.

Hadi said, “Will you head for the three lakes?” After a moment, he said, “The station, then.”

Tarah said, “Is there anything we can do?”

Zamir said, “A life in which I can remember this life. That’s all I ask for.”

“There is no life, not here.” I turned to Zamir and the children. “Sorry, pal. It’s over for all of us.” He smiled at me, those thin lips, the tired eyes.

“Nessie,” Tarah said, but I stormed out of the room, bashing my way through the complex of shacks until I burst into the quarter-cap dawn. Mara was sitting on the rock, her knees pulled up to her chest. She jumped up when I came near, threw her arms around me.

“Nessie,” she said.

“You were right, kid,” I said. “I don’t like that guy either.”

At half-cap, the camp across the pool roused again, everyone crowding out of tents and pointing at us. Mara had been stirring the water with a stick, swirling up sand from the bottom and piling it on the shore, but now she was gazing up behind us. I turned too. A wavering rainbow had sprouted from the shacks and bent back over the mountain, the colors like dust, like powdered tempura paint from grade school tossed into the wind. We watched it for a long time, until the day cap had dropped low enough to cut through the arch of the rainbow, and then it faltered and dissolved, just a trick of the light, an image burned on our retinas. I looked at the shacks, took a few steps toward them, then turned and fell to lean against a furry palm, my arms on my knees.

When the day cap had shut against the horizon, Tarah and Hadi came out from the shacks. Tarah walked out to the pool, far away from me, and bent to splash her face. Mara ran to join her. Hadi stood next to me, looking out at the camp.

“Well?” I said.

“What,” he said.

“What was with the rainbow?”

“I didn’t see any rainbow,” he said.

“We did.”

“That’s interesting,” he said. He hadn’t looked at me yet. He had his hands in his pockets.

“Don’t you start too,” I said. “I can only take the enigma routine from one guy, and even he gets on my nerves.”

“Don’t worry,” he said. “Zamir’s gone.”

I looked at him, but he gazed over the pool. Mara ran over to us, Tarah slogging behind. Mara tackled Hadi in a hug—she was a head taller than him—and said, “Did you see, Hadi? Did you like it?”

“He didn’t see it, kid,” I said. “Or claims he didn’t.” Hadi looked hard at me.

“Oh,” Mara said. “That’s okay. I can make another one.”

We both turned to Mara and stared. Tarah joined us, her brow wrinkled. She looked to me and said, “What is Mara talking—”

But the crowd in the camp was gasping and pointing again, and we all turned to see the rainbow, more distinct now, drifting like smoke over the mountain.

“See,” Mara said. “Isn’t it pretty?”

~

Mara lived with the camp, making them feasts they described or clothes they desired, conjuring images out of thin air and eventually flattening them into wide floating movie screens, animations of the stories they told her. In a week,

she had grown two more years and had taught the people to manifest things on their own. “They just think things into being,” Tarah said. I told the children I’d seen it before, and they kept silent, fire in all our eyes, screams in our ears. Tarah and Hadi held back, stayed close to me by the shacks. They never explained where Zamir had gone, or why he’d gone. Or how he’d gone. We mostly sat and listened to the sounds of songbirds and goats and carousels and pianos and cricket matches that floated across the pool, or, in the black of night, an hour or so before the day cap winked its pinpoint opening in the dome of the sky, we listened to the soft breath of the pool itself.

Soon the whole oasis began to change, pansies and daffodils blooming from the rocks, the pool floor sinking so deep the water turned black in the middle, cedars and Joshua trees breaking through the sand, then grass in lush swaths, with rabbits to hide in it. One day and night, snow fell in a soft, opalescent glaze, and the people had snowball fights and rode sleds down the mountain while the children and I huddled inside the shacks. The next day, the snow was gone, not melted but vanished as though it had never been.

One night the campers huddled around me, circled me with their camps. I stared at one campfire, neither lit nor always there—it had come from something, but it had come without heat or friction, or else I’d simply missed the moment the wood changed from tree to flame.

“I used to do this,” I said. No one said anything back. I said, “I used to stare at fires for hours. In fireplaces, on camping trips.” I shifted to face it,

leaned in with my arms hugged across themselves. “ I don’t know where this is coming from. I couldn’t tell you one detail from any specific memory. But I know I watched fires endlessly. It was like I was scared I’d miss something, some change in the flames, like I’d turn my head and when I’d look back there’d be only ash, and I’d have dishonored the fire by missing whatever magic it was up to in there. So I just stared. Even at the embers, because I knew if I turned my head a breeze would kick up one last flame and I’d lose the ending. But I always missed it anyway. I’d find myself staring at nothing in the dark, and I’d have no idea at which point exactly the fire had ended.”

Everyone nodded, but no one said a word.

When the clouds wrapped over the mountaintop and floated above the oasis, I gathered my old ocher blanket and walked out away from the camp, farther into the desert where the changes hadn’t reached. Tarah and Hadi stood at the edge of the grasses, Tarah with her hand shading her eyes. I waved them to me, then kept walking. The desert looked dark in the distance, steamed in some unfelt heat. I heard feet pounding at a run behind me, and then Mara was ahead of me, walking backward.

“Where you going, Nessie?” She looked sixteen, curved, her breasts loose in her imagined t-shirt, her jeans legs rolled up to her calves. Her auburn hair was tied up in a long ponytail that swung behind her.

“I’m leaving,” I said.

“For good? Why?” I could have sworn she was chewing gum, and then there it was, the sugary scent of watermelon and red dye.

“What you’re doing back there, all the invention and manifestation, all the imagining, that looks like a lot of fun, but—”

“It is! You should try it.”

“I’ve been trying since I got here, Mara. But all I want is answers, and I can’t make those up.”

“Maybe I can,” she said. “What’s the question?”

Tarah and Hadi had caught up to us. Hadi tapped my elbow; behind us, half the camp had drifted into the desert’s edge. I looked at them, then looked at Tarah and Hadi. I said to them, “You tell me. What is the question?”

“You want to know for sure,” Tarah said.

“Is this it, are you dead, is there anything else,” Hadi said.

“Something like that,” I said to Mara. We stopped, Tarah and Hadi flanking me as I stared at Mara. She was my height. We looked at each other’s eyes. I couldn’t see anything in hers, not even my reflection. I said, “And I want to know what the hell I’m supposed to do with you.”

“It looks like you’re ditching me, Nessie. Mom. Are you ditching me?”

I shrugged. “I’m walking this way. You want to follow, I won’t stop you.”

We stared at each other for a few moments. Some of the people reached us, piled up behind us. The clouds floated over to shade them. I started walking, brushing past Mara, and she turned to walk beside me, her brow furrowed.

“Fine,” she said. “I’m coming with you.”

Nobody said anything for a long time. We just walked, the desert floor getting darker, grittier. Behind us, the whole camp trailed in a thick line, the clouds crowding into a gray sheet then dissipating in a mist. Except for me with my blanket thrown over one shoulder, no one carried anything—no tents, no instruments, no food. Some of the animals followed too, a few goats and dogs, a horse, but no one held a leash, no one carried a bird in a cage. We just walked.

The ground began to stink, and as the smell grew viler the ground became softer. It became slippery like wet clay; it smelled of rot, of sulfur and bacteria. Several people began gagging, but I walked on. I’d vomited enough in that place. Tarah slipped once and fell in the muck, and Hadi called out for me to stop. I didn’t. Then some of the people called out, too, and Hadi slogged to my arm and pulled me around.

“Nessie, stop. We’re walking in shit.”

A dozen or so people crowded around Mara. They explained something to her, arms waving in emphatic gestures, and Mara closed her eyes. Clover and jasmine sprouted from the clumps of shit, then all the people were clustering, concentrating, growing flowers and shrubs and grasses to cover the shit. I looked at my bare feet, brown to the ankles.

“Hadi, I just don’t care anymore. Shit is as good as sand, really.” I turned and kept walking. “None of it matters.”

We walked through the night, the stench with us for several hours but then drifting away in an imaginary breeze, and by mid-night even I was walking through grasses, short prickly straw that must have been part of the After before the entourage reached it because it was imperfect, full of burrs and stray rocks. When the day broke and revealed the wide plains ahead, dry and vast, I felt dizzy, buoyant, as though I'd been walking all these days and nights from the very beginning in the deep of a still, clear pool, everything visible and tangible but heavy, thick around me and inside me, but then suddenly the water fell away so I could breathe air and move through empty space again.

I slowed my pace, reveling in the clean lines and wiry grass, the thin scratches it left on my calves and the bruises from small rocks underfoot. Ahead, the grass grew taller, bristly heads like wheat, scrub brush poking up in dark patches in the distance. I spread my arms as I neared the fields, but the grains sank, the brush went slender and turned to blooms, the grass collapsed into a green carpet of lawn, and I turned on the following camp, hundreds of people with their arms outstretched like mine, all of them muttering and scanning about for things to change. When they saw me they stopped, several smiled, and the woman who'd brought me the dates in the skull bowl put her arm around Mara's shoulder.

"Stop it," I said. The woman took her arm off Mara, but I said, "No, not that. Stop changing things."

"The grass hurts my feet," Mara said.

“Leave it,” I said. And for a while, they did.

Book 3

## Chapter 9

Though I never felt tired, every couple of days we'd stop and camp through a night. I'd roll up in my blanket and star at the pinprick stars the people were tossing up in the night cap—I'd stare until the day cap opened up and pushed away the stars. Tarah and Hadi slept on the ground; sometimes, when they were asleep and oblivious, Mara would conjure a mattress of clover for them. When the day cap was low enough to see the horizon I'd heave off the ground, toss my blanket over my shoulder, kick Tarah and Hadi awake and walk on. Mara and her followers left their dreamt-up tents and cabins behind as they hurried to catch up, a dozen deserted towns in our wake.

Tarah and Hadi walked beside me, and sometimes, Mara did too, though we rarely spoke. Sometimes she would ask the names of things, these plants and rocks I wouldn't let her change, and sometimes I'd tell her, but mostly she spoke to Hadi and Tarah. She'd grown womanly, her hair smoky scarlet and past her waist, her breasts heavy and free beneath her t-shirt—a loose short-sleeve with a Superman logo one of the campers had imagined for her—but she never treated Hadi and Tarah like children.

At half-cap two weeks out, the descended light like a clear midmorning, we saw the horizon break and rise in a shallow graph at the edge of the plains. By full cap, I knew they were mesas, and for a while I worried we were headed

back into the desert, but Mara could see further than I could, and she pointed out the bristly lines of the mesas' flat summits. They were covered in spiky evergreens.

"Those are trees?" Mara said. "We're heading for the forest?"

"We're just walking, Mara. We're heading wherever our feet are taking us."

"Your feet," she said.

"Whatever. I didn't ask you to follow me."

"Nessie," Hadi said. "Perhaps it's time we had a direction."

"You can't wander about the After forever," Tarah said.

"Really," I said. I looked down at her but didn't stop. "Tell me then, what else is there?"

"You wander too long," Hadi said, "and you get lost." I laughed, but Hadi said, "You end up like Zamir."

Mara grabbed my elbow. I shook her off and said, "Suicidal as that would make me, maybe that's what I need to happen. That guy seemed to know what's going on here. Maybe wandering lost is how I can finally find some answers in this fucking place."

"Nessie, no," Mara said.

I shook my head and laughed.

"Nessie, you—you should have stayed in the shacks with Zamir," Hadi said.

“He’s scared,” Tarah said.

“Of what,” I said. “Not death, or after-death, or whatever we’re going to call it when someone dead dies again in this place. He seemed almost anxious for that.”

“Not death,” Tarah. She eyed Hadi and Mara, then said, “Never mind.”

“Never mind what?” I said. “Seriously, you two sound like Zamir sometimes. You have the answers?”

“Not any more,” Tarah said.

“Then we walk until someone else comes up with a better idea.”

We walked maybe a mile or so, Mara and the children lagging in silence. Then the night cap broke, and Mara slipped up beside me.

“Nessie?” she said. “Maybe we camp tonight. Would that be all right?”

Mara said.

“Whatever,” I said.

~

We walked another week. The fourth night we camped again, and the clouds returned, grown out of nothing and low enough to glow against the campfires and cabin lights. For a few hours it rained, though I never got wet and the fires only sputtered. By the eighth day, the terraced tree line was close enough we could distinguish the russet clay walls of the mesas from their

evergreen roofs. They were maybe another day or two away, but we'd drifted to the right of them so I saw them only in my left periphery, the mountain a dim knob on my right. When we settled to camp, Mara's followers created a clapboard meetinghouse and gathered in a din. I lay back and watched the night cap, starless and forgotten, seal off the horizon.

Later, in the dim light from the meetinghouse, Hadi came and sat beside me.

"They're trying to decide what to do about you," he said.

"Oh?"

"They want to see trees. Nessie, they want direction. Some of them think you've lost your capacity for miracles, but Mara's got most of them convinced you're just biding your time. So they're afraid of going against you, afraid of leaving you."

"What did they decide?"

"They haven't yet. They're going to ask to camp again tomorrow and talk it out."

"Where are you and Tarah on this?"

"We're with you, Nessie. We have to be."

I rose to lean on my elbows and looked at him, his silhouette in the faint glow from the meetinghouse windows. He was sitting cross-legged, his head on one little fist.

“You two have been tailing me from the beginning, right?” It was hard to make out, but he nodded. “Why?”

“It was Richard. He mentioned the knitting needles.”

“Richard told you about us having sex?”

“No,” he said. He raised his head and both palms, shook his head in the murky light. “No, he mentioned the needles before he went to visit you. When he didn’t come back right away, Tarah and I deduced the sex, but we couldn’t figure out where the needles fit in. Many people enjoy a few brief flings here, for many reasons, and often some people come yearning for some vestige of their lives, photos of their family or literature they loved or hobbies they enjoyed, something to remember their former lives or to forget their current deaths. But those people don’t last long here. Richard returned the next day, you know. But you lingered. That we couldn’t figure out. We were curious, is all. We took an interest in you. And then there was Aléjandro, and suddenly everything we know about this place was in question, and you were tied to it somehow.”

“How? Damn it, why me?”

“We still don’t know, Nessie. So still we follow.”

We sat for a few minutes. Several new cabins and tents rose from the grass as people drifted out of the meetinghouse, the din in there softer. Then I touched Hadi on the knee.

“Earlier, Tarah said Zamir was afraid. What was he afraid of?”

“He was afraid of Mara,” Hadi said.

“You two sure seem keen on her.” I rolled to one arm and turned my back.

“Nessie, Mara is unnatural. Worse, she’s impossible here. Death we can rationalize, learn to accept. This After follows one existence—perhaps another After follows this one. It’s frustrating, but not unthinkable. But if this is an After, if we have lived and died, how can a birth come from that? It makes no sense.”

I sat up, rolled to me knees and took him by the shoulders, pulled him to my face.

“Then why the hell did you let it happen!”

“Nessie—”

“Not the rape, not the pregnancy—Mara. Why did you let me give birth? Hell, you helped it happen, after I’d begged for an abortion, after I begged you to kill me and her with me.”

“It’s not the birth that’s miraculous and terrifying, Nessie.”

“Did you go through it? Did she come ripping and screaming out of your dead vagina?”

“Nessie, it was the pregnancy we feared. It’s conception that’s impossible. Once Mara was conceived, however impossible she was, she was inevitable, and we had to see what she was so we could figure out why she was, how she came to be.”

“Fuck you,” I said, shoving him away and rolling to lie on my side, away from him. “Tomorrow, I’ll perform a miracle, I’ll shove Tarah up your ass and watch you push her out again. Just to see what happens.”

He touched my shoulder but I elbowed him so hard he fell backward, and when he picked himself up, he walked away.

~

I lay staring at the horizon through the night, so I didn’t realize the day cap hadn’t broken until several of the campers burst from their cabins and tents and pointed at the sky. I rolled to look at nothing. The inky dome of sky was untouched, a solid shell of black. I stood and walked closer to the camp. Tarah and Hadi jogged over to join me, but neither said anything. The whole jumbled village was waking, campers spilling out to crowd around the meetinghouse by the dozens. Mara was among them; she looked my way once, shrugged, and stared at the sky. Her followers were all but dancing in agitation, elbowing each other and pointing and gesturing.

“So,” I said, “what the hell did they do this time?”

“They don’t know,” Tarah said. “None of them will claim this, none will even claim the power to stop it.”

“Please,” I said. “They’ve been scattering stars up there for a couple of weeks now, a different pattern every night.”

“That’s just it,” Tarah said. “They can’t create the stars tonight. They’re trying, even collectively they’re trying.”

“Whatever,” I said. “Nothing ever stays the same in this fucking place. Aren’t they used to that by now?”

“So you didn’t do this,” Hadi said.

“Are you kidding?”

“They’re convinced you created the day caps and night caps, Nessie,” Tarah said. “Frankly, so were we.”

“At least, we assumed you were connected to them somehow.”

“Oh, that’s right,” I said. “You two pissed me off tonight so now the whole endless After is conforming to my mood swing. We won’t see light till I forgive you both and smile the day cap into being again.”

They stared at me. I looked over them to the crowds around the meetinghouse, dim faces and shadows in all the window lights.

“Hey, Mara,” I shouted. “You know anything about this?”

She shrugged again, pointed at me. I flipped her off, shook my head, and lay back on my blanket. Tarah and Hadi sat beside me, but I said, “Really?” and they stood again and left.

For a few hours I stared at the black ceiling above. I may have closed my eyes a few times—it was dark enough I couldn’t be sure. But I began to get restless; it felt like time to get up, to shoulder the blanket and walk on, and still no day cap. Just the glow of the camp, which had spread to tinge the dome of night

in a weird, waxy goldenrod. The people had grown noisy, frustrated, I guessed, at their inability to star the night. I sat upright, my arms around my knees, and I looked toward the camp then fell over when I let go of my knees, and I fumbled to my feet and stared. The sky burned, the horizon flushed gold and smudged in haze. The distant oasis mountain burned like a cone of incense.

I shouted for Tarah and Hadi and they ran to me, Mara a short jog behind them. When the two children reached me, I grabbed each by an arm, bent to face them both.

“Did you do this?” I said. “The fire, is it another fire?”

“No,” they both said. “Nessie,” Hadi said. Tarah said, “We don’t know what’s going on.”

Mara said, “Look,” and the whole camp fell silent as smoke and flame tore over the horizon. The grasses behind us waved wildly then lunged at us, and a moment later a hot wind threw our hair back; a few dozen of Mara’s followers staggered in the blast and cried out. A few turned to run past us into the plains.

“What’s happening?” Mara said. “Why are they running?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “We’re dead already. What’s the use.”

“Nessie,” Hadi said. “I think we should go now.” Dozens more followers had broken for the plains, running toward and past us. The closest fliers grabbed at Mara but she shook them off. A few looked at me and faltered, but none tried to lay hands on me.

“Nessie,” Hadi said, touching his fingertips to my elbow. “Really, I think we should run.”

I glared at him, wiped sweat from my forehead and ran it through my hair.

“No.”

“Nessie,” Mara said, “if they think we should run, shouldn’t we run?”

“Oh, come on, Mara,” I said. “You haven’t even died once.” I grabbed her wrist. “Don’t you want to know what it feels like?”

Her eyes went wide, and she pulled away from me, looked from the fire to me. The flames were huge, spread out for miles and billowing up in a massive semi-circle like an explosion in slow motion. The sky around it smoldered, the dome glowing like burnished copper then darkening to a swirled blue like the burned bottom of a dry saucepan before it faded into the smoky black of the night cap.

“Nessie,” Tarah said. “We need to go.” The rest of the camp had run into the plains; Hadi furled my blanket and held it up to me, the fire reflecting in his black eyes. Mara and I locked eyes. I pushed a hand at Hadi, waved him away.

“Go, then,” I said. To Mara, I said, “Go ahead.”

We stood there sweating, our clothes sticking to us then flapping away in the hot breeze, then sticking again. Mara looked at the fire again, then to me. I refused even to blink. From off the plains we heard a handful of distant cries, muffled in the burning headwinds, then Tarah said, “Oh my g—Nessie, look.”

The fire had bubbled under, broken loose, and it was the sun, or a sun anyway, rising like a marigold on fire and burning the solid sky. Some of the fleeing campers were cheering out in the plains; others were walking, a few running, back to their provisional village, back to us. This time it was Mara who stared at me as I watched the horizon. She had her arms crossed on her chest; she was leaning back on one leg. She said, “Are we going to die, Nessie?”

“No, Mara. Not yet.”

The campers all returned, and after eddying around Mara and I, begging to know who’d made the sun, they crowded in front of their meetinghouse to argue and stare at the sky. Neither of us would admit to making it happen, and Tarah and Hadi not only denied they’d done it, they looked horrified.

For hours it rose, fluttering sometimes like a glowing scrap of paper ash drifting on its own hot updraft. The campers spent the whole day outdoors, watching the sun’s progress for as long as they dared stare at it—after an hour or so, they set themselves shifts to watch it so they all could rest their eyes and spend time arguing about where the sun had come from and what it meant for the After. When the camp had first settled to watching the sky, I tossed my blanket open on the ground where I’d slept, sat, and watched the sky alongside them. I had no theories and people stopped asking me, Tarah and Hadi included. They stayed close to me, sometimes taking turns to eaves drop on the campers’ arguments or to whisper with Mara in a corner of the camp but otherwise watching me carefully. Watching me, or watching the sun. It shrank

as it rose, grew denser perhaps, and the heat departed overhead, leaving a soft descending breeze to dry our brows. Ahead of the sun, the sky brightened to some shimmering blue like pottery glaze; behind, it left a trail of soot smudged on the sky. By midday, the whole sky shone a child's pure blue save the sun's burnt trench, and the heat was trapped somewhere up in the apex of the day cap. Then it stopped, bobbed in place like a balloon trapped on a ceiling, and settled. The sooty trench faded to a pale ash from the horizon upward, and after a few hours, it was subsumed in the bright blue shell of sky. I lay on my back with my hands behind my heads as though I was watching clouds. Mara sat beside me on my blanket and asked what I thought would happen next. I had no idea—I didn't want to know. Whatever was happening was happening, and I had no desire to try and control or predict it. Tarah and Hadi said, "That's a rare opinion around here," and pointed to the edge of the camp where half a day before Mara's followers had fled for the mesas. A contingent of two dozen campers had gathered just outside camp, circled over the grasses, and thought up a deep lake with a small sandy beach, and soon half the villagers had conjured lounges and umbrellas and bathing suits. Mara left to join them. Someone fashioned a beach ball, someone else a net. For hours and hours the sun remained high overhead, and some people fell asleep in its warmth on the little beach or drifted indoors to nap away their afternoon.

After a long while, Mara returned to my blanket. "They say the worst is over," she said. "They say the sun has come to light the After for real and that we're all coming alive again."

"Not you," I said. My voice was cottony, as though I were dozing even though I hadn't closed my eyes in maybe a day.

Mara looked at me for a long moment, then Tarah said, "What will they say when the sun begins to set?"

"It's going to set?" Mara said.

"The sun always sets, Mara," I said without looking at her. "And the worst is always still to come."

"You're making predictions now," she said. It was only barely a question.

"No prediction, kiddo. It's the way things are, and if you ask me, the way things are is more so here, so don't get comfortable."

"I'm not a child," she said. "Don't call me kiddo."

"Whatever."

She was silent for a while, and so were the children. Then she said, "So, what will happen when the sun sets?" Nothing. Just that fiery ball resting overhead. "Nessie?"

"Me?" I said. "Damned if I know." After a moment I added, "Apparently, I'm damned if I don't know, too," and I laughed.

“They look to me for answers,” she said, more to the sky than to me or the children. “I don’t know why, I have more questions than they do, but if the sun begins to set, they’re going to be afraid, aren’t they?”

This last seemed aimed at someone, and Hadi answered: “Yes, Mara, I think they will be.”

“What will I tell them?”

“We don’t know,” Tarah said.

I chuckled.

“Tell them to fire the barbecues,” I said. “Tell them to whip up a drive-in, or maybe a make-out point. Light some campfires, break out the guitars. The usual.”

“Are you serious?” Mara said.

“Why not,” I said. “It’s not like any of this matters anyway.”

She stared at me for a while then wandered to the little beach and waded among the people there. After a few more hours, and chuckled again. Tarah looked at me, Hadi leaned over to examine my face, but I pointed upward, my arm perpendicular to my body. The sun had begun its descent toward the far horizon. The whole camp went silent.

As it dropped, it left its scorched trench as before, though now the flames trailed upward with it like the shallow tail of a rocket. The camp had roused again, and everyone gathered around the pool to follow the sun’s descent. No one said anything. For hours and hours. Mara look back at me several times,

but she never came over. Tarah and Hadi held hands. The heat increased as it near the horizon, but it seemed much farther away than it had in the morning, and no one gasped or sweated. The lake dried up, forgotten, and left its waders standing in the grass again, left the sunbathers lounging in prairie. The beach ball bounced away several feet then got stuck in a stand of high grass. The sky dimmed behind us, near the mountain. Then the sun touched the far horizon and flashed like a mirror before disappearing behind a huge column of smoke that swept the sky into immediate dusk. The horizon behind us rose dark like a grin, swung upward fast in a vast shadow, and then, almost before it could lift over the top of the sky and close on us, the sky went suddenly black.

For several long minutes everyone stayed silent, waiting for the last of whatever was happening, but when the After settled into stillness and nothing else came, the crowds sizzled into conversations. Some panicked and cried or ran about trying to discover who had caused and let die the sun. Others turned resolutely toward the oasis mountain and tried to make the sun rise again. A philosophical gang around Mara argued in favor of expecting a moon, which would rise in the shape of a jawless skull and grate across the sky after the sun, the dry scrape of bone on night cap keeping us all awake and reminding us we all were dead. But none of it happened. The night passed in stillness, a damper on the fear and the prophecy, until finally everyone lit campfires and settled into conjecture, everyone again wondering aloud who'd made the sun, if it would come again, what the pillar of smoke had been. And then it began to rain, a thin

mist that sifted down and hissed in the fires. It was condensed steam—everyone knew it at once, and the fires went dim as the campers crowded around them to speculate and confer—and the pillar we’d seen was steam where the sun had quenched itself in an ocean, the ocean we’d all heard or spread rumors of.

I sat upright on my blanket for long, long minutes, then rose to one knee for long minutes more, and after a long while I was standing. Tarah and Hadi, who had spent their night meandering through the crowds to eavesdrop, now walked over and stopped a couple of yards behind me.

“Nessie?” Hadi said.

“Is everything all right?” Tarah said.

I didn’t turn around. I stood facing the night horizon, my back to the camp and the distance oasis mountain where the sun had risen. I said, “If it rises again, I’m going to the ocean.” They didn’t say anything, and I turned to look at them, hazy little silhouettes in the fires and the night. “And they”—I waved toward the camp—“aren’t coming with me.”

~

The sun exploded on the morning horizon. Though it was smaller and more controlled than before, the same searing wind washed across us; the lost beach ball rose from the grass and swelled in the heat till it burst. We gasped and sweated for a full hour until finally the sun had broken free of the horizon and

risen far enough to send the heat upward with the coils of smoke to settle in the high day cap. I waited out the heat, and when the sweat had crusted on my skin, I rolled my blanket longways to throw it like a rug over my shoulder. By then, word had spread of my plans, though Tarah and Hadi had remained beside me the rest of the night and I hadn't seen anyone close enough to have overheard me. A gang of people approached me, wild men and women in ballooning pants and metallic vests. Two of the women had shaved heads; everyone wore tattoos, though I didn't know if the flames and barbed wire had followed them to the After or if they'd appeared in a fit of whimsy since the oasis. Mara was with them, lurking toward the back of the gang. She watched me, her arms half-crossed so one hand dangled at her hips. At the front of the gang stood a tiny man with a sparse mustache like a teenagers but peppered with gray, his wiry hair whipped in tangles, his thin chest ablaze in tattoos. He was the man who'd taught Mara to build sand castles at the oasis. He nodded his head once, slowly, then put his bony fists on his waist and said my name.

"What do you want?" I said, but I was looking at Mara.

"My name is Uriah. This is my family—"

"Some of it's my family."

"—and we've come to escort you to the ocean."

"I'm fine, thanks," I said. I looked at Tarah and Hadi. Tarah shrugged.

Hadi took my hand.

"Still, we offer our services and will not be refused."

“You already have been,” I said, and I turned to walk away, but I heard them following. I let them come several yards, then turned again. “Look,” I said. “This is nice, but I’m okay on my own.”

“We know what the children rescued you from,” Uriah said. The others were nodding. Mara had folded both her arms and set her lips in a firm line, but she stayed in the back of the gang. Uriah said, “We know what dangers might be out there.”

“Yeah, well, here’s the thing. The kids rescued me, and they’re with me now. So let’s assume they’re all I need.”

“Perhaps,” a woman said. “But we were there in the City—we helped the children rescue you. So perhaps you need more.”

Tarah nodded and Hadi said, “We’re sorry, Nessie—we should have mentioned it.”

“Nessie,” Tarah said, and she tugged on my hand. I bent down, and she whispered to me, “They make us nervous, Nessie. Be careful.” Hadi nodded.

I crooked my head toward the gang, looked at the children again, then stood.

“You have anything to do with this?” I said to Mara. “Or are you just along for the ride.” She eyed me, kept her arms folded. I switched to Uriah: “Look, this whole baby-duckling thing has been cute, really, but enough already.”

“Mara wants to join you,” one of the bald women said.

“And you’re what, then, her baby sitters? Her secretaries?”

“Nessie,” Mara said, dropping her arms and stepping into the middle of the gang, “I’m worried about what’s out there. You think I don’t know what went on in that city? That man and woman, all those people murdered? I was inside you, I heard and felt a lot of it, especially at the end.”

“Did you feel the part where these two took care of me? I’ll be fine with Tarah and Hadi, you’ll be fine with these people. They worship you anyway.”

“We worship you, Nessie,” Uriah said. “You caused all this to happen, you brought a miracle to the After.”

“Well, delicious,” I said. I adjusted the blanket on my shoulder. “Then listen to me. I’m the mother of all this shit, I’m the one you worship and adore, and I say, piss off and leave me alone.”

“We will not,” Uriah said. He stepped toward me, reverence in his face but no fear at all. “You are the mother, Nessie, but you claim you can’t create or control anything, and we believe the child is our future, so we follow her. If Mara wants to go with you, she will, and if she wants us with her, we will follow and guard you both.”

Mara uncrossed her arms. I watched them all, the ten men and women, Uriah, Mara. I looked over my shoulder, toward the wet horizon, the mesas off to my left, dry grass drifting back toward desert on my right. My long wandering, Tanith in the desert, captive again. Here, at least, I had a choice.

“You’ll have to keep up,” I said. “I’m not much for camps, and for all I know, I may want to walk through the night.”

“We hadn’t planned on walking,” Uriah said.

Mara slipped around him and pointed into the plains. “I had been thinking of something like this,” she said. To her left, the plains swelled up in a mound the size of an elephant until roots broke loose and the grass fell away in clumps. Then the whole mound shuddered like a burrowing dog, and the black soil crumbled to reveal a filthy white van. I clutched my blanket and backed away, shook my head violently, said “No” softly but repeatedly until Tarah and Hadi each grabbed an elbow and pulled me to them, behind them.

“Mara!” Tarah said. “You know what that means to—”

“Yeah yeah,” she said, a dead imitation of me, and in a few seconds the van rusted, bent, and fell in on itself, the now-rotted seats poking at the papery roof. “I don’t understand engines, so I couldn’t make it run anyway. Been trying for weeks now.”

“Then we remembered the oasis,” Uriah said, his mouth spilt in a wide wedge of smile, and Mara waved her right hand over the plains and the grass dried in a vast patch, withered to nubs, then disappeared into sand. The sand trembled and rose up in one giant sheet like a hinged tarp, a live tree angling after it as a mast, and once the sand sail was erect and billowing, a sand yacht the size of a tall tour bus piled up from the ground.

We stared at it for a moment, then Mara said, “Oh, right,” and the sail jerked so the sand burst free and fell in a shower, leaving a thick canvas sheet sagging against the tree-mast.

“When the sun rises each morning,” Uriah said through that wide grin, “we can ride the hot wind it sends ahead of it. That will push us toward the ocean, where the sun sets.”

“Genius,” I said. “And you’re just going to make us a river ahead of the sand yacht, mud the whole way?”

“In a way,” a bald woman said, “but Mara is much neater,” and Mara stepped back, concentrating, until the chassis of the desiccated van shook off its rusted shell, the tires inflated, and the platform rolled under—into—the yacht. The sand compressed into polished wood as the yacht rose onto the van’s tires.

“I can’t make roads,” Mara said. “not like the ones you knew, or the ones they say ran through the Origins. I can’t get the asphalt right. But I can pack the earth so dense it turns to rock. Hell, I can just throw down rock, one long strip that’d clear anything ahead of us, which might be easier.”

The children were still holding my hands. Hadi said, “That is two small for all of us.”

“If it’s too big, the solar wind might take a while to get us rolling,” Mara said. “I can make more small ones.”

“Once the sun has risen and the wind stops, we’ll be stranded,” Tarah said. “We would rather walk to keep an even pace.”

“That’s why I asked them along,” Mara said. Uriah grinned and held his fingers to his lips as though to blow a kiss, but when he pulled them away and bent forward, a long flame erupted from his mouth. It stayed there, a horizontal

pillar he seemed to hold in his teeth, until he stood, sucked in, and swallowed the fire again. As he bowed, the rest of his family did the same, a symphony of fire jetting into the air like a dancing fountain.

“We were performers,” he said. “We traveled with carnivals and rock concerts. Of course, we couldn’t create the fire then, but—”

“I get the picture,” I said. The fiery crawl of the City, the screaming Citizens, those corkscrewing embers running wild in the night. I began to sweat.

Hadi whispered, “That’s what makes us nervous.”

“You didn’t seem to mind it when the sun first rose,” Mara said. “*Don’t you want to know what it feels like*—remember? How great it would be to let the fire come and destroy us both?”

“I thought it was—” but I stopped. On purpose. Retribution. The fire that should have killed me and Mara inside me, come back to finish the job. But these people surrounding her, protecting her.... Tarah adjusted her grip on my hand, and Hadi leaned into me. When I looked at him, he shook his head. “I wasn’t thinking straight,” I said, and then I looked at Mara. She watched me. The gang glanced at each other. One of the men bit his thumbnail, and another put his hands in the pocket of his balloon pants, took them out again, put one hand in, then scratched his tattooed chest with his free hand.

The sun was a quarter up the sky, the smoke drifting lazy toward the top of the dome.

“The children stay with me,” I said. “And her”—I pointed to a small brunette with a crooked spine and a tattoo of a flying beetle on her right arm—“she can ride along and, what, spew fire for the sail. That’s it.” Uriah nodded, and Mara waved the bent woman toward us. “We don’t stop,” I said. “Not for sleep, not for stragglers, not for anything, until we hit the ocean.”

Mara had already summoned two wheeled yachts to join the first, the sand shaking loose from the sails and compacting into wood while we watched, and a fourth patch of prairie grass was withering into dust. Uriah’s family divided itself among the little ships. At each yacht, the smallest person clambered onto the shoulders of the tallest—Mara, stronger than I’d have believed, lifted our small fire-breather—and they scooped out ladder-rungs in the sides of the yacht, the wood falling away in sand as though it had never been solid.

“We should coast on the plains for a while,” one of the bald women said, and she nodded over her shoulder toward the silent camp. Everyone had gathered at the border to watch us, hundreds and hundreds of Mara’s followers gazing in wonder at her four yachts. Some of those at the front were crying and waving at us. The bald woman said, “If they see Mara make the road, they may decide to follow us.”

~

By midday, the fire-breathers spit their flames and pinched the fire in their teeth, the sails unfurled, and we were creeping across the flat open plains. Hadi stood on the raised bow, the thin breeze in his hair, and Tarah leaned on the rails by the helm while I steered. But only an hour in, my yacht coasted to a crawl, and I saw our flame-eater, Edana, bent over on her raised rear platform behind the sail; she was hissing and fanning her lips. The other yachts rolled past us several lengths but swerved and stopped, the rest of the entourage leaning on their railings to watch us.

“I can’t do this the whole trip,” Edana said, her words slurred and sticky. “My lips are blistering. I need someone else to work in shifts.”

“Tough shit,” I said. “You’re so full of magic, you make it work, because no one else gets on this boat.”

Her eyes went wide; she cradled her mouth in one cupped hand, then looked across the plains at the ships ahead. Tarah stepped down from beside me at the helm, picked her way aft, and took Edana’s elbow to pull her low.

“Here,” she said, her small voice suddenly thick and buttery, one hand gentle on Edana’s cheek. “Let me see.” Edana lowered her hand, and Tarah said, “Look at me eyes” then pinched Edana’s upper lip and stripped the skin in one delicate swipe, as though she were removing a bandage. Edana gasped and cupped her hand over her mouth again, but Tarah said, “No, no, it’s okay. You just need to peel away the blisters. Your lips are fine.” She pulled away

Edana's hand again, stripped the lower lip, and nodded. "If you feel it start to hurt, just peel the blisters and take a few cool breaths. You'll be fine."

She left Edana sucking air through her pursed, pearly lips and returned to my side. We faced forward, and Tarah whispered to me. "I don't know how they manage it. They still think they have bodies, somehow."

~

The vast grasslands rolled under us for days. Sometimes we would drift between patchy copses of sprawling trees or scrub brush, but otherwise the days and nights wafted past, the plains smooth as an indoor carpet beneath our tires. I took to slipping inside the yacht early, when the sun was halfway through its descent to the ocean and I was sure we were still aimed the right direction, and I would emerge when it was still dark outside, the waxy cast of the coming sun just beginning to blanch the horizon. I had not slept since the City, so my nights were the same as those long months at the base of the oasis, same as the hike into the plains: I lay in the dark and stared at the wood beams above, listened to the creak of the yacht, the crackling hiss when the sun's plume of ocean vapor had condensed to fall in mist through Edana's flame, the soft crush of damp grass beneath our tires. I would listen and stare and lull myself into something like rest, but I never slept, refused to dream, and then the black rectangle where the stairs opened onto the deck would soften, I knew morning approached, and I slipped

from my thin berth. Those long pre-dawn hours, I would climb to the deck, send Edana below to sleep away the morning, and lean over the aft rails to watch the plains, the grass itself seeming to sigh in expectation of the sun. The dim lights from the camp disappeared after the first night, and these dark mornings made me feel alone, private, the way I might have felt as a girl when I closed my eyes and hid from the world. It was what I might have hoped death would have been like. Secure and serene, safe in some coffin. I wondered where my body had wound up, if someone had found me and dropped me in a morgue, in a coffin, in a hole, or if I still lay out in the woods, half-naked and rotting beside the road. Then the morning horizon lit up in a sickly yellow glow, muddy with smoke and haze, and after a half hour or so, the fire broke free and floated up the sky.

On the fourth morning, I emerged into perfect darkness, not even the jets of flame setting the four sails aglow. I couldn't see my feet or the deck, just the shadows of the stairs from the dim light in my cabin below. As I stumbled onto the deck and felt my way back along the rails, I called for Tarah and Hadi, then for Edana. I heard her answer from behind me—Edana was standing on the raised bow, and we had drifted to a dead halt. Out in the black behind us, I could just make out a thin crack of dead brown like muffled light from under a door. Tarah climbed the stairs with a lantern, some old square museum piece, and in its watery light I could make out shapes in the black beyond our ship. One of the yachts had overtaken us in the night—it rested just ahead and to the right, starboard if there had been stars.

“What’s happening?” Hadi said as he crawled up from below.

“No idea,” I said. “Edana?”

“We only have a short window here,” she said. “Mara didn’t want to wait till midday.”

“For what?” I said. “I told you I didn’t want to stop.”

“She needs the light of sunrise, but we have to get it done before the winds come,” she said.

“Edana, you’re not explaining anything,” I said, but the crack of light back on the horizon had gone buttery and the plains had lightened to a murky dusk. When I climbed to the raised bow, I could see Mara on the ground ahead of us; she’d been picking bits of grass and poking in the dirt, but now she stood and brushed her hands on her jeans. She walked around our ship—I followed her across our deck and stepped up onto Edana’s rear platform—and Mara climbed into her yacht, which had stopped behind us, the jutting prow almost parallel with our ship. She made her way out onto the prow, just a few yards from me, where she took a long, deep breath, then blew through puffed cheeks so the grasses swept away from her and lay flat. Then she pressed her palms together and closed her eyes. I’d have thought she was praying if her face hadn’t looked so strained, her hands trembling with pressure, and then the prairie crackled with the crunch of grass pressed flat into the soil, the dirt crushing in on itself, packing hard. Mara sweated, a strangled grunt sputtering through her nose. Then she raised her pressed hands over her head, took another long, long breath, and

collapsed backward onto the deck. The plains resounded with a buried rumble and the yachts were consumed in an eruption of dirt and bits of chaff. The heavier clumps of earth fell in a long chunky spatter, but the finer dirt and bits of grass hung in the air for a few moments, and when everything had settled, I still couldn't make out much but a dirty wrecked strip in the plains that ran to the horizon, the leading edge raised a bit like a ripple and still racing into the distance. Then Uriah shouted from the lead ship—"Steer!"—and I realized how light it had gotten. The hot blast of wind hit me before I'd turned, and as it swept past the ship and jerked us forward in the snap of the sail, I saw the wrecked path ahead dissolve, a cloud of debris raking ahead of the wind, to reveal a bright stone highway twice as wide as the yachts, the shoulders jagged but the direction straight as a bowstring and the surface smooth and white as bone.

## Chapter 10

I rarely steered. Sometimes the solar winds stirred in unexpected directions, or our weight in the yacht would set us drifting to the edge of the road, but mostly I leaned on the spoked, wooded wheel and watched the grasslands swipe past. More and more Tarah stayed near me at the helm while Hadi spent most of his mornings below and most of his evenings in the bow, watching the sun set. At night, while Edana moaned through her fire breathing, Hadi silently guided the yacht. He told us the stone highway gleamed even in the pitch of night, soaked up then seeped the glow of the sail fires. The other three ships, with three or four fire-breathers apiece, usually pulled ahead of us in the dark, but they always quit before dawn to let us catch up and roll to the lead. By day, the road stretched ahead like a marble pillar fallen and buried in the earth. Off our port rails, toward what would have been the south if the sun rose and set in its old directions, the mesas were splintering into a distant mountain range, grubby brown for a few days, then fading to drab ash. After a week, the mesas had withered into the flat line of the horizon and ahead of the mountains a ragged shadow spread from the southern edge of where we headed, a hard black streak like a pen line emerging from it and cutting across our path and winding into the northern plains as though to sweep around the desert I'd left months ago.

In the nights since we first saw the shadow and line, I grew restless. The pattern of squeaking suspension springs and hissing tires, of humming sail and rocking wood, became alien, invaded by some foreign sound I couldn't isolate, couldn't make out as anything but the white noise of my wandering mind. Tarah stopped sharing the cabin with me, spent her nights at the helm with Hadi or on the rear deck, I wasn't sure. Then, the worst night yet, as I tossed and squirmed in my berth, Tarah descended the dark steps and whispered to me.

"There's something out there," she said. "We think we hear voices."

I swung my legs off the mattress and hunched inside my berth. "Is that what that is?" I said. "I've been hearing something—"

"For days," Tarah said.

"I didn't think it was voices, though. Just noise, like a buzzing I couldn't place."

"It has structure. It sounds like words. Come up here."

I followed her up to the deck and climbed the steps to the raised bow. The other three ships, the wide glowing squares of their sails and the thin jets of their flames the only things visible, slipped ahead of us into the black. I could hear the dim hum and pop of their tires and sails, and mingled within it was a faint chatter. Tarah stood at my elbow, and I pointed at the ships, looked down at her.

"It's just the rest of them, Uriah's family," I said.

"No," she said. "Beneath them. Ahead of them. Listen."

But I didn't hear a thing but the dull monotony of our own travel. We waited, Tarah motionless beside me, the occasional chirp of the steering wheel on its spoke or sucking huff from Edana as she peeled and cooled her lips before spitting forth her flame again—but then I heard it.

“Stop,” I said. I turned around. “Hadi, keep us straight, just let us coast, but Edana, stop the fire.”

She sipped the flame back and swallowed, caught her breath, and said, “But we'll lose them.”

“Good,” I said. “Shut up, everyone shut up.”

We coasted, the yacht sinking on the tires as the sail sagged then flattened against the mast, acted like a slow brake. The hiss of the tires lulled to a low hum and Edana's sucking breaths subsided, the broken chatter ahead of us drifted away, and from beneath everything a regulated, rhythmic sound took over the stillness of the night. I couldn't make out what it was, but it sounded vaguely like language, the patterns not words necessarily but nothing mechanical or musical, either, and certainly not something we would have called natural if we'd been alive, not a bird call or the ruffle of water. I leaned on the bow rail, then stood up on it, then crouched and inched along the short prow out into empty night. We waited. Hadi and Edana walked to the bow and joined Tarah at the rail; we all closed our eyes. After several long minutes we heard new sounds, a different rhythm, and I said, “There,” then, after several careful breaths, “What's that?”

Tarah said, "Nessie, look," and Edana said, "Where's the flames?"

I opened my eyes. The glowing squares of sail had stopped, two far ahead and one, the size of a postage stamp and growing, coming closer. I backed along the prow and crawled down to the deck to wait. When the yacht pulled closer it slowed, the twin flames turned sideways into the night to hold the light but stop the sails, and the ship rolled along our port side, the far tires dropping off the rough edge of the road into the grassy shoulder. Mara stood on her own bow and walked sideways down her ship as it passed so she could keep even with me.

"What's wrong?" she said as she walked. "Edana, are you all right?" and—while Edana nodded—"Nessie?"

"Did you hear it?" I said.

"Hear what?"

"We're stopping for the night. And I want everyone silent."

"What did you hear, Nessie? Is something out there?" Her eyes narrowed at first, but after a second they flew wide, her hands pressed on her rail. "Is it Zamir?"

"No," Tarah and Hadi said together.

Mara's yacht stopped a few feet past ours, so she was standing not even with us but even with the short stairs that led to our raised bow. She didn't move, and we didn't walk back to come join her. Everyone stood silent; we listened

again. The sound rose again as though on a wind, and Mara let her head bob in several shallow nods. She whispered, "I hear it."

We listened a while longer, then Tarah said, "We don't know what it is."

"You've never heard it before?" Mara said.

"We know the general layout of the After, Mara," Tarah said.

"But we've never actually come this way before," Hadi said.

"And you've changed it so much now," Tarah said.

"You didn't have anything to do with the noise?" I said. When Mara shook her head, I added, "Not Uriah's people?" She glanced at me, a brief glare, almost cautionary, but she shook her head again and said, "At least, not that they've told me."

~

When the solar wind jettied into the sails we couldn't stop ourselves, and we raced along the smooth stone road after the leading two ships. But we let ourselves coast to a halt again in the noon hours, and after twenty minutes we saw the lead ships lumbering back along the road to join us. By the time the winds and the humming tires of the returned yachts had settled, the voices filtered above all the other sounds of the After so we could almost make out the words. One was "passenger," another sounded like "bard," and I made out either "bright" or "blight." The tone was much easier to pick up; the voice sounded

careful, a trained voice like a news anchor or a dj for some contemporary-adult radio station. It was pleasant and polite but flat, vague. And it was stationary. We sat on the stone road the rest of the day, listening, and the voice neither came closer nor grew fainter, didn't shift right or left, south or north.

Mara joined me on my yacht. She looked mid-thirties, my age, no grays in her hair but the auburn faded to a dull rust, dried out, and her face showing thin lines. I stared at them, wondering why a dead face on a body that was never really born would show age, but the sun was setting and I couldn't see clearly, so I switched to staring at the horizon. When the sun had pulled its shadow after it behind the After's edge, Mara said, "Now what?" I shrugged. She said, "Uriah said he saw something, a heap of rubble ahead in the road." I stared at her, then snapped my head forward to squint over the prow. The line was thicker though still unclear, but even from our position I could see it thickened like spilled ink directly ahead.

"Why the hell didn't you say anything?"

"We were listening, and we weren't going anywhere, so I assumed it could wait. It's roughly where that black line cuts across my road, only he says it's more like the opposite, that the road broke through the line and scattered some debris into the plains. There's a big pile of it where the road and the line intersect, with shallower piles spreading a bit to the north and farther out to the south."

"Couldn't see what it was?"

“No. Or, he didn’t want to say. I think he suspects something, though.”

“A camp? Another city?” I was pushing my short fingernails into the polished wood of the deck rail.

“I don’t think so,” she said. “If it’s close enough we can hear voices, we’d see from here if it was a city. It could be a camp, though.”

“What do you want to do?” I said.

“I worry about getting too close in the dark,” she said. “I’d rather see what we’re coming up on. I say we wait out the night and let the winds take us in. At least until we’re close enough to see what it is.”

The next morning the winds shot us along the road in a roar of heat. I stayed on the bow, let Hadi steer. The four ships raced each other—ours was the lightest and by the end of the sunrise we’d pulled ahead a full length—but once the sun had settled into the dome for the long noon hours, we let ourselves glide to a rest. Hadi steered the port tires off the road to use the grass as a brake, and Mara pulled her yacht into the prairie to roll up beside us. The blank line running out of the southern forest was a ridge, only a few feet high but distinct on the flat plane of grasslands. Nearest Mara’s road, it rose in a jumble of tossed tubes, most a deep pine green but a few at either end rich white, teetering or leaning against each other like a child’s toppled blocks. Mara’s road disappeared beneath the mess then shot on, gleaming toward the horizon on the other side. It took us all a moment, but Edana said it before I did: “Oh god, it’s a train.” Her voice was small; she held one fist tight between her breasts while she

picked at her peeling lips with her other hand. A moment later Mara shouted the same announcement from her yacht, but I waved her silent and we listened, and now, close as we were, maybe another good sunburst away, the polite, tinny words floated over us like a lone cloud.

“Dear passengers, this is the time when perseverance and purity of perception are imperative.”

The sentence was metallic, the words sharp echoes that bounced through the tossed wreckage. Some of the hundreds of PA speakers sounded broken, popped paper or wiring stripped in the wreck. We all looked at each other, the whole gang from ship to ship, and then I turned to Tarah and Hadi.

“Did you know anything about a train?”

Hadi’s face was slick, his black hair in his eyes.

“It’s the Hot Shot,” Tarah said to her feet. Hadi put one arm around her.

“We didn’t know where it ran,” he said.

“We’ve never been out this far,” Tarah said. “We’ve never seen the train.”

“But we’re pretty sure this is the Hot Shot,” Hadi said.

All the other ships droned in a low sob, Uriah’s family leaning into hugs. Mara climbed over our rail, waved to Edana until she broke for the edge, swung over the rail, and ran to Mara’s ship, and then Mara made her way to our bow.

“Dear passengers,” the PA system announced, “when the roar of savage, wild beasts echo around you, may their cries be transformed into the sound of six syllables.”

Mara watched the children for a moment, then leaned close to me and whispered, "What do they know about this?"

"It's the Hot Shot," I said. "I thought Uriah's people would have told you."

"They don't know what's going on," Mara said. "They're upset because this is how they died, the whole family was in a derailed circus train."

"I didn't know they still had circus trains anymore. I thought it was all motor homes and trailer trucks." Mara stared at me, and I realized for all our similarity in age, she didn't know what I was talking about. I shrugged. "How'd they remember their deaths? I couldn't recall mine at all until—" but I stopped.

"It was back at the camp, the one with the meetinghouse," Mara said. "I helped them remember. Did my road do this?"

"Don't know. Could have," I said. She looked to the children and opened her mouth but I grabbed her elbow. "Leave them alone," I said. She stared instead at the wreckage in the distance, the white cars and the shattered windows gleaming in the descending sun. I said, "You think there are survivors?"

"I thought everyone was dead already," Mara said, but before I could respond Tarah had broken free of Hadi.

"We need to go to them," she said. "We need to check. Get the fires going. Mara, get us moving again."

"I thought we'd ride the sun's—"

"No," Tarah said, and I was already jumping the steps to the helm.

Mara stayed with me but called Edana back to our yacht, and soon we were leading the other ships toward the wreckage. The PA system called to us over the rush of wind and Edana's roaring flame, but we only caught bits of sentences, "peacock throne" and "blood-filled skull" and "hearing" scattered between the "dear passengers" refrain. As we drew closer the low sun flared against the scattered cars, twelve pine-green tubes like logs out of the forest and, at either end, three stubby white engines or crew cars with beveled roofs, their strips of mountain blue muddied in the wreck. Mara's road was littered with loose black gravel, and twisted down among the cars and wheels we could see the rails bent and buckled.

"Dear passengers," the PA announced as we turned north off the stone road and bounced parallel to the gravel bed of the tracks. "These are arising out of the natural expressive power of your own awareness." I had expected the voice to blast across me like the solar winds, but the reverberations seemed to rise high into the air before spreading across the plains, so while it was louder, more distinct, it sounded more like the voice was raining down on us than blaring against us.

When we stopped beside the lead white car, which had flipped onto its back like a dead insect and bent in the middle, the sun was nearly into the ocean. We had sailed so close to the shore we could hear the water hissing and boiling under the huge fire. Mara hurried below deck while everyone else gathered at the rails of their yachts; when she reemerged, she was carrying broken chair legs

wrapped in sheets, which Edana flew fire over and lit for torches. By the time we'd climbed down the niches in the sides of the yachts and sorted ourselves on the grass, the sun had steamed out in the ocean and dragged over the night's shadow. Our torches crackled in the falling mist.

The white cars lay in ruin, bent or crushed like empty beer cans, their wiring and conduit pipes and axles spewed into the grass or across the tracks. But the green cars behind them were still mostly intact, the worst damage from tipping onto their sides or riding up at angles over each other. The first two cars were the ugliest, every window shattered, half the stiff, lattice-patterned seats broken away at angles to hang from one bent bolt or fallen in little heaps on the ground side. Edana clipped a short flame in her teeth, we lifted her to the top side of the first car, and she lowered herself through one of the wide, shattered windows. We could see the glow from her little fire passing up and down the car until she pushed past a pile of broken seats and forced open the narrow door between cars, which fell down like a flap. She swallowed her fire and crawled through.

"No people, but there are lots of weird symbols in there," she said. "They're scratched into the walls and the ceiling, like with one of the broken seat frames or something. Jagged lines like jackolantern teeth, and an arrow pointing at something. At least I think it's an arrow—the tip is almost diamond-shaped." I stooped to put my torch and then my head through the door, saw the jagged lines like teeth and the diamond arrow. It didn't seem to be pointing at anything.

“Dear passengers,” the speakers told me, “at this time the fierce, turbulent, utterly unbearable hurricane of past actions will be swirling behind you, driving you on.”

“Thanks for the heads-up,” I said, and we turned toward the remaining cars.

The third car was intact enough we all could climb in. It looked like a dining car, all cracked and teetering tables and the crush of powdered dinner plates under our feet. We waded through used instant-noodle cups and stale bread rolls littering the broken windows; I smelled rancid butter and, at the back of the car, near the lavatories, a pungency of dried vomit. On the back door, someone had scratched a small cross and a question mark. The PA system slipped into a too-polite tone, like a smarmy waiter, and followed its “Dear passengers” with a long list of comments about our appetites and desires.

The fourth car was upright but harder to enter through the doorway because several thin seat cushions, in that same lattice-pattern, had been wedged against the door. When we finally forced our way into the room and Mara had passed me a torch, I heard a gasp and scrambling in the back of the car.

“Wait,” I said. “Wait, are you okay?”

A second pile of cushions in the back of the car shifted, and the back door clicked shut. Mara stepped around me and said, “We can help if you’re hurt. I can help.” I eyed her, but she ignored me and climbed over a fallen seat, her

raised torch leaving scorched streaks in the molded plastic ceiling. “My name is Mara,” she said. “Please let me see you.”

We waited, but no one moved, no one said anything. The torches crackled. Then the seat cushion at the top of the pile shifted, sagged, caved in on itself and turned to mold, to dust, and sifted down the pile. The next two mattresses did the same, then several at once until the whole pile toppled and a skinny teenage girl stepped into the aisle to face us.

“Stop that,” she said, her voice tiny and rolled into a thin brogue, Irish or Scottish, I couldn’t tell which. “How’re you doing that?”

“I can teach you,” Mara said, leaning against the toppled seat she’d stepped over, “if you’ll trust us.”

The girl shifted closer to us. She had translucent skin and short, choppy dark hair, and she wore baggy dungarees with a grimy, red-striped tank-top over a gray sweater. She was barefoot. “Mara, is it?”

Mara nodded.

“And the rest of you?”

I told her my name, then Edana and Uriah and Tarah and Hadi, and so on back through the car as we crowded closer behind Mara. The girl stood on her toes and peered hard into the car when Tarah and Hadi spoke. She couldn’t have been but a few years older than them when she’d died.

“How’d you come to find us here?”

“We followed the road—” Mara caught herself, then said, “we followed the sun.”

“S not natural, that sun,” the girl said. “Why’re you following it?”

“I wanted to find the ocean,” I said. Then, without thinking, I added, “I need to find a boundary, some end to all this.”

She looked at me, and Mara turned to look at me too. Tarah slipped past the crowd and put her hand in mine. The PA system announced, “Dear passengers, when your life’s course is ended and you roam alone in the intermediate states, your loved ones can no longer help you.”

The girl flinched then crossed her arms and scowled at the speakers in the ceiling. When she looked back to Mara she said, “How’d you do that with the seats, then?”

“Later,” Mara said. “How many of you are there?”

“Lots. Forty-two. This all of yours?”

“We have a few waiting outside,” Mara said. “Not easy to fit us all in here.”

“How’d you squeeze in forty-two, actually?” I said.

The girl wrinkled her brow at me. “There’s more than this car, ain’t there?”

“What’s your name?” Mara said quickly, sidestepping in front of me to block my view of the girl and, I guessed, shut me up.

“Colleen,” the girl said.

“Colleen,” Mara said, “let’s help the rest of your people out into the open and we’ll see if we can help you. And I’ll explain everything we know.”

She led us three cars back to a sleeper still sitting firm on the track. She took Mara's torch and opened the door, called into it that she was coming in, and a few minutes later she emerged, helping the line of passengers step down from the car and the track-bed to the dark torch-lit prairie. The crowd huddled close, but it was clear they weren't friends, just people trapped together in accident. Some were Asians with round, ruddy faces and long hair piled on their heads. Others were white, European maybe, with hunched shoulders and upturned coat collars. One woman wore a filthy men's blazer, a few sizes too big and once sage-green. A few were African or Caribbean, draped in what must once have been bright, wild patterns. A lanky punk with ruby-red spikes and ripped plaid pants stood between Colleen and a middle-aged Indian man with a matte vinyl case like a satchel or a laptop bag. A withered old woman stooped in greasy housecoats layered one over the other, muttering and touching her fingertips to her forehead again and again. Several old men huddled to one side: Some had long dry hair and sandpaper stubble, two had thick tangled beards, one gray-blond and the other the color of graphite. They wore dirty t-shirts pulled across their stomachs, and hanging thin blue jeans or course workmen's overalls. Everyone smelled of cigarette smoke and sweat and the rancid butter from the dining car.

"Dear passengers," the PA said, "if even now you do not recognize this, and become afraid and turn away from the visions, you will go on to experience yet further suffering—"

“Oh, shut up,” Colleen said.

“—You will be overwhelmed by fear, by awe, at the sight of all the blood-drinking deities,” the announcement finished, “and you will faint.”

The straggly crowd shuffled in the wavering circle of torchlight, staring at us in shifts. Mara said, “Is this everyone?” and Colleen told her it was.

“So, who’s in charge of you all?” I said. “Colleen?”

“In charge?” she said.

“Ain’t none in charge no more, ma’am,” one of the bearded old men said. “Least, not the ways you’re thinking. We had us what you might call a bull, a mean son of a bitch, what put us on the train again. Real bone polisher, that one. But we’re shut of him now. The angelina there’s been looking after us since the wreck.” He jerked his beard toward Colleen, then stuffed his hands in his overall pockets.

“On the train, again?” Tarah said.

“The woman in the dirty blazer smiled at her. “Oh, yes dear. We’d ridden the train straight to the caves, and we’d all settled in warm and safe. We heard our own heartbeats echoing there in the caves, it was so serene. Do you know what serene means?” She bent toward Tarah and Hadi and smiled at them

“Please,” Hadi said, “you were at the caves?”

“Yes, dear, but then that man came, and the next thing we knew the train had come back, and that man was ushering us on board again.”

“Ushered with a cow prod,” one of the old men shouted. “The son of a bitch.”

“Yes, well,” the woman said.

“He kidnapped us, he did,” Colleen said. “Chained us to the seats. We couldn’t sit up straight, we were handcuffed to the legs, you see.” Tarah and Edana both gasped, and Colleen nodded and said “Oh, yeah,” then pulled up the left sleeve of her sweater to show us the bracelet there, the chain broken. “All we could do was slump in the seats.”

“Till we come up on the road there,” one of the men said. “Threw us straight in the air. Hell of a wreck, but what chains it didn’t break we could slip over the legs what broke away.”

“Please,” the man in the suit said. “I would rather we didn’t speak of the train anymore. We’re free now, praise God.”

“Actually,” Mara said, “I think it may have been me who freed you,” and she gathered them close to explain the road, the ships, her ability to change the After. She left out her birth, left out David—my part of the story—and Tarah and Hadi and I sifted back through the crowd until we sat just beyond the ring of firelight.

I picked at the grass. Tarah said, “Are you okay, Nessie?”

“It doesn’t matter where we go,” I said. “Someone’s always getting fucked with. Ditched, raped, kidnapped, held hostage from the inside out”—I nodded

toward Mara in the midst of her audience—“ganged up on and followed around.

And it’s not just me.”

“These people seem okay,” Tarah said.

“Though that’s partly due to their ignorance,” Hadi said.

“You don’t hold anything back, do you, Hadi?” I said.

“You haven’t seen it?” Tarah said. “They didn’t know they were dead.”

I looked back into the crowd. They were jostling each other, some hid their faces in their hands, a black woman with hard, wide cheekbones was yelling at Mara. The light from the few torches and the jets of flame Uriah’s family held upright in the night cast weird coppery shadows over the ring of faces and shoulders.

“Heard their heartbeats in the caves,” Tarah said. “It’s kind of sad, actually.”

“But that just makes it worse,” I said. “They were kidnapped. Handcuffed. And probably beaten—some of them look worse than they ought to just from a train wreck. One of those beefy guys, looks like a bum, he has a split cheek and a black eye, and I’m betting whoever kidnapped them gave them a hell of a beating. And before that they were buried, buried alive for all they knew? What were they doing in caves to begin with, Tarah?”

“They were sleeping,” Hadi said.

“In caves,” I said.

“Those who want to, do, even if they don’t realize what it means” Tarah said. She put a hand on my knee. “It’s where Richard went after you two—well. That’s the way back.”

I tried to jump up but I got my legs tangled and I tripped. Tarah tried to catch me but I pulled myself to my knees and fell backward before I finally scrambled to my feet.

“That’s the way—Richard went—Jesus, Tarah!”

Some of the rail passengers at the edge of their circle turned to look at me just as the PA system piped up—“Dear passengers, when you encounter peaceful and wrathful conquerors, try to resemble them”—then they turned back to Mara and left us alone.

“Wait,” I said, “just wait a second. These people?”

Hadi nodded. Tarah took both my hands and pulled me back to my knees so she could face me. She said, “Yes, Nessie. They were trying to return, to find a new life. The Hot Shot—that’s what some of the old timers called it ages ago—it takes people from the Origins to the caves.”

“And it’s just that easy,” I said. “Crawl in a cave, fall asleep.”

“I don’t know, Nessie,” she said.

“We’ve never done it,” Hadi said. “At least, not since the last time we died.”

“But I can’t imagine it’s that easy,” Tarah said. “You remember what your life was like. Would you want to go back to that?”

I sat back on my heels and glowered at her. "It's not like death has been much of a picnic either."

"You want to go back, then?" Hadi said.

I looked at them. I folded my hands on my thighs.

"I just want to find the ocean," I said.

"You want to find the end," Tarah said.

"An end, yes. Something to finally stop all this misery."

"If only it were that easy," Hadi said. His voice was quiet, his tone even, his eyes down. "If only we knew how to make it that easy for you." Tarah let go of one hand and reached to take Hadi's shoulder.

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By morning, Mara had explained the basics and had amazed the passengers with her creations, and she and the fire-breathers had them all practicing magic, uprighting train cars and rearranging the sleepers into luxury cars with private rooms and softer mattresses. Through it all, the PA system prattled on: "Dear passengers, to arrive at our destination, we will cross over a very long, thin lake, bordered by trees. You may see cows roaming in the woods, though no one knows why the cows roam here instead of in the prairie. We assume they are stupid."

Colleen and the punk grew a field of flowers, simple daisies and puff-ball chrysanthemums and plain red roses that grew not on a bush in single stems like they'd been plucked from a bouquet and stabbed into the ground.

“Dear passengers, as we approach our destination, you will see on your left another, smaller lake. This is a breeding ground for swans, who always seem very happy though, like the cows, a little stupid.”

The Asian family circled the intersection of the railway's bedrock and Mara's stone road until the rocks rose up in a mound like a whirlwind, the dark gray rocks swirling within the gleaming chunks of white marble, and then the stones settled into a heap like a globe on a dais. A trio of broken rails grew out the top and braided themselves to a point.

“Dear passengers, on your right you will see another lake. Look closely—on the far shore you may see horses. They come from the stables of the very rich, who spend hours riding beside the water but who are also a little stupid, much dumber than the horses.”

The old men broke open the lead engine car, shaped the huge engine into a fiery broiler, and sunk it half into the ground so they could huddle around it like a cast iron stove.

Still, not everyone took to the conjuring and games, so little pockets of silence developed on the other side of the tracks, where even the PA announcements sounded muffled and distant. The old woman paced in a careful square, muttering and tapping her forehead as she had been all along. The

woman in the blazer strolled through the bits of flower-patch that Colleen had sent growing beyond the train, her hands parallel to the ground so her palms grazed the tops of the flowers. The Indian man dragged one of the broken seats out into the plains and simply sat in it, his back straight and his arms in his lap, and stared south along the tracks. And as the sun dropped out of its apex and burned down the sky, the cries of wonder and the colorful experiments gave way to weariness. By midafternoon, despite Mara's continued lecturing and cheerleading, everyone had gathered around the rock pile at the track-and-road intersection, craned their necks to stare at the sky, and made a thin sheet of clouds. For the first time since I left the Origins, the After went hazy and colorless.

The children and I walked over to join the passengers, huddled together in the gray, mourners at their own funeral. Mara pleaded with them to clear the sky, to make new things, to practice and exercise, but they ignored her. The old men muttered and shook their heads; Colleen scowled as she had before. "What's the point of it?" she said. "You keep after us like we can change what's happened, like we can change where we are."

"We can change it," Mara said. "We have changed it."

"Oh, flowers and rock piles, that's made all the difference."

"Don't change the fact that we're all fucking dead," the punk said, his voice surprisingly soft and rolled into some sort of southern drawl.

"But you've never been more alive," Mara said.

“Easy for you to say,” I told her. She glared at me.

“It’s the train,” one of the old men said. “Never thought I’d say this, but I’m ready to be shut of this thing. All the sprucing and cavorting, it ain’t done us any good.”

“We can do that,” Mara said. “We can get rid of the train if you want it gone.” She squeezed shut her eyes and balled her fists at her sides, and at the southern end of the line, the white cars straightened as the rear engine fired.

“I miss the caves,” the blazer woman said. “I felt so peaceful there.”

“Get on board!” Mara said. “We’ll send you back down the tracks, I’ll send you to the caves!”

“You just don’t get it, do you?” I said.

“Shut up, Nessie,” she spat.

“She’s right,” Tarah said. “You can’t give these people anything.”

“You can’t make them want what you want,” Hadi said.

“I’m not—”

“Yeah, you are,” Colleen said. “We don’t want to have to make our own heaven, or whatever you want this place to be. We don’t want to make nothing. We’re tired, Mara, and we just want to go to sleep.”

“But we made you beds,” Mara said.

“No good, no good,” the stooped old woman said. “Bed bugs, no good.”

The sun had burned a hole in the watery gray clouds and was sinking fast toward the distant ocean. The PA system said, "Dear passengers, one will be freed from the sufferings of the lower existences."

"Look," Mara said, "it's just this place, the reminders of the wreckage. I get that. Even if you can clean it up, you can't forget it. Let me send you back to the caves. The lakes the announcements mentioned, with the swans and the horses, they sounded nice. Maybe you won't feel so tired then."

"We're done, lady," a long-haired old man said. "This here's a bad road now, and it's time we got off it. These folks can picnic at the lakes if they want to. I'm headed for the bone orchard."

Mara's shoulders sagged, and the air shook with a low groan as the train, released from Mara's mental brake, shuddered and began to roll southward. She looked at me, her eyebrows high, and though her face was a strange mirror of my own age, she seemed like a child for the first time in several weeks. I crossed my arms and stared at her.

"Let them go," Hadi said.

The train's wheels whined against the tracks.

"Listen," Colleen said, "we appreciate what you tried to do for us, all of you, but I'm for leaving, for finding our way back and crawling into the caves and going to sleep."

"I want to hear my heartbeat again," the blazer woman said.

Mara only nodded. The train slipped ahead a bit, began to roll as the engine churned. "Dear passengers," the PA system said, "inexpressible virtues and negative actions may both greatly increase." The sun touched the ocean and hissed into its roiling pillar of steam. Uriah's family found the torches Mara had made and breathed them alight, and Tarah and Edana passed them to Colleen, the Indian man and two black women just as the night swung over and closed out the day. The passengers clustered tight around the torches.

"Thank yous again," Colleen said. "I hope you figure out what you want out of this place, or manage to make what you want, or whatever."

"I'm sorry I couldn't explain it better to you," Mara said. "I wish you weren't leaving."

The mist from the steam cloud began to fall, thicker than before, almost true rain, and the torches sizzled and flickered. The broken white cars on the north side of the road still lay in a heap, the glowing stove of one engine steaming in the ground, but the rest of the train, the three rear cars and the dozen pine-green cars, picked up speed and slipped into the night, the twin white taillights and the big spotlight at the roofline forming a shrinking triangle in the hazy black.

"Stay off the tracks if you can," Hadi said, and everyone turned to look at him, this change in good-byes unnerving even me.

"You want to avoid meeting anyone. The After isn't following its old rules, and this man who kidnapped, he might still be out there," Tarah said.

“We’ll keep an eye out,” a bearded old man said.

“At least I know I can kick his ass now,” the punk said, his grin in the torchlight like a gargoyle.

## Chapter 11

We slept on the yachts. It rained through the night. In the morning, Mara was standing on the bow of her own ship, silent, eyes downcast. The waxy rim of light that announced the coming sun was runny and diluted against the low clouds like raw egg whites. The gravelly rail bed beside us had atomized into damp ash and dust the shape of rails and rocks, and when the hot solar wind slammed into us, it swept clear the path and we shot to the other side and vaulted back onto the slick marble road. The sun's early smoke caught in the cloud cover and rolled out over us like smog; at midmorning, the sun hissed as it burned into the clouds and disappeared above them, its light diffused as though through skim milk. The solar winds died out and we coasted slow for a half hour until the fire-breathers caught on and clipped their flames in their teeth. Mara said nothing, just stayed on the bow of her yacht the rest of the day, staring ahead or sometimes turning to look southwest at the receding path of the train.

That evening the sun punched through the clouds and its steam set off true rain again, a heavy drizzle that soaked the sails, made them heavy and our progress slow. Still Mara stood on deck, gazing behind us more and more.

For two days.

The third morning I climbed to the deck to find Mara waiting onboard. She was wearing sneakers and a light jacket, her hair tied back in a plain ponytail. An

umbrella hung from the side rail near our niche-ladder to the ground.

“Nessie,” she said.

“I get it,” I said. “You really needed to say good-bye?”

“I have to, Nessie. I need to know what’s in those caves, why the passengers back there wanted to find them again so badly.”

“They just want to leave, Mara. Or to be left alone.”

“I know,” she said. “I talked to Hadi and Tarah, they explained the concept. But Uriah’s family told me what life was like, and I keep thinking, why? Why go back to a place like that, where you have no control, no choice in things?”

“We had control, I guess. Not the free reign you seem to want, but we had choices.”

“But not free reign.”

“It’s not that much different here, you know. Make whatever you want, change this place however you want it, you’re still just tinkering along, at the mercy of whatever comes next.”

She looked at me a few moments.

I shrugged. “Look, it’s your business. I just didn’t get why you needed to say good-bye.”

“I just told you, Nessie, I’m leaving. I mean, you don’t need to come with me—”

“I hadn’t planned on it. But just go—you don’t owe me good-byes.”

“Nessie,” she said. She shifted a half step forward, swung one arm as though to touch me, then let it swing back. “Nessie, you’re my mother.”

“So?”

“So I do owe you an explanation, a good-bye.”

“Mara—” I faltered, stared at her a moment, but she waited for me to finish. “Look, I know it’s only been, what, a few months? If we were alive you’d still be sucking milk and shitting your diapers. But as it is you’ve been a woman for a long time now, and frankly, I barely know you.” She opened her mouth but I raised a hand. “No, listen, you’re closer to Uriah and those people, they understand you better, or want to, anyway. And to tell you the truth, I’m closer to Tarah and Hadi than you, I’ve known them longer. You want to leave, leave. I’m glad you’re grown up, I’m glad you want to strike out alone.” Her chin had compressed into dozens of tiny dimples, and her bottom lip quivered, but I couldn’t tell if it was in tears or fury. “Really,” I said, “I’m sorry I wasn’t a better mother. I’m sorry I didn’t care more.”

She stared at me, clenched her jaw. She sucked in a long, shaky breath, held it, and let it out in a slow shudder. She did it again. Then she stepped close, clumping steps like a robot, like a monster, and she pulled her strong arms around me. I tensed, then offered her back and shoulders a few tentative pats. When she stepped back she held me at arm’s length, her fists tight on my shoulders.

“You really are a bitch, Mom.” She looked me over; I looked at the sky behind her. “But then, from what I hear Dad was worse. So I guess there’s that.”

We looked at each other for a few more moments. Then I took her arms by the shoulders and pulled her into a new hug, as near the real thing as I could manage. I rubbed her spine. The smell in her hair, clean scalp and faint body oil, and I realized this was what my mother had done, rubbed my back that way when I had been dumped by a boy or wrecked my first car, this sudden wave not of memory but of emotion that stretched back beyond my mother, to her mother, and her mother, and her mother. I remembered in college, sex ed or some science class, learning about the mystery of ovaries, that an infant girl is born with all the eggs she’ll ever release, they’re inside her even while she’s still inside her mother, and every woman gives birth to her daughters and granddaughters at the same time, this long overlapping of maternal history back through forever, and I wondered, was it true even in death? Had I been born with Mara inside me and only waited to deliver her here in the After? Did she have ovaries and grandchildren dormant inside her?

Would it ever end?

I let her go.

“For what it’s worth,” she said, “thanks.”

“You ever coming back?”

“Not if I find what I’m looking for.”

“What are you looking for?”

“Whatever’s there,” she said.

We held each other’s arms a moment longer, then she pulled away and took her umbrella from the rail.

“Mara,” I said. “If you don’t find it, whatever’s there—we’ll be at the ocean.”

“I know,” she said. Then she slipped over the rail and dropped from the rolling yacht in a run, jogging after us several yards till she could slow, wave, and switch directions, running in quick, measured strides back toward the train tracks.

~

We rolled on. Each sunset brought the hiss of the boiling ocean closer, the roil of it louder over the horizon and the rain thicker as it sifted through the constant cloud clover, the steam condensed to fat, lazy drops. When it plopped on the deck in a wet imitation of a summer shower, Edana swallowed her flame long enough to sweep her hands over head as though she were shaking out a bed sheet: The sail whipped fast against the mast and suddenly there was more of it, a full length of new sail that flew backward over Edana’s post in the leading edge of the rear deck. The crossbeam on the mast splintered, and I heard crackling echoes in the rain—the rest of Uriah’s fire-breathers were doing the same on the other yachts—and then the freshly broken wood bent back to brace the new awning of sail.

I watched without comment. Edana hadn't said a word, not even to her family, since Mara left. I wondered if Mara had said good-bye to any of them, but I decided not to ask. Sometimes I caught Edana studying me in her long shifts behind the sail. Or maybe she was glaring.

I took to pacing the deck in the wan daylight, glad for the odd comfort of the overcast sky. I stayed damp most of the time, and my white dress from the oasis clung to me, but it had long ago turned a dark mushroom color from weeks hiking and sleeping in grass, from the dusty solar winds, and from the rock and dirt at the train tracks. Still, I spent my mornings on the rear deck, arms outstretched, so the winds could blast me as dry as I was going to get. And five days after Mara left, I was the first to notice the change in the morning light. The low clouds swirled with the coming heat, and the whorls and ripples had bruised burgundy. I stared at the sky for several minutes. The closer the sun came to rising, the deeper, richer the clouds went, until just as the sun glanced over the rim of the After, the whole edge of the sky was awash in scarlet. I called out to Tarah and Hadi.

"Something's been bothering me," I said when they joined me, the three of us staring at the lip of sun. "That first morning, the very first sunrise back at the oasis. The sun seemed closer then, closer to the ground or the fire bigger. And it burns—you remember the sky those first weeks, and until the clouds it was still singing things. And I keep thinking, what if it was bigger or closer, hotter even,

those first days. What do you think's happened to the After behind it? What's happened to all those people?"

"We'd thought about that, too," Tarah said, her voice quiet. She shook her head.

"And? What did you think?"

"That's it's best not to," Hadi said. He also shook his head, but he looked directly at me when he did.

We bounced along in silence, watching the sun crawl into the sky red and louring.

"What about this, then?" I said. "Do you think about the red?"

"Nessie," Hadi said, "we worry about any change here. None of them have been good."

Tarah screwed up her face at Hadi. "But it doesn't matter in the end," she said. "It makes things here more difficult, maybe, but every one is dead."

"Mara isn't dead," Hadi said.

"No. She's not alive either. It's the same with everyone, Hadi—none of this is real, you know that."

"I know it's real enough to the people here. Nessie's suffered as though it were real. Zamir has run away from it, people have died second deaths and we don't know where they went—"

I stared at them, moved my head from one to the other. I caught myself dropping my jaw.

“You think I don’t care about these people,” Tarah said, “about what happened to those children in the City or what will happen the to train passengers if they can’t get back?”

“I think you’re forgetting that this place serves a purpose, that there are rules for dying and moving on.”

“And I think you’re forgetting that things change, things have always changed. We’ve been here a long time, you and me, and we’ve seen the Origins grow from an empty field with a fence and a few tents to a way station to a village to a city, people coming now in vans and semi-trucks and trains. I’m amazed we haven’t seen planes rise up through the ground and land on the highway.”

“Some change is necessary, Tarah. This change is not. It is decadence, not progress, not transition.”

Tarah glowered at him. I leaned against the aft rail, between them. Then Tarah turned to me and said, “What do you think, Nessie?”

“I have no idea,” I said.

“Hadi, he’s pretty set in the way things used to be—”

“The way things should be.”

“—But he has a point. You’ve born the worst of the changes here, they’ve been personal for you. Have they been horrible changes?”

I looked from her to Hadi then pushed off the railing and stormed between them for the steps to the main deck. Behind me, Hadi said, “You see?” and I spun at the top of the steps to face them again.

“No, Hadi, don’t do that shit. You’re right, everything that’s happened here has been utter shit from day one. But you two—you’ve been a big part of the bullshit here, following me around, never giving me straight answers to anything—you all but held me down and forced me to give birth, you little fuckers, and you, Tarah, you have the balls to ask if anything has gone well? And you, Hadi, you have the nerve to think I’m on your side in this? No, fuck you both. The truth is I hate it here, but the more I think about it, the more I’m convinced it’s just the same hassles and misery and bullshit I’d put up with anywhere else. It comes in a bigger package with a lot more bells and whistles, but pain is pain, and I suppose I’d rather have this shit I can deal with, pain I see and taste and rage against, than that melancholy lethargy I woke up to back in the Origins. I’d rather have some sense of direction even if it is just to keep moving, even if I do end up collapsing by the sea to waste away. So you know what, Tarah, Hadi? I don’t care if the After is real or not, I don’t care if I’m dead or alive or something else entirely—”

“Nessie,” Tarah said. She was edging toward me, but I backed up, took one step down toward the deck.

“No, look,” I said, catching my breath and holding up both hands, “I’m sorry to get so pissed off, I know you two have been trying to help, and I guess now I know you’ve been almost as scared as I have, almost as confused, but enough. Okay?”

“It’s not okay,” Hadi said, but he stayed by the rail, sat and lowered his head. “If there is no point in death, there is point at all.”

“And what if the point is that there is no point,” I said. “What if—oh fuck, forget it, now I’m not even making any sense.”

Tarah shuffled forward again and I stayed put till she took my hand. She didn’t pull me back onto the rear deck, though. She just stood with me, her hand in mine. The sullen red sun was burning through the clouds and it set them writhing in spreading tendrils of ember and ash like smoldering steel wool.

Later, we sat together on the floor of the rear deck, our backs against the rail. The sky had faded to a faint pink, thin but alive in the clouds like a strawberry soda spilled across the clouds.

“I keep thinking back to the first night at the inn,” I said after a long, long silence. “Before Richard, before you two really. I was watching the van out the window, thinking about hot wiring it and ditching Harish and the old folks.” I stopped—the image of Harish naked and broken flared, I heard him pleading—but the children kept silent and after a moment I went on. “The opposite happened, you know, they left the inn without me, and I keep think maybe that was it. Maybe that was the moment where the After lost me, and everything that’s gone wrong here is because I’m somewhere I’m not supposed to be. I’m like a nickel loose inside the couch, not under the cushions but inside, and the After is tearing itself apart trying to get at me.”

“There might be something to that,” Hadi said.

I leaned across Tarah to look at him, and I patted his folded knee.

“Sorry, man.”

“Then again,” he said, and Tarah finished, the two of them back to their old routine.

“Maybe the After is behaving more like a kid who’s lost a balloon.”

“I don’t follow.”

“You let go,” she said. “Once you got over the revelation, death hasn’t mattered much to you, and you’re not tethered to the rules. You let go and floated away.”

“And now the After is throwing a tantrum,” Hadi said.

I shook my head. “Or maybe I’m just overthinking it,” I said. “Maybe there is no reason.”

~

For most of the day the sky seeped that sickening pink, and eventually everyone but the helmspeople retreated below decks. Even Tarah and Hadi withdrew for the day. I was alone at the wheel, Edana keeping a silent flame in our sail as though I weren’t on deck, or as though she were somewhere else. Mine was second in the pack of yachts, with one of the bald women ahead of us and Uriah behind, the last yacht steered by a squat, muscled black man with a skinny face and a pewter crew cut. Each deck was as spare as mine. I leaned

on my wheel, barely steering. Even with the After newly pink—darkening to cherry as, I guessed, the red sun began its afternoon descent—and the ocean so close I could see low scrubby knolls like dunes in the distance, I dozed at my post and didn't rouse until the clouds ignited again and the eerie light from blazing sun drenched everything in worrisome new shades: The sky overhead glared translucent, cottony tomato, the marble road beneath us glinted scarlet, and the grasslands were sharp sepia.

I could hear a low roar, a steady churning, but the sun hadn't yet burned through the clouds, let alone come near enough to the ocean to set it roiling. I stood against the wheel, rose on my toes to peer ahead—the bald woman was doing the same—but I saw nothing that would create the roar. Then the woman ahead turned to look back at me, and even from the ship-length between us, ten yards or more, I could see her eyes go wide. She let go of her wheel and ran backward to the rear of her yacht, where she collided with the rails and began waving her arms and shouting, "Swerve! Cale, swerve!"

I turned to the yachts behind us, Uriah's brow furrowed and behind him Cale, the squat man steering the last ship, pointing ahead, cupping one hand to his ear, and shrugging as he shook his head. But I saw it. In the plains behind us, just off the road, one of the angular white engines from the Hot Shot train was thrashing through the dirt and grass, aimed at a diagonal for the road and screaming toward Cale's ship. I held tight to the wheel with one hand and pointed southeast in furious jabs until Uriah turned, and he too shouted at Cale to

veer off the road, but it was too late—Cale turned just as the train cut across the marble road, the steel wheels shrieking as they carved into the stone, and it tore through the back end of Cale’s ship. Planks and jagged shards of wood splintered into violent cartwheels, and Cale’s fire-breather, the other bald women in Uriah’s family, shot into the air broken and limp as a dead cat. The mock van-tires squealed against the stone, and the remainder of Cale’s yacht skittered sideways, joggled with the friction, and then the portside tires caught, peeled under their rims, and the whole yacht tilted in screams of metal and cracks of wood, capsized, and shattered across the road. The train slammed nose-first into the plains and gouged a wide semicircle in the grass as its rear spun around, and it ripped forward back toward the road, finding along its path the fallen body of the other bald woman and mowing over her to leave her scattered in crimson chunks in the grass. The train jumped onto the road again and plowed through the wreckage of the yacht; it caught Cale across its lifeless white front, flat as a tour-bus and crimson in the blazing sunset with black rhomboid windows like dead eyes, and Cale stuck fast from the sheer momentum of the train, splayed there like a deer on a grill. In the distance, I could just make out the streaks of Cale’s two passengers, their torn bodies smeared black on the red strip of road. The train leapt off the road again, sending Cale sliding underneath it to be mangled like the rest, and it veered out into the plains for another pass. Uriah turned away and gripped his wheel in both hands, bellowed “Run!” and bent against his steering as though leaning into the ship would make it go faster. He

shouted orders on his ship, but they were for his crew, and I couldn't hear them clearly. Then I saw his other two family members scramble beside the fire-breather behind the sail, and all three spit huge flames to speed up his yacht. I turned back to my own wheel and found Tarah and Hadi on the bow, waving and screaming at the yacht ahead—the bald woman was running back toward her helm but it was too late, her yacht had drifted and now bounced its port tires off the road; when she reached her wheel and jerked it straight the tires caught along the rough edge of the stone, smoked and screamed, and then the lead tire exploded, the front of the yacht tipped into the ground, and the whole ship keeled up at an angle and crunched nose-first into the shoulder of the road. I spun my own wheel starboard and yelled for Tarah and Hadi and Edana all to rush to the port side of the ship. Edana ran without swallowing her flame, and the long jet she'd held in her teeth came loose and collapsed like a rope into the deck. We swerved left around the wreck of the lead ship and jumped off the road into the plains, and with our acceleration gone and our weight shifted I was able to control our jostling turn, but the deck was on fire. Tarah and Hadi and Edana all dashed to the flames and with the ship decelerating in the grass I left the wheel to join them, but the mast had caught and the sail was smoking. I heard another sickening crunch behind us and looked back at the splinters of Uriah's ship, people rolling sideways in the grasses but the train had locked onto us and left Uriah's crew behind to bear down on my yacht, all but stopped in the field. "Leave it!" I shouted, and without waiting I grabbed Hadi under the armpits and

flung him overboard then reached for Tarah but she and Edana were already vaulting the rails and I leapt after them.

It was at least a dozen feet to the ground and I landed badly, twisted my ankle or worse, but I rolled onto my feet anyway, ignoring what should have been pain. Edana had landed against her left arm and the upper bone had shattered so her arm flopped against her as she screamed and clutched at it with her good hand. "Ignore it!" I screamed, "you can't feel pain!" and I grabbed Tarah by the wrist, and she dragged Hadi off the ground, and we ran. Edana was still writhing on the grass when the train reached us; I let go of Tarah and shouted for us to scatter as the train cut through Edana, the wheels cleaving her torso like a butchered cow's, but we scrambled sideways and the train missed us. I veered east, back toward Uriah's wreckage, and Tarah ran south as Hadi turned west toward the ocean, and I ran hard, but I heard a loud whine and creak like bending metal and I looked over my shoulder to see the train tip over like the ships it had chased, its steel wheels caught in the dirt as it tried too sharp a u-turn after me. The axles bent and the wheels snapped off under the carriage, and the train rolled onto its side and skidded in the grass several hundred feet. Something burst in the engine and smoke swelled out the shattered windows, an orange glow of fire inside.

"Tarah!" I shouted, running backward now. "Hadi, get over here, help me find Uriah!" They make ran tight arcs and scrambled to catch up, but I didn't wait for them and took off south for Uriah. I met the bald woman, her shaved scalp

rent with a bloody gash, limping toward me up the stone road, and I waved her to follow me.

“What the fuck is that?” she said as she jogged up alongside me. “It looks like the train we sent back to the caves—”

“Where’s your crew,” I said, breathing hard.

“Vanessa and Gunther are dead. Ophelia’s injured.” She glanced back at her ship—“She’s hiding in the wreckage”—then watched over her shoulder at the broken train behind us. “Who’s driving that thing? It’s not Mara, right?”

“No idea,” I said, still breathing hard and straining not to limp as I jogged ahead.

I could hear the short, rapid beat of Hadi and Tarah running behind us, nearly caught up. Ahead, I saw one of Uriah’s crew helping Uriah crawl off the ground. Another fire-breather was sprinting from heap to heap and lifting wide panels of deck and siding, poking his head under each one then dropping it to run for the next. The After lit up in a bright fiery glow as the sun burned through the clouds, the same sizzling steel-wool effect curling long embers across the sky, and our shadows stretched long in front of us. Uriah saw us and hobbled our direction, then he grabbed the hand on his shoulder to stop his crewmate, pointed behind us, and said, “Nessie, look!”

I turned and saw the train, a blood-red silhouette in the flaming dusk, and its skyward side was growing a shadow, a solid figure emerging from smoke, except the shape was brighter than the smoke or the silhouette of the train, as

though the figure were translucent and lit through with the red of the sun. It stooped atop the train, its hands on its knees, then it raised its head at us, crouched, and dropped off the train into a sprint across the plains toward us.

“Whoever you’re looking for,” I shouted to the man searching the wreckage, “find them fast, we need to move!” I met Uriah, spun him around, and dragged him toward the wreckage. From among the scraps of wood I pulled an armload of thin laths and deck plank, and I handed them one at the time to Uriah. “Light them, and keep spares—the sun is setting soon.”

“Take more,” Hadi said. “We need weapons, clubs.”

“We won’t need them if we get running now,” I said, but I scooped up more planks as Uriah blew the torches aflame.

Then the bald woman grabbed my shoulder. “No, wait,” she said, “Ophelia, at my wreck, we can’t leave her.”

“She’s hidden, we’ll draw this fucker away,” I said, but Tarah was shaking her head.

“She’s right, Nessie. This person wants us dead.”

“We’ll never outrun him,” Hadi said.

“Fine,” I said. “But we face whoever that is here. No point in leading the fucker straight to Ophelia, right? That goes for whoever you’re looking for, too,” I said to the searcher, but he ignored me.

“It’s Moira,” Uriah said, “Evan’s sister.”

The figure was getting closer, almost floating across the plains. It was tall and spindly, with almost no hips and with a matchstick head on a long neck, a man with a long, loping run, and he still glowed red. Then he screamed my name:

“Nesssss-eeeeeee!” His voice was high and thin with a dry rattle like a tea kettle full of rocks and just beginning to boil. Then, behind the long screeching vowel I heard the familiar hiss, so close now it sounded like an exploded pressure cooker, and the ocean steam shot up in a rosy geyser. A second later the dark sun went out, and still the screaming man glowed, his skin patchy in reds and oranges like broken embers from a dying fire. And I knew who it was.

“Phineas,” I gasped, “he survived!”

Tarah grabbed my wrist when I said his name, and Hadi swiped a lath out of Uriah’s hand and held it like a baseball bat. Uriah stammered. “Phin—no, he’s the one from the City—we burned—they all—it can’t—”

But I was already running into the darkness, straight at him.

“Kids, Uriah, take the rest and go, follow the road, get out of here!” But Hadi and Tarah were beside me, keeping pace despite their shorter strides and Hadi armed two-fisted now, chunks of wood like nightsticks. Tarah held a longer piece, one of the rounded rails broken off but nearly as tall as she was. Then there were the rest of them, the bald woman and Uriah with torches, between them Evan and the girl I guessed was Moira, all tight on my heels.

“Go!” I shouted, Phineas nearly on us, but they stayed close and it was too late, Phineas leapt through the air in a dive and Tarah slipped the long rail in a high arc as though swing an ax and caught Phineas hard on the shoulder. He spun tight around the point of impact, his long body crumpling in on itself and his collarbone cracking like a gunshot; a jet of flame spurted down Tarah’s rail as Phineas slammed into a smoldering heap on the ground, his shoulder glowing bright yellow, the rest of him shimmering in the dark. He was on fire still, a living ember, and even as Tarah beat her rail in the grasses to extinguish it and Hadi lunged with his two short clubs, Phineas was unfolding himself. Hadi landed several hard cracks on Phineas’s back but then Phineas grabbed him by the collar of his linen shirt and spun him hard out into the dark. Tarah’s rail was still on fire and she’d caught the grasses. Uriah hurdled her and tackled Phineas, the two of them tumbling over the ground until they both managed to roll to a stand. I started to shout for Uriah to step aside, but he squared off in a wide stance, took a deep breath, and blew a huge flame like a blowtorch that washed over Phineas in a blazing cascade. Phineas reeled, cringed away from the flames with his arms in front of his face, but when Uriah swallowed the flame Phineas stood tall, his torso and arms glowing hot orange and his eyes gleaming in the dark. He grinned, and he drove at Uriah with both fists to hurtle Uriah into the dark.

Tarah gave up trying to put out her staff and brought it around to crack Phineas’s cheek, a spray of orange sparks erupting from his face and his eyes and teeth flaring like a jackolantern’s, then his cheek caught fire but he only

grinned again and rushed at Tarah. Hadi leapt in front of him to trip him again but he stumbled over Hadi, spun and scooped him up by his little legs, and the bald woman tackled him at the waist but only set Phineas off balance for a moment; he kicked at her then ground his heel into her toes till she fell off, hauled up Hadi squirming, cupped one long-fingered hand under Hadi's back, and chucked him like a shot-put into the fiery grasses. I used his set-up to scoop up a fallen torch and charged him; he spun when I reached him and his swinging forearm crashed into my throat and threw me hard to my back. Evan came out of the dark and punched Phineas in the back of the skull then again in the face when Phineas turned around, and Phineas reeled, then Uriah found Tarah's rail and drove it end-first into Phineas's spine. He twisted back in pain so Evan's next punch just missed, then Phineas spun to punch Uriah but Uriah brought the staff around again and cracked it against Phineas's swinging arm so hard both shattered, the broken head of the rail cartwheeling into the dark and Phineas's fist and forearm splintering in an explosion of cinders and flame. He howled and folded over his smoldering stump, his whole body shaking, but he did not go down, and just as Uriah swung to hack at him with the stub of rail, Phineas unfolded and caught the rail with his good hand. His stump was on fire, and he held it before Uriah's face as though displaying a treasure. They both looked at it. Then Hadi ran in from the flickering night and made for Phineas's knees with his two clubs, but Phineas flicked his broken arm at Hadi and a long flame shot from it like a whip, knocked Hadi down and set his cloths on fire, then retracted

into a hard, white fire the shape and mass of what once was his forearm and fist. With his black hand he twisted the shattered rail from Uriah's grip, and he plunged his fire hand into Uriah's stomach, clear inside him, so flames spilled from Uriah's mouth like spewed blood, his hair smoked, and his flesh erupted in boils. The bald woman, Evan, and Moira all screamed.

I grabbed Tarah by the wrist, turned to the bald and shouted, "Take them, run to the ocean!" and pulled hard on Tarah. By the thin flickering lights of the grass fires and the torches and Phineas's flaming arm we ran, all of us clawing at each other to make sure we stayed together in the dark, only the dim glow of the fires in the plains and the feel of the stone road under our feet left to guide us. But Phineas chased, shrieking behind us, and when he caught up to our group he grabbed Moira's hair in his flame hand and twisted her to the ground, dragged her behind him kicking and clutching her smoking scalp. She screamed, and Evan broke off and turned, charged and slammed into Phineas with his whole body. I staggered and stopped, turned to face him again, to watch Evan squeeze the death-life out of him. The bald woman ran on, shouting into the dark for Ophelia, but the children stopped with me, Tarah making to free Ophelia but I held her back. Evan was grunting but gripping Phineas hard, around arm pinning him while the other punched him in short uppercuts to the ribs. Phineas swung his arms up, ripping a bloody hank of Moira's hair out as he did, but instead of blocking Evan's uppercuts, Phineas embraced Evan and squeezed. Evan roared, pulled his elbows wide to try and break free, but Phineas held fast until

smoke rose between them; when he let go and Evan staggered back, Phineas punched him hard with his black hand, grabbed Evan's head with his flame hand and pulled him into another punch, then twisted him to the ground. Evan's shirtless chest was blistered, his tattoos black and charred; he writhed and clutched at his skin, pulling it away in thin shreds.

Phineas turned back to Moira, who was crawling to her feet, and kicked her hard in the face. She fell backward in an arch but swept her legs as she went and tripped Phineas. Tarah leapt on him with a plank of shipwreck in both hands and began beating him on the head and chest, and for a moment he flailed at the club in futile blocks but then he rolled his thin shoulders and swept her off. I grabbed her plank and rolled to the ground, swept the plank hard into Phineas's kneecaps and he buckled, clutching his leg. I hauled Tarah to her feet as Evan and Moira helped each other up, and we ran on, a frenzy in the night. Ahead the path was thick and black, the flames falling behind us, but we had the stone under our feet and we pounded toward the distant roar of ocean. Then I heard Moira scream. Phineas had tackled him, his fire arm cooling to a solid glowing coal but his knee and part of his shin ablaze in the night. He wrestled Evan up from the ground and even as Moira pounded on Phineas's back and ripped at his charred face, he managed to wrap one hand around Evan's throat; he heaved a hard uppercut into Evan's stomach at the same time he swept his legs and he hauled Evan one-handed into the air, turned and flung Moira from his back, and lunged to drive Evan headfirst into the ground. Evan's skull cracked in

a steamy spray of burning blood. Moira screamed, and I tackled Phineas from the side and we hit the ground rolling over Evan's convulsing body, but then Moira was on us both and Phineas managed to wrench an arm free to elbow me in the chin so I fell off him, then he backhanded Moira's head. She fell backward, her nose shattered and burned, but Hadi and Tarah hit Phineas hard, Tarah below and Hadi above. He tumbled, and I rushed in to kick his head, then his ribs, but every blow send out sparks and set little flames in his flesh and Hadi, who was straddling Phineas's chest, cried out and fell away. Phineas rolled away and stood, found Tarah charging him in the dark and caught her in his arms; she struggled and squirmed against him but he put one hand on her throat and one at the base of her skull, picked her by the head, and pulled her to his face. She glared evenly at him, blood frothing in her flared nostrils, and he said in a high, raspy growl, "You cannot save her." Then he twisted at the waist, spun his shoulders, and tossed her screaming like an Olympic hammer into the blazing night. She landed a good forty feet away, arms and legs snapped and folded beneath her in a soft, muffled crunch.

I roared and jumped him but he caught me midair and flung me overhead. I landed in a roll and scrambled to my feet but Hadi beat me to Phineas, dove like an attack dog at Phineas's legs and managed to bring him down, and then we all were on him, Hadi wrapped tight around his legs and Moira flung across his torso, screaming from the heat but holding fast, and kicked and stomped at his head; the sparks and cinders I broke loose ignited little fires in the grass around

his neck and shoulders. He grabbed one ankle and pulled me to the ground where my filthy dress caught fire and I had to roll away to put it out. Moira grabbed at his arms to pin them too, but his skin was too hot, and he threw her off. Hadi shot forward and pressed Phineas to the ground, but with his legs free he managed to rock to a sitting position with Hadi tight in his arms. Evan had pulled himself upright and found a discarded plank, with which he cracked open the back of Phineas's head, flames bursting out in a fiery jelly, and as Phineas bellowed in pain and clutched his open skull Evan swung the plank down driving golf swing to break Phineas's smoking leg clean off, another jet of flame spitting into the grass. Moira kicked him in the back so he fell over, clutching wildly now, and then we all—Evan, Moira, Hadi and I—kicked or chopped at him, breaking away pieces like charred wood and igniting the ground beneath him in a pyre. He screamed and rattled and twisted, but every direction he moved to escape he met a foot or a fist or a chunk of wood. But Evan was weaving with the effort, his skin still blistered and falling away like thin rags from his bloody chest, and Moira's hair had charred and half-melted to her scalp, and Hadi was nearly gone in tears and so was I. Finally Hadi grabbed my wrist, kicking still at Phineas but pulling me away.

“Run,” was all he said, again and again in little grunts timed to his kicks.

“But Tarah—”

“Run.”

I panted, leaned against one knee, kicked Phineas again, then pushed Evan away. “Ocean,” I gasped, and we were running again, the night descending into dense black once more, and after a long, limping race we heard only the pounding of our own feet against the stone and the coming rush of surf. We ran for half an hour before I saw the faint glow on Moira’s back; Phineas was up again, half his engulfed in short flames, and though he limped now he was chasing us. Ahead, I could just make out the pale outlines of the bald woman and Ophelia, and within another half hour we’d caught up to them in our ambling race for the ocean. I could tell from the growing amber glow, dawn still a few hours away, that Phineas was gaining, too. Still, exhausted but driven, we ran on through the dim for another hour, another hour and a half, Phineas shouting after us in gravelly gasps and our heavy running steps lost in his fury and in the looming roar of the ocean. Then the stone road went gritty—Moira slipped and I had to catch myself as she slid into me—and suddenly the surf erupted in our ears and I knew we’d past the low dunes, the sand spilling through the grass to coat Mara’s road.

Then my feet sank into beach and I stumbled and fell in the sand, the grit tearing at my cheek and knees, and I collapsed gasping, and I knew.

Hadi pulled at my arm, Evan leaned against Moira and shouted, “Nessie, get up!” but I only rolled to my side, sat up, and pushed Hadi away.

“This is it,” I said. “I’ve made it to the end.”

“Nessie!” the bald woman said, and Ophelia echoed her, but I stood carefully in the sand and shook my head.

“Enough,” I said. “He wants me, I don’t know why, but if you run, he’ll kill me and be done with it.”

“Never!” Hadi shouted.

“Run!” I screamed.

The four fire-breathers cringed and the bald woman made as though to run, but Hadi screamed at me. “She wouldn’t want us to!”

“He’s coming,” Ophelia said.

“God damn you, run!” I said, but Hadi dashed between me and Phineas, limping fast past the dunes, and after a half-second the four fire-breathers joined him, surrounding me. Then Phineas was off the road, plowing into the sand so hard he erupted, fell apart into flames so his smoldering remains pitched across Hadi and the four-breathers like napalm. They all fell away shouting and beating at the flames in their clothes and hair, and I covered my head with my arms, but the flames and cinders hadn’t exploded, just spread out, and as soon as I uncovered my face they condensed into Phineas, fiery white and yellow so he outshone the flaxen lip of dawn creeping into the sky behind him. I gasped, stepped backward once, but he knocked me to the ground and pounced, sat in my lap and pinned me between his burning legs, his black hand in my hair, yanking my head back hard so I faced the sky, and his fiery hand, solid now but blazing hot, pressed tight and blistering around my throat. I rolled my eyes down

and strained to see him over my nose, but he leaned in close so his cracked, scorched face loomed over mine.

“I killed them all,” he said. “You sent them back to me, yet I killed them nonetheless.”

“Fuck you.”

I could see Hadi and the others creeping in behind him, but Phineas bellowed, “No! I have her now and you will not come!” They hesitated, crouched and looking for a way to surprise him but otherwise motionless.

“To hell with them,” I choked. “To hell with you too.”

“Soon.”

“Now,” I choked. “You wanted this, so do it. Kill me.”

“I don’t want to kill you,” he said. “I want that you should suffer. I want them all to suffer as I suffer. I marauded the Origins and made of it a new City, there at the beginning so I could catch the newly dead—”

“No,” I choked, and I squirmed in his grasp.

“Yes,” he shouted; the semi-circle behind him inched closer but the sand between them and us shot into a wall of flames and they fell back. “You cannot save anyone from their fate!” he said, to me or them I wasn’t sure but I twisted hard at his fiery wrists, my hands blistered and the skin peeling off.

“You can’t have the Origins, I won’t let you hurt anyone else!”

“But you have,” he said, his blackened teeth grinning in his glowing-ember face. “Nothing for which you have striven has made any difference. You burned

the City, but I evaded death. You sought to liberate the silent escapes I caught slipping away in the caves, trying to escape me, yet they returned to me as I sealed up their caves and they perished still.”

“No!” I said. “Fuck you!” I pried at his hands but he held firm.

“You fled my wrath but I have caught you. You swore to protect those miserable children, I heard your vow, but you saw your precious Tarah—”

“Fuck”—I punched him hard across his smoldering cheek, the bone like coal—“you!” I punched him again, then crossed with another punch, then I crushed my fists together on either side of his skull and it cracked, a geyser of flame shooting into the air. He grunted, his grip slackened, but his head dripped fire over itself and reformed, ablaze to the shoulders but whole. It was the distraction they needed, though, and Hadi and fire-breathers lunged, Hadi ignoring the flames and yanking back hard on Phineas’s head while the other four grabbed a limb apiece, and they ripped at him until they pried him off me and hauled him screaming into the air. I rolled away, sand sticking in my blistered flesh, but I was up as soon as I found my footing and I flew at him, flailing and screaming and cursing him. His twisted and roared but could not break free, and no one seemed to care anymore how burnt they became. We couldn’t see it over the dunes, but the sun had broken the horizon, and in the dim morning light I could see how ruined Phineas was, how weak the fires had made him, and then the crashing surf offered me his end.

“Toss him in,” I said. “Throw him in the ocean.”

He ripped loose one arm and beat at Hadi, kicked violently at Evan and Ophelia, but they dragged him toward the shoreline and I managed to get hold of his loose arm, and when we'd waded to our thighs in the water—the waves cresting at Hadi's neck—we raised Phineas over our heads and pitched him into the waves. He hissed like a cigarette butt dropped in cold coffee, a body-shaded cloud of vapor lifting off the water for a moment, and then he was extinguished. The charred remains of him floated like driftwood in the waves, bobbing closer then farther then back then farther still as his stiff black corpse drifted out to sea, an eerily soft expression on his burnt, charcoal face. I watched him for a long time, watching the ocean work him back from the shore until he was just a dark chunk that disappeared between the low swells in the distance. When I turned away from him, the sun—soft yellow as always—had crawled half-way up the sky, and the beach was empty, ruts from dragged feet winding aimlessly up the shore and over a southern dune.

## Chapter 12

I found Hadi and the others shuffling through the grassy sand toward the sparse edge of the forest we'd seen from our yachts. It may as well have been years. We'd been on the road so long; I dragged along behind them, a good two miles back, no pretense at catching up. They weren't following the road. We weren't going back for Tarah's body.

At the treeline, the tiny group ahead turned, walked east back toward the prairie. Heading nowhere. We walked through the day. Then the sun quenched in the ocean and the steam washed over us in the dark, I walked on, trudging in sightless black. None of the fire-breathers spit a flame, and Hadi lit no torch. When the sun crowned the next day, they were still walking, though they'd drifted a different direction in the night, staying close to the treeline while I'd roamed lost in the open plains. I turned to follow them, but soon they'd faded into the woods, and I walked without a aim, headed for the last place I'd seen them and, once in the woods, between the tall trees and thin underbrush, wandering what I assumed were trails only because the vegetation thinned in vague patterns.

Toward evening, the forest already dark in shadows, the trees opened onto a wide road of packed gravel. I'd lost my sense of direction and couldn't tell this deep in the forest which way the sun was setting; on instinct I veered right and followed the road. In the night, I felt the ground swell, the road inclining

through the trees, and by morning I'd come out in an open grove at the top of a high ridge. In the distance, the blue ribbon of the ocean flashed below the western horizon. Directly below me was city, denser than the open highway town of the Origins but brighter, cleaner, more normal than the dry ochre streets and cracked stucco walls of Phineas's desert City. Down in the first leveling of the valley, where the road entered the city, I saw Hadi and the fire-breathers trudging between the first few buildings. The outskirts of town came right up to the stark edge of the forest, the few trees growing amid a long garden of rusting machinery and crumbling antique cars. The first several structures were squat, two-storey apartment buildings, decrepit concrete quadplexes with cardboard or tin foil in the windows. At the southernmost edge the apartments gave way to an old residential neighborhood, shingle-sided shacks with roofs of corrugated tin, but otherwise the city grew toward taller buildings, offices and condos that looked cleaner but still abandoned. I watched Hadi's group until they disappeared, swallowed by the taller buildings closer into town, and then, with nothing better to do, I slipped down the road and headed in.

I caught up to the fire-breathers that afternoon, at the corner of a wide street just off the center of town. Ophelia pointed up the block to Hadi, who stood in the middle of the street staring at a two-storey cube of a building with a domed roof, the walls dusty granite, no windows that I could see.

Evan said, "He led us straight here."

“He’s been over there ever since, muttering to himself,” the bald woman said.

I slipped up behind Hadi without saying anything. We stared at the building for a long time. Hours. The other four never joined. Finally, Hadi said, without turning around, “It’s a mausoleum.” He paused, the silence expectant, then he said, “The ones we used to use until the wars and the plagues thinned out.” Another waiting silence, then, “But we don’t know where those are.”

I put my hand on his little shoulder.

“Come on, Hadi. It’s nearing sunset. Let’s get inside.”

He turned to look at me, but his head was cocked as though he were listening to something. Then he said, “Because we may as well use them for something.” I bent and took his hand, but before I could turn to lead him up the street he said, “Oh, I agree,” then looked to his side, a cocked grin on his lips, but there was no one there, and he pulled his hand loose, turned erratic circles scanning the street, and started calling, “Tarah? Tarah?” He made to dash off but I leaned fast and scooped him into my arms, held him tight as he kicked and squirmed against me. The closer I hugged him and harder he fought until finally he burst into tears.

“I’m so cold now,” he cried. “It’s like I forget my jacket and gloves, like the sun had never risen, like I’m in the deep of the ocean with all the icy water crushing down on me!” and then he collapsed into sobs and I lifted him like the

child he'd never been till that moment, cradled him, and carried him back to the fire-breathers.

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We stayed in the city, taking apartments on the seventh floor of the same building, the tallest in town, a few blocks closer to the ocean from the center of town. I lived in 710, Hadi in 726. He wanted to be alone. Every morning and evening I climbed to the roof to watch the ocean, making sure nothing of Phineas or anything else floated back in the currents to wash ashore, but the beaches remained almost empty, except for the birds. No gulls, but sometimes I'd find small flocks of big-headed kingfishers, their thick beaks like heavy thorns on their heads. They picked their way through the sand each morning, stabbing after fish that, so far, we'd never seen.

The newcomers came from the other direction instead, along the road we'd hiked in on. It took just one week. For a while they walked in as we had, telling us they'd followed the sun as we had, that they'd seen the remnants of the train and the wreckage of the yachts and the long marble road Mara had made shooting out onto the beach, then the path dragged in the sand to the woods. The first of them were the campers, Mara's followers from the oasis. They settled in with fire-breathers and reminisced. After a few days, they set about remaking the city, nothing like the outlandish inventions Mara'd put them up to,

just basic civic improvements: lights, clean streets, a memorial to Tarah at the mausoleum. It took her several tries to get the fit right, but Moira made me new clothes, a pair of loose jeans and heavy t-shirt, a light hooded windbreaker. She couldn't manage shoes but I didn't mind staying barefoot. I missed my old blanket though, even though it was the one I'd given birth to Mara in. It wasn't exactly a security thing—it was just the last thing I had that connected me to Tarah. I couldn't bare to save the ruined dress, burned through from Phineas's embers and blood-stained as it was. I gave it to Hadi, but he didn't seem to recognize it, or know what to say to me. He left it in a box in his room across from the mausoleum.

After a month, when the last of the campers had straggled into town, I heard the grumble of two small engines and from my rooftop saw motorcyclists pattering along the road, in and out of shadows from the trees and rusted machinery. They wore old-fashioned goggles and brown leather bomber jackets, domed helmets with stubby visors. They stopped at the edge of town, put a hand to their visor, and surveyed the roofline till they'd seen me. Then they roared into town and straight for my building.

They'd come from the Origins. More were on their way. A miraculous thing had happened: They had been delivered from evil, and their savior had set them on the road to this place, where they would await their savior's return.

I knew what was coming. I had only a few more weeks to wait, a few more weeks of peace. In the meantime, the dead came to the city by dozens,

then hundreds. The big buildings downtown filled fast, then the quadplexes at the outskirts piled up, the new arrivals learning fast how to polish them, then add floors then connect them in vast compounds. The shacks beyond them transformed into bungalows, then cabins, then houses. Thousands poured in, the streets downtown crowded with pedestrians and bicycles and skateboards. They fashioned medallions for their necks or imagined tattoos into their bodies, every geometric religious symbol they could remember, crosses and crescents and stars and disks, beads in every color in short wrist strands or long belts winding again and again around the devotees' waists. The district around the mausoleum erupted in churches and temples and synagogues and mosques. And then Mara returned.

She managed to slip into town unnoticed, disguised or maybe controlling the thoughts of everyone around her, I didn't know which, but she found me before anyone knew she'd returned.

"I've been to the caves," she told me. "I know the secret."

"I know," I said. "You came to tell me that? You told me that before you left."

"No—the caves taught me a different secret."

"And I get in on this why?"

She frowned at me but just a second, but she couldn't seem to help grinning, like some loopy college spring-breaker on acid. "I did want you to be the first to hear this, yeah, but actually, I also came to you first because I brought

you something.” She reached behind her like a cheap magician and pulled my old blanket from thin air. It still had bits of grass and splinters in it. One corner was singed.

I snatched at it, shook it out, but I didn’t break eye contact with her. “Did you see Tarah’s body in the plains?” I said. “No one yet has said they’d seen her, but she can’t have just disappeared.”

“No—this is bigger than Tarah—”

“Bigger than Tarah? She’s dead, Mara! Hell, she half-raised you, she and Hadi, they were more parents to you than I was those first few months.”

“But it’s okay, Nessie, that’s what I’m saying. I know the way out, I can find Tarah.”

“The way—you can find Tarah? Mara, we’re dead, she’s dead, she’s dead again. There is no saving her. I just want to know her body, or whatever, is safe.”

“I saw the wreckage, yeah,” she said. “I saw the carnage too. But I know where they’ve gone, what happens when people die here.”

I sat on my hard little couch, the best the fire-breathers had managed those early days and I wouldn’t let them fix it. I twisted my blanket into a rope, then tossed it to the end on the couch. Mara paced, I couldn’t make her sit.

“Okay,” I said. “Good. Tell me first, I don’t want you getting everyone’s hopes up.”

“I need to start at the beginning,” she said.

“Oh christ.”

“Okay, I followed the rails for a long time, through all that gloom and rain. I walked through the nights, though, so it didn’t take me long before I came across the train again. It had stalled on the tracks. There were bodies there, all those passengers, even Colleen, they were all dead, burned alive it looked like—”

“God, he really did it,” I said.

“But there wasn’t anything I could do for them, and the train’s engine was gone, jumped the tracks from what I could tell, and ahead through the trees, I could see water. The first of the lakes the train’s PA mentioned. So I walked on. It was exactly like the PA described it, and I was able to walk on the tracks so I crossed the first lake and between the other two until I came to these mountains, weird pillar-like things like, nothing like Uriah described mountains. These were more like he described anthills, the big mud ones he’d seen in the deserts, skinny and sand-colored. Some of them had these big boulders on top like hats—”

“Get on with it.”

“So there were the caves, carved into the skinny mountains, and I entered one near the ground. I was ready—I wanted to experience true life, I wanted to know why those train passengers had wanted so badly to be born again that they’d died trying to get back to the caves.”

“Mara—”

“The cave went deep below the mountain, and I had to stoop and then crawl to get back into it, but in the end I hit a wall. It was a dead-end. So I tried another cave, but the same thing happened.”

“Mara, it was—”

“They were all the same. The way was shut, in every cave I found, I couldn’t push through to birth. I tried sleeping, I try beating at the narrow dead ends, but birth wouldn’t have me because I’d never lived—I am unnatural.”

“Would you listen to me? It was Phineas—”

“It was me. I know he’d been there, but I’m stronger than him, Nessie, I know it, and if I’d been able to get through I would have. There was more than Phineas keeping me here.” I shook my head but waved for her to go on. “So I sat in the last cave I found, just sat and cried. I can do all these things here, Nessie, but I was powerless at the caves. It was miserable, okay, not like anything you’ve gone through but it pained me, Nessie. I didn’t know what to do next. After a few days I realized I wasn’t in there alone. I heard rustling in the dark. There were birds. I remembered your fear of them, how unnatural you said the birds were here, and I began to wonder why they hung around the caves. Then in the sunrise one morning I caught a glint in a cave across from mine, and I found a nest of robins. I didn’t know they were robins at first, but they grew up in a few days, fast like I did, and I’d seen a robin tattooed on Renata’s neck—”

“Renata?”

“The bald woman who died in the plains. She told me about the tattoo and here were robins, a whole flock of them drifting from cave to cave, nesting and birthing. The nest I watched grew fast, and by the end of the week they’d flitted off to other caves or out over the plains, just one bird left behind. I watched it for days, soaring to the huge stone hats at the mountain peaks, or perching in the cave entrances one by one, but every night it returned to the cave it had been born in, where I was sleeping now, and after a while it flew in with twigs and leaves and rebuilt its old nest, and it laid eggs, Nessie, eggs! And that’s when I saw it happen. As the eggs cracked and the wet little heads poked up from their shells, the robin fell over dead. Just like that. Tipped like an empty paper cup in a breeze. I cried out, went to the bird—I was convinced I could save it, could bring it back to life somehow—but as I reached for it flared, the whole bird glowed with this faint blue light the same color as its eggs, then it flashed and I blinked and the robin was gone, just gone from the cave. It was the same glint I’d seen when I first found it as an infant—its mother must have died.”

“Oh my god,” I said. I stood and squared off against her. She stood between me and the door, but I had a window behind me and I could jump if I had to. I’d killed David and Phineas with my bare hands but Mara was something else, and I wasn’t sure I could handle her, and I started bouncing, on my toes and scanning the room, looking for other exits I might try.

“What?’ Mara said, but then she shook her head and laughed. “What, you think—no. I mean, it occurred to me, yeah, that maybe you needed to die for me

somehow, but you've never been big on sacrifice and the chicks didn't seem to benefit from the robin's death, they didn't kill her. No, I was worried for the rest of the afternoon, I cried a lot, but the more I thought about it, the more I realized the truth. Nessie, I have to die."

I recoiled, looked hard at her. "You what?" I said.

"It sounds unbelievable at first, but I learned the truth, Nessie. I did not come here through death, and I cannot leave here through birth. For me it must be the opposite. But I will not die the deaths of those others, forgotten soul-corpses left in the after or burned through by fire. Because I never lived, I will survive death, and in so doing I can learn what is next. I am meant for higher birth, Mother—either I will be able to find god, or I will become god.

I stared at her for a long minute. She was grinning, but it wasn't the same wide, stoned grin she'd started with. She'd changed during her speech, stood firmer and calmer, and now her smile was a hard slit of self-assurance.

"No," I said. I watched her.

"No?"

"You can't do it," I said. "You can't set yourself up as a martyr, Mara, or go off to become some god. It isn't real, what you saw, and if you try to kill yourself you won't survive."

"I will—"

"I won't let you."

“You are only a person, Nessie, dead and fragile. I am part of this world, death herself. Why should I do what you say?”

“I am your mother. You’re a part of me, not the After. I carried you in my womb.”

“Womb tomb, tomb womb. I know you understand—it is an ancient idea. It’s why you fixate on the coffin and the grave. You yearn to bury yourselves in the cradle of the grave, to lie quiet and rot in utero. Death is birth, and you have died, born to my world. I am your mother now.”

“You sound like Phineas,” I said, my fists tight at my sides. “What the fuck happened to you in that cave, Mara?”

“You’ve spent all this time running, all this time searching for an end. You have found your end. I have found mine.”

She turned and walked out of my apartment, but she didn’t go downstairs. She climbed to the roof and shouted out over the city, her voice echoing and tinny like the PA from the train.

“People of the After, I have returned. Some of you have known me and learned from me directly, and you have taught the others here to control your existence, to command the After in whatever way you can imagine.” I looked out my apartment window and saw people filing into the streets, craning their necks around corners or up alleyways to find Mara on the roof. “But there is more to the After than control,” she said. “There are the questions. Why are you here? What is the purpose?”

I raised my window and pushed out my whole torso, twisted to look up at the roof six feet above me. I couldn't see Mara, but I shouted up at her: "We're here because we're dead, Mara, and that is the purpose."

Her toes peeked over the edge and she leaned to look at me. Below us the streets were filling. Her voice still echoed mechanically. "And yet here too people die, and what is their purpose, where do they go? Aren't you afraid of redeath, terrified this mystery might catch you, too, off guard?" Some of the people below shouted their agreement.

"What mystery?" I said, and I twisted to shout at the crowds below. "I died and wound up here. If I die again maybe I'll wind up someplace else. I hope I don't, I hope if I die again I can just escape all this nonsense and disappear, nothing would make me happier, but maybe I don't, maybe I wind up in some other place just the same as this, some place worse. It's bound to happen, and when it does, I'll deal with it, but I'm not afraid."

Someone below shouted back, "I am," and several others repeated it.

"You need not be afraid," Mara announced, "because I have your answers or will find them for you. In one week's time, I will have taught the last of you all the creative skills you will need. One week after that fourteen days from this moment, meet me on the beach where my road ends, where Nessie's last fight took place—and she fought because she too is afraid, don't let her tell you otherwise—and I will explain everything to you all."

There were murmurs and some cheering, but I pulled myself into my apartment and ran up the stairs to the roof. I had to stop her. She could do what she wanted, but she was deluding the rest of them, and without Tarah, with Hadi lost in one-sided delirium, I couldn't argue against her in front of all those people. But when I got to the roof she was gone. I turned back to the stairs but I hadn't passed her. I ran to the edge of the roof over my window, shuffled to the edge and leaned over an inch, another inch, but I saw her—she had jumped and now was floating, arms outstretched like those paper helicopters I made as a kid, twirling slowly toward the ground.

~

The sky was still overcast. We hadn't seen the sun since the train. But it was more naturally overcast now, clouds that threatened genuine rain. The surf crashed against a pile of rocks and driftwood people had set up or conjured out of thin air into a vast semicircle facing a huge, dry trunk, a gnarled hunk of tree worn smooth by the ocean. Mara stood on it. I sat in the back, here only because I couldn't leave her to do this alone, though I couldn't bear to listen and didn't know how to stop it. I was cold despite the crowds. The whole city had made their way here, walking for the pleasure in it though most had long since begun conjuring wagons, busses, motorcycles. They'd conjured everything by in the last week: Fast food places, a library, boutiques and shoe stores, a

multiscreen movie theater, radio stations that didn't need transmitters or towers because everyone but me knew how to raise their voices in thunderous broadcasts and everyone but me know how to tune them out. But there would be no comforts on the beach. Mara had declared it her territory, her conjuring space alone, and she wanted her announcement to be sacred and clean of anything she didn't control. So once the rocks and driftwood benches had shaken loose the sand and the people gathered themselves into their semicircle, the conjuring ceased, and Mara raised her hands for silence.

My daughter spoke.

"You all know the question," she said. "Ask it, and I shall answer."

"What is next?" some woman said. Her voice echoed up in amphitheater magnitude because she wanted it to. "We do all this, but now what?"

"I have brought you all here to know the next step. You have mastered your selves, overcome your own deaths to rule the After as your own. And yet you all feel trapped, stuck in a godless in-between place, lifeless yet alive. You wander without aim as you await a reward you cannot quite create yourselves. You have offered yourselves rebirth but then return to the After, dissatisfied with Life as you used to know it. You return to seek reconciliation with a God you have never met. Some of you even await what you perceive as ultimate death. Friends, I say unto you, death will be yours. You shall have it, control it, bathe in it and emerge cleansed and renewed, not reborn but empowered. Behold—"

The hard canopy they had long called sky and assumed was blue with memory or gray with cloud now was turning red, not burned red from a hidden sun but the clouds themselves stained from within.

“A return is at hand, my friends. You shall regain the power over your death and life, over your existence that once was and should always have been yours.”

There was thunder. She raised her face to it.

“If God is in the sky, let him come down. If God is in the ocean, let God wash ashore. If God is in the earth, let her seep up like a spring. Let us wash in the menstruation of God.”

Gasps, but only a few. They were enough. She opened her eyes to the congregation and spread her hands out over them, shouting to them and to the God she called upon.

“The rules you followed in Life were the rules of men, carved in erectile stone as a symbol of potency. You have been raped too long by the God of your living memory, you have suffered too long the rules of stone.” She looked at me, her eyes narrowed. “What will happen to a stone immersed in water? It will erode. What will happen to the rules that rape you? They will run their course and grow flaccid, and they will leave you as naturally as the tide leaves the shore.”

It began to rain, clean glistening ozone rain cutting down through the thunder.

“I have exiled God in the sky, my friends,” she called, raising her face again. “No more will you be pierced from below by the stones of your pasts. No more will your religions betray you. Cast off your tainted ornaments of a treacherous God!”

Screams. The rain had turned red, a crimson dripping into everyone’s eyes and down everyone’s hands.

“Your hour has come.” She was calm and again in control. “Do not let it pass.”

The congregation ripped at bosoms and wrists, cast off their crucifixes and crescent moons, their Davidian stars and their strings of beads. The last four of Uriah’s family, closest to Mara’s dais of driftwood, drew out pocket knives and began cutting tattoos from their bodies, the imagined blood from within flowing fast to join the blood from above. Mara grinned and opened her mouth to catch the rain in it like the child she still was.

“From this lacerated sky I draw new life!” she said. “This blood will be my nurturing milk! On this day I create a new faith. But I will not speak it, friends, in esoteric parables. Nor will I build my church on some rock. There!” She pointed at the roiling stormy ocean behind them, the waters once algae-emerald now frothy with blood. “There is my foundation! There is fertility embodied! In this will the egg of our faith be planted!”

She stepped down from her fallen tree and parted the crowds with a sweep of her arms. The ocean licked the heels of the followers, and she walked to its lip. She turned.

“In death is new life. There is no end. There is only another place, a higher existence. Somewhere, beyond this After, there is the old God, hiding from us, cowering unaccountable. I will go into the ocean and to a death I have never known as you have. And from this death I either will emerge into the next plane, where I can confront this coward God, or I will emerge in Life, not as you did in infancy but whole and unchanged and still, always, empowered. The people you left in Life can know the power you have found After, and I will teach it to them. I will free them from the oppressive tyranny of their religions and give them control, and together we will ascend to rejoin you. With this army, we will go to seek this God, to hold this God under our scrutiny, under our power. As great as this coward God might once have been, our collected power will be a thousand times greater. I go to save you all from this perpetual death.”

The congregation cheered above the storm, louder than the sea, their roars thrown high into the wind and carried off into the trees, the roads, the city. She smiled and nodded to them. My daughter.

When they had quieted again, she raised up her arms and said, “Bring me rope.” A handful of people hurried forward, pulled long coils of rope from under their sleeves like so many sideshow magicians. They passed them up to her but she held her arms out to her sides, the Magician to her assistants, and told them

to tie the rope around her waist. “Make it fast,” she said, “and close to the skin. Tie me tight, so that when I have found what’s next I can return to you, or bring you to me.” She closed her eyes while they bound her, thick knots looping their way up the rope, one on top of another. Once they had her leashed, she opened her eyes again and took hold of the rope, tugged it, handed it to the people around her. “We will *be* God, soon.”

Then she turned and walked into the ocean, the crimson of the waters rising fast up her dress, pulling her in. Her hair spread out behind her, and then she was under, and then she was gone. The ocean churned on, chewing her, swallowing. I thought I caught a glint of light, not eh flash she’d expected and not the blue she’d described—it was too fast, and it might have been a final thrust of lightning, but it was dull, pale, a muddy white light that glanced on the horizon as though off a wave, and it was gone. She was gone. The crowd stood silent for a long time. I wept.

When the storm relaxed and the rains turned clear, the congregation sat on their stone or wood benches in the sand to wait. They sat forever. Days and nights. Lifetimes. More people wandered out onto the beach, newcomers to the After, wondering what we were doing out there. It was one of the newly dead who found it, the thick tangle of knots and the loop of rope washed up on shore again. Everyone watched it, a long line formed, coiling around itself in a wide spiral to pass and touch the rope, the knots. A lot of the people were crying now, even the newcomers, but they were happy somehow, and when they’d touched

the rope, they filtered back toward the road, back into the city. And I cried still, at least once a day rocking and coughing over my tears, my arms folded tight across my breasts, I sat in the sands and let my sobs and my heart beat against me until I relaxed into silent trickles and quivers. My nipples ached, they strained toward the water. My cheeks and throat cramped up and no more sound came from me—just the tears. Then they stopped too. I rocked with my mouth stretched open and my eyes squeezed shut, unable to cry or to make any sound. I hurt.

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I think I fell asleep for days. My mouth had relaxed. My cheeks ached and my stomach was sore. And my breasts, still. But I'd stopped crying.

I stood and turned in circles a few times. The sky was clean. The ocean had drifted out away from me and was calm. The fallen driftwood tree she'd stood on was gone. Or maybe I had move in my dreams. Who knew. I was getting used to change here.

I walked up to the treeline then veered and followed it, walked the beach until I reached the road. I went on foot for days. Maybe a week. Then there was the city. It was mostly empty. The old ones had moved out, gone on their own search, maybe, or gone back to the ocean to wait. Only a few dozen remained, mostly new arrivals.

This is where I stay now, in the city. I stay and stay. I don't know how long it's been. She has not come back. Her church remains, filled each day with mourners happily worshiping death. They stand at pulpits and altars and describe again and again the dull light that flashed on the horizon like a gauzy sunset, the way it reflected in the high glittering windows of the skyscrapers and reflects still in the cornices and steeples of their temples. Only most don't describe a white light, they tell of a dull yellow like a dusty sunset, or the pale blue that Mara had first described with the bird. It divides them sometimes, and they splinter into sects, the Yellow Lights and the Blue Lights, not a white light among them, but they all worship Mara still. Everyone here is a follower now, even the new arrivals. They are taught her words and convert, all of them. None of them had seen her in Life.

Well, not quite all convert. A few rebel at first. They are cast into the woods, to contemplate. They see the light soon enough. They return to the city to wait. Or they move to the beach, where they've built a lighthouse that stretches, I think, more than a thousand feet into the sky. She would hate that. It doesn't make a bit of difference to me. I know better. So I just sit here, sore and alone in my weary apartment, staring out my window at the odd play of color the distant ocean makes. It's like a rainbow stretched across the glass, not a simple wash of color like the one Mara sent sweeping over the mountain way back at the oasis, when she was just a girl; I see a vast gleaming array of colors spanning everything as though it weren't here in the After or splashed in the

glass of my window but coating my eyes, or beaming from within my eyes, opalescent in its liquid, shimmering ability to reflect all colors and no colors, like my eyeballs had turned to crystals or diamonds, breaking up light into every possible shade and variant and wavelength but not really breaking it up at all, just intensifying it. It's a nice thing to watch, when it happens. But I don't put much stock in it. My eyes probably are crystallized. I am old and unnatural, not a part of Mara world or the city's world or any world. Because I know that none of this matters. They're worshipping nothing—there is no death.

A moon has risen. The contours are strange, the craters deep, and after a while it does resemble a skull as I'd always expected it would. For a time I thought only I could see it, focused as everyone was on their lighthouse and their ocean. I thought perhaps I'd conjured it, unconsciously as always, some bright reminder of Mara, or of my little Tarah. But I'm not as mournful as Hadi, who is a worn stump rooted now at the western edge of the city, his back to the ocean and his eyes always on the plains where Tarah died. And I'm not as fixated as the residents; I don't expect much from my departed daughter. And after several nights I realized they could see it too, and for a while I instead assumed they'd created it, a larger lighthouse to guide Mara home, a big skull beacon in the sky. It's not just my imagination—they think it's a skull too. Some pretend it's Mara's skull, that the moon itself is her return, but that following is small and heretical, and they've been ghettoed around their own small church near the woods. For the most part, it has become just a moon, new chalky light sifting down to soothe

the masses. And now I know they didn't create it, because while I see only a moon as well—no great symbol, no bright new meaning—the light itself isn't chalky at all. It's clear, like shimmering air, like vaporous cellophane, alive with faint translucent color the way clear mylar can refract the light, and it isn't pasted on the moon like dust but beams off it, reflected from some vast sourceless other light, as though off a hammered, burnished-pewter bowl, and when the breeze stirs off the ocean, it sings.