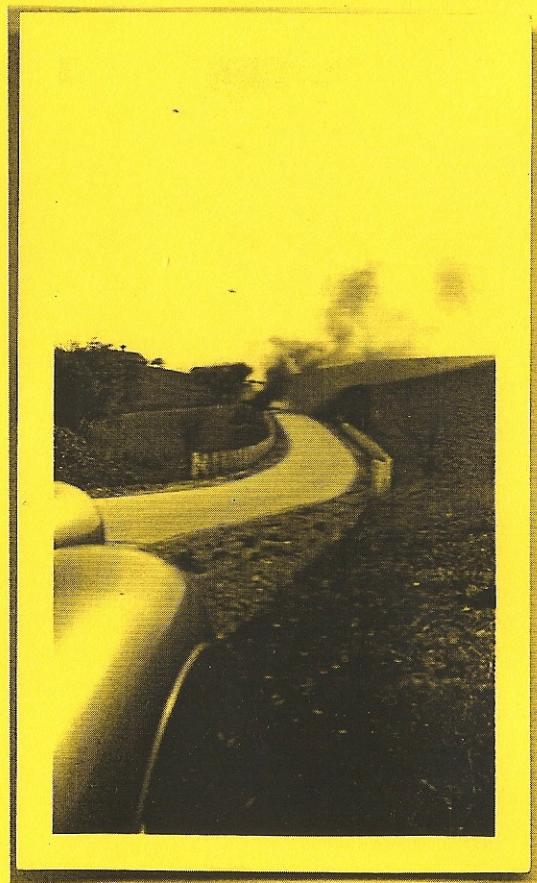


BETA DECAY



NUMBER TWO

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#2

by ANDREW JACKSON KING

The Scobies

Rebecca stared down at the flat tire, dumbfounded. She looked around the barren parking lot, hoping somebody would appear to give her a hand. Where was she, she thought. It felt like she had slept through the last few hundred miles. Tall, golden grass spread out like an ocean from the parking lot. She looked across to the edge of the asphalt at the church, rising out of the sea of yellow like the mast of a ship. Its white siding was cracking from years of storms, but still looked strong enough to stand up to a tornado.

Rebecca wiped the sweat from her forehead. There's nobody here, she thought, looking at the empty parking spaces. She sat in the driver's seat for a minute, sipping from a water bottle, before getting out and opening the trunk. Tossing aside books, old clothes, and boxes of soda cans, she lifted the bottom panel to expose the spare tire and tire iron.

The heat wave had passed through the area over the last week and had turned the fields into a baked landscape of scorched grass and dried cornstalks. Her mind was blank on much of the last few hours of driving, but she could see for miles from the church's parking lot. Stands of sweetgum trees dotted the surrounding acreage, with rows of bald cypress visible in the far-off distances. The silence was almost deafening to Rebecca; such a void that the nothingness seemed to invert itself into a dull pulsing between her ears.

Grabbing the car jack, she felt under the car for the lip to hook it into it. Finding it, she wound the handle, which forced a small squeal out of the axle as the car lifted off the ground. Apparently, she had done this before.

She reached into the car and grabbed her water, taking a sip as she leaned against the open door. I could go into convulsions and nobody would find me for hours, maybe days,

she thought. Why didn't I ever buy a car charger for my phone? Damn it.

She looked back at the road, heatwaves rising up and distorting her view. Nobody had passed in the thirty minutes she'd been there. Her eyes started to cross and she lost focus. Jesus, how did I get here? she thought. She remembered waking up at a motel in the morning, the crisp cool bedsheets wrapped around her feet. She could remember the water she splashed on her face, the gas station coffee, the talk radio host proclaiming the end times. But she couldn't remember the past few hours, where she was, where she was going, even larger questions like why she wasn't at home or where her money was coming from.

Rebecca felt a twitch on her arm. She snapped out of her daydream quick enough to look down at her wrist and see the large grey bug crawling along her forearm. "Ugh!" she yelled, swiping the insect away. Its papery wings exploded as it fell to the ground, covering her hand in grey and black dust. She bent over to look at it, watching its legs slowly move as it lay on its backside, gradually expiring. She thought it looked kind of like a moth, but much larger, the size of a can of sardines. Its body and what was left of its wings were a deep bluish-grey with streaks of irregular black. I've never seen a bug that big before, she thought.

Grabbing the tire iron, Rebecca tried to break the nuts with her own strength before grabbing a hammer out of the trunk to loosen them. Changing the tire, she kept thinking about what she was doing there. She remembered an argument with a boyfriend, her boyfriend, named Kevin. He was wearing a suit, she was in a red dress, but what they were arguing about she couldn't recall.

Tightening up the nuts, she turned the jack handle and lowered the car. It seemed like the powerful sun had barely moved since she first pulled into the lot, her skin starting to turn red on the most exposed areas of her arms and face.

Throwing the old tire into the trunk, she grabbed one of the warm sodas, which had been sloshing around for the entire trek. The heated cola scrunched her face into a look of disgust, but she was so thirsty from the heat that it didn't matter.

She wiped her wet hair away from her face and happened

to see the bright red rash breaking out from where the insect had landed on her. Like a topographic map, the center regions of the affected area were raised and white, about to burst with pus. Surrounding them were dark magenta rings which fizzled out into lighter red areas, but even these were raised like hives. She hadn't even felt it until now, but after seeing the rash she couldn't think about anything else. It burned like touching the handle of a hot skillet and the edges itched like a sunburn. She didn't want to scratch it, fearing it might spread. Grabbing an old t-shirt out of the backseat, she wound it around the sore like a bandage.

She went back and looked at the bug, dried and shriveled from the sun. She wanted it step on it, to crush its feathered back and its emaciated exoskeleton. I don't want to risk spreading whatever poison it has, she thought.

She looked towards the church. It must have been a beautiful building once, but it had an air of abandonment that she couldn't put her finger on. The way the doors looked almost painted shut and the seeds and dandelion tops that were caught in the crevices of the front steps. There had to be running water in there and maybe a first-aid kit, though. Maybe a telephone, if she was lucky. Closing the trunk, she walked across the scorching pavement towards the church.

It was a simple building, a single gable roof with a massive bell tower lifted out of the peak, its oaken spire evoking the Tower of Babel out here amongst the low-slung desolateness of the surrounding land. Several pieces of siding had broken off, exposing the framing timber and interior wall paneling. There were no windows on either the front or sides, but two large wooden doors stood at the front of the building. Oddly, the building was not perpendicular to the parking lot; rather it was askew, some twenty degrees off a right angle formed with the edge of the lot. Rebecca surmised the church was much older than both the paved road and the asphalt parking lot.

As she got closer, Rebecca could see that the building was raised half a story off the ground, which required a short flight of concrete stairs to reach the front doors. Bushes flanked the steps, strangely green despite the drought. The pulse she had felt in her

ears from the silence became more pronounced, a tinge of buzzing or metallic clanging to it. Ascending the steps, she lost her balance for a second. The steps weren't poured level, she thought. She grabbed the railing with her bandaged arm to steady herself, realizing too late that this would cause the weakened flesh to tear. A flash of pain swept over her. The cloth of the shirt suddenly became uncomfortable as the blood and pus seeped into it.

Composing herself, she again began to move towards the door, grabbing the bronze handle and kicking the bottom of the door to unstick it from the frame. She glanced at what appeared to be ancient letters painted on the two doors, so worn from time and the elements that she only noticed them up close. Upon the left door she could make out the words "CHURCH OF," while the right door, which she had paused opening, read "NEW JUBILEE."

The door creaked open, with the bottom getting caught on some kind of small debris that dragged across the oak floors, making a quiet scraping sound. A wave of dry, musty heat swept over Rebecca. She could see towards the back of the building, where stained glass allowed amber light to filter through. Columns of illumination, reaching from the windows to the floor, were filled with dust. Barely visible were the tops of the pews, but she could make out the white pulpit beneath the stained glass. In the back right of the building, she could make out a smaller room with a door.

Steadying herself on the backs of the pews, Rebecca made her way down the aisles to reach the room. She hoped she could find some dressing for her arm. She desperately wanted to peel the cloth from the wound, the discomfort from the cloying blood being almost unbearable, but without the ability to clean it, the pain would only get worse. Feeling her way forward through the dimly-lit room, the dust became thicker as the smell of burning wood filled her nostrils. Trying to speed her ordeal up, she began moving faster before tripping on an obstruction in the middle of the floor. Falling into the pew, Rebecca banged her knee on the hard, ancient oak and dropped to the floor.

Her arm, knee, and foot in pain, she lay there for a minute to calm herself. It didn't feel like she was on a wood floor

anymore. It was softer, maybe carpet, she thought. She stared up at the ceiling, focusing on the huge beams spanning the width of the building. Past the beams, she could see the underside of the roof. Her eyes came unfocused, staring at the ceiling.

She rubbed her eyes. It looked like the ceiling was moving, undulating. Slowly, to be sure, but with a rhythmic quivering. The pain subsided somewhat and the metallic pulsing was a steady droning now, growing louder in her ears as she lay there. Her eyes focused and unfocused, over and over, mixing with the pain and the drone and the quavering ceiling.

Rebecca thought she saw a piece of the ceiling falling towards her and closed her eyes. After a few seconds, she opened them and saw the same type of bug that had landed on her in the parking lot drift down to one of the arms of the pews. Oh God, she thought, as she stared more intently at the vaulted roof. Chunks of the ceiling began falling off as she realized that it wasn't the ceiling that was moving, it was the thousands upon thousands of insects crawling along it.

She tried to get up, but the shirt wrapped around her arm was caught underneath something. Jerking it loose, the makeshift bandage ripped off, separating itself from the wound. Rebecca could feel the warm blood running down her arm and dripping between her fingers.

More of the giant bugs began to dislodge themselves from the roof of the building. The droning became a more pronounced buzzing. Disoriented, Rebecca began to run, but towards the rear of the building. She glimpsed one of the bugs about to land on her face, causing her to twist her body and trip into the pews. Pulling herself out to the aisle, she could see hundreds, maybe thousands, of the bugs flying through the streams of light cast through the window at the back of the building.

As she tried to get up, she saw a figure moving towards her from the pulpit. The light was low, but she could tell it was a person. It was shuffling at an odd gait and hunched over, dragging one of its legs behind the other. Rebecca stared hard into the low light and could make out a clearer picture of the figure as it came nearer towards her. It's covered in something, she thought, as

chunks began falling off the figure as it attempted to move. Passing through one of the columns of light, she could see that the figure was covered in a thick, tan material, like a wasps' nest. The baked, clay-like material was cracking off as it moved towards her.

She tried to get up, but pain shot through her legs from having fallen down twice. Pulling herself up onto a pew, she got into the aisle and began to hobble towards the door. Looking back at the figure, she felt a wave of dread come over her. Everything was happening so fast, but she was positive this was a terrible creature. It opened its mouth and let out a howl, a mixture of shrieking owl and junkyard dog, that gave Rebecca deeper shivers than she already had.

Bursting through the doors, she scrambled out onto the steps, running to her car at full speed. The direct sunlight warmed her in a way the heat inside the church hadn't. The blood was caked on her arm and sticky rivulets ran down her palm. Grabbing the tire iron she ran back towards the door, preparing herself for the creature to open it. Every step she took, she imagined the monster opening the door before she could reach it, causing her to fall into its decrepit body. She made it before it did, jamming the iron between the door handles to prevent them being opened from the inside.

Running back to her car, Rebecca reached into the back seat and found an old sock. Opening the gas tank cover, she forced it down with the tip of an old umbrella. The sock wicked up the gasoline and Rebecca's hand became cool as the liquid evaporated off her skin. She grabbed a lighter from the change holder in the front and ran towards the doors again.

Scanning the oak portals, she found a notch on the top that had been carved for some ancient purpose, as the wood had been worn down to a fine, smooth surface. She forced the sock through the hole and held the lighter in her hand. Why was she doing this? she thought. Why couldn't she just drive away? What were those things and what is that creature? Overcome by an urge to destroy the entire structure and all inside, she flicked the lighter and drew it near the saturated cloth.

Flush with adrenaline, Rebecca jumped down the half

flight of stairs in two leaps, stopping halfway between the church and her car. Flames licked up the doorframe. She stood watching it spread across the front of the building. The fire moved fast in the dry heat, spreading up and out from the doorway, like an animal rising from its slumber. Slats of siding fell from the front, sending ashes and sparks across the concrete steps.

She could remember more of the conversation with Kevin now. He was telling her to stay away from the cities, stick to backroads. She couldn't remember why, but his instructions certainly hadn't helped her.

Rebecca turned as she heard behind her the sound of gravel crunching under car tires. An old red station wagon turned into the parking lot, throwing up pebbles as it came to a screeching halt. A man stepped out, his prematurely greying hair tucked into his sunglasses. His blue plaid shirt stood in stark contrast to the golden fields and orange flames. Rebecca's eyes unfocused for a moment. A red-haired woman got out of the car, a green sundress rippling around her like verdant fields. "Are you all right, honey?" the woman asked.

Rebecca's eyes focused. "Yes, yes, I was just driving by and saw the flames! It must be the heat! Do you have a cell phone?"

The man answered. "Yeah, we do. Honey, can you call 9-1-1?" The man walked closer towards Rebecca. "Jesus, there's no way to save that thing now. It's going up faster than a box of tinder," he said, as the flames shot up out of the roof, exposing the massive beams underneath.

"What a shame," Rebecca said.

"The fire trucks are on their way," the woman yelled over to her husband and Rebecca.

Two children, a boy and a girl, climbed sleepily out of the backseat of the station wagon. The girl clutched an old brown teddy bear under her arm. They stood dumbfounded as the inferno consumed whole sections of the church's walls and roof.

Rebecca opened the door to her car. "Thanks for helping out," she called over to the family. She turned the key and slipped her seat belt on. Far off, she could hear the sirens as she flicked on

her turn signal. Her eyes unfocused for a second as she got lost in the rhythmic click-clack of the signal. She snapped back, looked right down the road and turned left, throwing up pebbles onto the church parking lot. She wasn't sure where she was going.

Carbón

Lucas ran the plane across the massive block of oak, shaving thin layers of the heartwood and watching the curls fall to the ground. Class had ended a few hours earlier, but he had taken advantage of the long summer sun to get some extra work in before bed. He didn't have any other hobbies; didn't bother to go to the bar like the younger students or to work on his house like the older ones. He had always been focused during class time, working hard to learn and apply his new knowledge.

He was loading a hand-carved tabletop into his station wagon and happened to look over into the yard of the house two doors down. It was empty, the large cherry tree swaying slowly in the wind. He pushed the block of wood the final inch and shut the hatch, glancing back over to the yard. She was walking through it now, barefoot, clipping the flowers from beneath the trees lining the paths and driveway. She looked over her shoulder, smiling at him, the way he remembered.

His grey hair darkened then; the muscles in his arms grew taut, his back straightened. He returned her smile, getting into the car and driving away. He looked at his hands on the steering wheel, pitted and scarred from countless scrapes and accidents in the shop. This is helpful, he thought to himself.

Lucas woke up, his alarm still ringing. He looked at his hands, soft from years of reading and writing. He swore his arms were sore from the months in the woodshop, but he couldn't be sure. Actually, he was positive they were, but he knew that he had to get up and get dressed, regardless.

He met Carla at the corner coffee shop, the same place they had met every Monday for the last few years. They had studied chemistry together at university, the rush of experimentation and the freedom from familial obligations

allowing them to run wild in the lab. Their early work on molecular Van Eyck strings had broken new ground in cellular regeneration and organ replacement and both had completed their studies in record time, even by the university's standards. They stayed on for a few years, doing research and scrambling for grant money before they turned thirty and had to give up their pet projects.

The pair had grown apart in later years, the necessities and vagaries of funding sending them to separate coasts, but Lucas had returned home after his breakthrough. The stipend that the institute provided him to hold his patents and distribute the rights paid him well enough to allow him to live where he wanted and he had decided to move back into the house he grew up in. A few months of finagling with the current owners and he had transformed his boyhood room into a library and writing study worthy of Rowan Oak.

Carla had ventured to New York and later Europe in a quest to adapt recent Casimir effect breakthroughs to an organic level. He had followed her trail of acclaimed papers and articles through the years before a car accident brought her back to town. Through the window, Lucas watched the early sun glinting off her jet-black hair as she walked up to the shop, casually carrying a stack of books she would try to get him to read.

“Morning, Luke!” Carla beamed as she came up behind him, the door being situated nearer the cashier to his rear. She had always done the same thing in the lab, grabbing his shoulders to try and scare him, even if he had seen her coming.

Lucas pretended to act startled. “Carla, hello,” he got out after wiping the coffee from his chin. “Let’s sit outside, it’s so nice out.”

They chatted for an hour or so, discussing the weather, Carla’s children, current events. She had noticed that Lucas had become somewhat withdrawn in recent months. “Have you been spending a lot of time in recursion?”

“Yes, actually, I have. I took a woodworking class the other night. It was wonderful to be actually doing something. Making something.”

“You know you need to break that up with deep sleep, right? Don’t push yourself too hard, Luke. I’ve seen you like this before.”

“Sure, but look at all it gave me. Look at what it gave the world.”

“I suppose.” Carla tried to shrug off his comment, but Lucas’ recursion sessions *had* helped the entire planet. It was difficult for her to imagine what would have happened without his breakthrough. The small insurrections that ended years ago may have boiled over into all-out wars. “Just take care of yourself for me, please?” she asked.

“Okay, okay. I’ve got a deep international relations course tonight, then I’ll take a break. I promise.” Carla tracked his eyes and wasn’t sure if she believed him, but had to take Lucas’ word.

Other classes followed in quick succession. His questions on rudder design had led him to an intensive study of fluid dynamics, which in turn had fed into hydraulics and aerodynamics courses. A particularly interesting year of studying sea myths and legends had pushed his imagination and allowed him to experiment with constructs to populate the worlds he was beginning to create.

It was during a three year stint on cartography that he had asked her on a date. He made steaks that night, the kind he remembered from his childhood. The white fat marbled through the meat, the edges sizzling, a layer of salt and pepper. He rarely ate fish during recursion. They had told stories of growing up, moving, their parents. Even the wine tasted better than what they had now.

He had been tinkering with an organic positioning system when she moved in a few months later. He spent less time focused on his studies and more with her. They would cook outside, watch the sunset, follow the fireflies as they flitted across the night. One summer, he almost forgot to change the seasons, forcing himself to keep autumn the same length because of how much she liked it, but shortening the cold, winter months to only a couple of weeks.

Carla smiled through the plate-glass window at Lucas, who was seated in a deep leather chair. She unfolded the newspaper from under her arm and pressed it across the glass, while the other patrons looked quizzically at her. The banner of *The Longcamp Beacon* sat atop the headline that read, “Local inventor of G-Carbon awarded Nobel Prize.”

Walking in, Carla stood in the middle of the room and put her bag down. “Ladies and gentlemen!” she called. “May I have your attention? Seated at that window over there is the one, the only, Lucas F. Gardell, this year’s Nobel Prize winner in Chemistry!”

She ran her finger down the newspaper to the requisite paragraph and began reading aloud. “Dr. Gardell’s breakthrough paper, the product of years of recursive training, titled *Pathways for Catalytic Carbon Restructuring: A Theoretical Approach*, shifted the world from a carbon-dependant state to a carbon-abundant state, saving millions of lives with its low-cost power generation.”

Skipping over the paragraph on Lucas’ family life, she continued reading. “Gardell, a prolific author now retired from the science field, continues to write for journals and periodicals praising the benefits of recursive training. The scientist and author now resides in Longcamp, Arizona and regularly contributes to the magazine *The New Dominion*. ”

Lucas waved his hand to the other customers as his face turned red. Carla sat down across from him as a waitress brought him an espresso on the house.

“So what’s it feel like?”

“Pretty good, I’d say. I could go without the attention, though.”

Carla laughed. She noticed a slight tick in Lucas’ thumb, a movement she had remembered from many years ago during a particularly stressful modafinil addiction to stay awake during the day. Carla had deduced then that he was using homemade zolpidem to fall asleep easier and increase recursion time and then upping during the day to stay on schedule. The confrontation that had followed strained their friendship, but Carla never regretted it.

“God damnit,” she sternly whispered to Lucas as she grabbed his arm. “What is wrong with you? Why are you doing this again? Can’t you just relax?”

“I’m fine. Just a few more weeks, I promise.”

“Don’t you remember what happened last time?” Carla looked pleadingly into Lucas’ eyes, trying to get him to remember the weeks he had spent in a coma after taking too many pills. “You can’t live there. With Gail, I mean.”

“I’m not. I’m just working on some research.”

“Skip it for tonight, please. Come on. Let’s go out to eat.”

Lucas mulled over the proposition. “I suppose we could,” he forced out.

The rain fell down in heavy, black drops. The creek was cresting its edges as the golden moonlight streaked through the cattails. He could vaguely remember this night, but there were holes missing. He realized then that Gail was filling in details he couldn’t remember. Her memory construct was designed to interact with him well enough and the impression Gail had given a few months before the end had allowed much of her personality to carry over, but her ability to plug holes in Lucas’ recursion was unprecedented. It was working, he thought.

He looked over at her as she wiped the rivulets of rain from her dark curls. Her dress clung to her; she was woefully underdressed for a storm, but perfectly dressed for a summer picnic. She pointed to the oars and said “Come on!” and laughed.

Lucas got up from the bench, his hand on the gunwale tilting the boat to the side some, and kissed Gail. He kissed her long, making up for lost years, as the rain poured down in sheets.

The flight to Luzon had taken well over ten hours and Lucas was frustrated that he had been unable to fall asleep. The pilot had indicated turbulence, but even with his pills, he hadn’t been able to nod off. He pulled out his notepad and jotted down a reminder to reschedule his class for Wind Shear on Variable Sail Materials.

Looking out the window, he could see the hundreds of

islands in the nation broken up by the sea, drops of volcanic mass scattered here and there. The institute had wanted him to come to the groundbreaking of a new plant and he had reluctantly agreed in order to get out of the house for a while. Carla would be happy about that.

A Manilan ambassador picked him up in a gleaming white limousine, a symbol of pure Pan-Pacific modernity. The driver wove the car through the narrow streets to a small section of Muntinlupa on Laguna de Bay. The ambassador – a short, intense man named Romeo – rattled on to Lucas in the car. He enjoyed American cigarettes, dark coffee, and fly fishing; he hated talking on the telephone and paying the new war tax. Lucas gazed out the window as the city transformed from gleaming skyscrapers to ramshackle apartment buildings.

They pulled into a small shanty town, the houses constructed from the flotsam and jetsam of the modern life carrying on inside the city core. Corrugated aluminum, carbon-fiber beams, and radiation-resistant glass found new uses in centuries-old Filipino building styles.

A photographer stood near the water of the bay with a family from the town, consisting of a mother, father, and four children. The father was dressed in a white formal barong, the mother in a traditional Tagalog deep purple baro't saya. The children played at the water's edge in blue jeans and t-shirts.

Lucas walked towards the family's house and could see a tidy stack of brand new G-Carbon near the front door. He was told that families actually left it outside because it was so cheap and plentiful that nobody bothered to steal it, but he was sure the stack had been arranged by the photographer.

The man fretted with the family, angling them this way and that to get a shot of them using the new fuel in a burner at the edge of the water. Lucas picked up one of the bars, inspecting the outer wrapper. It looks like a candy bar, Lucas thought, though perhaps four or five times larger. The deep blues and aquamarine of the paper label were in sharp contrast to the image of a burning orange flame that the bar brought into Lucas' mind.

He had never been happy about the name, a blunt mash of

his surname and the element. It certainly wasn't pleasant to say or hear. He hoped that perhaps in the future, the G and C would be combined, mixing the hard and sharp of the two letters, or even bastardized into some pidgin word since the product was in use around the globe.

The photographer called him over. Moving him into position between the mother and father, Lucas watched the children playing in the dirt, sand covering their worn sneakers, being careful not to hit the Mercado furnace that had been placed on a base next to the family. The man said a few words and began snapping a series of photographs as the father dropped the G-Carbon into the furnace and plugged in a lightwire to show the instant flash of energy.

The family smiled and laughed and Lucas began to as well. It felt good to be around these people, so far from home. Their love was palpable. It reminded him of Gail; how she laughed, how she used to work in the garden, how they would share a plate of food together.

They finished the photographs and the family invited him in their house to eat with them. Before leaving the shore, he took the bottle of pills out of his pocket and threw them in the water, watching as the white bottle cap bobbed above the surface of the water before the heavy orange bottom dragged it down.

The shimmering blue sea spread out before Lucas. He stood on the wooden pier, his toes curled around the edges of the dried, weathered boards. A slight breeze blew across the surface, catching the collar of his shirt. Gail carried a canvas bag of books over her shoulder, the lining of red gingham inside of the bag peeking through the opening.

Dotting the horizon were specks of islands with snow-capped peaks tearing through the clouds and trees ringing the coasts. Ships of all kinds populated the water off in the distance; wooden galleys loaded with sailors, massive men-of-war towering over the surface, schooners skipping across the surf. Schools of orange fish swam just under the blue plane, while a fin or two belonging to some fabled creature broke through. It was a magical

world and Lucas knew he wouldn't have to leave for a long time.

Grabbing Gail's hand, he stepped into the boat. Steadyying it for her, he guided her over the side and she placed the bag on the deck. The sun bounced off her hair, catching her eyes. Lucas kissed her and they smiled, looking out across the fantastic scene as the boat slowly drifted away from the dock.

Wastoids

Charlotte rolled over and opened her eyes. Coughing, she grabbed her chest. Struggling to breathe, she scrambled around for her jacket in the bed of the truck while trying to keep calm. Opening the denim pocket, she pulled out her inhaler and took two deep breaths from it. A golden retriever, white around the face, licked her left hand as she petted him with the other. She sat up and the wind caught her hair, blowing it across her face as she tried to rub her eyes. From the back of the truck, she could see the abandoned houses and empty cars whip by as she passed.

James swerved around a burned-out car and onto the shoulder of the road, twisting the steering wheel to regain traction. Charlotte slid in the bed of the truck along with the dog, piles of dirty clothes, toolboxes, and other supplies, all scratching against the worn metal. The wood panel extending up from the gate on the back of the truck slapped loosely against the body.

Charlotte pulled out her mirror and leaned over the side of the truck, looking at what they were leaving behind. The glow of the city still pulsed strangely, a mix of blues and greens and yellows. Charlotte thought she might have seen orange in it. She leaned in to study the mirror, thinking to herself that the glow didn't appear to be growing anymore. Before long, they would be out of range of the city and they could look around wherever they liked.

Sliding the window of the truck cab open, she poked her head in. "Any news?" she asked.

"Caught some voices over the static. End of the world ranting, like usual. I wonder where these stations are and how they're getting that much power. I can't even tell where they're coming from, but I guess it's good to know more people are out there, even if they're crazy." Despite the wind blowing through the open windows of the cab, sweat had beaded up on James'

forehead.

“Harumph.” Charlotte was bored of riding in the back of the truck. They hadn’t seen a waster in three days. “How much farther to Gentian Beach?”

“Before the bomb, two days. Who knows now.”

The quantum bombs had led to unpredictable changes in the wake of their detonation. They had dropped at night, trapping the major cities and choking their citizens inside. Their effects had licked out of the cities like tendrils, reaching into the interior of the country and cutting out into the oceans in seemingly random patterns. Whole slices of the world were left relatively unscathed after the initial detonations, while other regions were completely consumed in the arbitrary madness. Those that had survived were left in a short waiting game while the world reorganized itself.

Charlotte stood staring in the windows of the travel agency. It was so quiet with no people, no cars, no airplanes, no air conditioners. Her rifle slung lazily across her back, she stood imagining her toes digging into white sand, blue water flowing over her ankles, the sun warming her bare shoulders. James walked through the shattered front window of the next building over, carrying a shopping basket loaded with cans of food and boxes of dry goods.

“Let’s go,” he yelled over to her.

“Come on, Roscoe.” The retriever ran over to Charlotte, sidling up against her calf. “Do you have anything for Roscoe?”

“Yeah, found him some rawhides. Here.” Charlotte tore the lid off the red cardboard box and pulled out the chew for the dog. Tossing it in the air, Roscoe caught it, and continued walking with it held in his mouth, his tail wagging.

“Anything in there?” she asked.

“You mean bodies? No, place was barely touched. But all of this food should last us a couple of days.”

Walking towards the truck, James swung the basket into the back and pulled out a box. Opening it, he looked back towards the grocery store, still amazed at the luck he could have after all

they had seen.

“What if Gentian Beach is changed?” Charlotte asked, biting into the granola bar James had handed her.

“Then we’ll go south or north. Follow the coast until we find something safe. That guy from Furnace said that he heard of some of the beaches that way were destroyed.”

“You said that guy was crazy.”

“Oh, he was definitely crazy. We should still check it out, though. Gentian Beach is a sure bet and we don’t have many of those anymore.”

Charlotte and James turned as they heard the click of the dog’s rawhide hitting the pavement. “Shhh,” James said. Charlotte grabbed the dog and held his mouth shut. They slowly slid into the back of the truck.

James pulled his rifle off his back and held it out, scanning the street of the small town. Off the main frontage of stores, a small alley reached back and around the buildings. James moved slowly across the opposite sidewalk to face down it. Gravel crunched beneath his feet as he dragged them slowly to get into a better position.

As he slid the waster into his line of sight, he could see it hugging the wall as it dragged its body forward. He noticed it was missing an arm like several of the other ones he had seen the week before. Tattered clothes hung from its gaunt frame. The waster stumbled forward and James could make out the bridge of its nose in his sight. He hated looking at their faces. He cocked the rifle, waiting for the waster to use its fire.

Reaching into the depths of what was left of its brain, the waster turned to face James and began making its way down the alley towards him. Raising the hand that it still had, it turned the palm towards James and he could see its eyes begin to focus. James pulled the trigger and watched through the scope as the creature fell to the ground, its blood smeared across the brick wall behind it.

Running to the truck, he grabbed the basket of food and tossed it onto the bench seat. Charlotte had been holding the dog between her legs and using her hands to cover her ears. “Come

on,” he yelled to her. “There could be more.”

Opening her eyes, Charlotte grabbed the door of the truck bed, pulling it up and locking it into place. She slid the wood panel into its holder as James pulled onto the main road, wiping the sweat from his brow.

Small towns had fared the best, if they had fallen outside of the blast zones. There was a time of confusion at the beginning, a day or so at the most, when it was thought that those affected and those outside the blast zones could live amicably. Until the degenerative effects of the change were discovered, there was some hope. Relations broke down quickly from that point. Those unchanged wanted the world the way it was; those that were affected were usually unable to go back to that world if they had wanted to. Their control of a strange effect called “burning” quickly erased any hope of coexistence.

James stuck his head out the window. “This house should do for the night. There’s even crops still in the field.” Charlotte pulled herself up from the bed of the truck. Petting Roscoe, she jumped down onto the dirt and gravel driveway of the farmhouse.

Tying Roscoe’s leash to the bumper, the two checked the house. It looked like it hadn’t been disturbed since the attacks. The kitchen was still in order. A rarity these days, James thought. Charlotte began up the stairs, the creak of the old wood shocking James before he realized what was happening.

At the top of the stairs, they split and checked each of the four rooms on the upper level. As James was leaving one of the rooms, he saw Charlotte in the hallway, shaking her head towards him. She motioned toward a closed door at the back of the house. “Three dead; two were burnt, one shot himself.”

James put the safety on his rifle and slung it over his back. “Come on, let’s go outside.”

The bombs had heralded the usual issues involved in dealing with an attack on a nation’s soil and major cities. Many clung to loved ones that had changed, hoping that it was only a

temporary shift. But as survivors attempted to band together, it was clear there could be no relationship with those changed. In addition to the ability to burn, those affected were fundamentally changed in their mental and emotional abilities. They could breathe, eat, walk, but could no longer cognitively function, could not talk, laugh, console. They were shells of their former selves and would attack others unprovoked. Their harnessing of the burning pitted them in direct opposition to the remaining humans.

It was easy to put together a dinner that night. As James went into the corn fields behind the house, Charlotte took Roscoe into the small family garden in the backyard. Spoiled vegetables were scattered across the soil, unpicked during the chaos, but the strong growing season left a bounty of fresh peppers, cucumbers, and squash on the stalks and vines. Gathering these, Charlotte made her way back to the house, finding James in the front yard, stoking a rock-rimmed firepit.

Charlotte set down her basket and bent over to rub Roscoe's head. "It's a pretty nice spot here. We could clean it out and fix it up."

"Yeah, mark it on the map. We can always come back."

James pulled a cast iron pot out of the back of the truck and placed it on the embers. Grabbing a can opener out of the tool box, he opened two cans of beans and dumped them into the pot. Charlotte had gone into the house and came out with a cutting board for the vegetables.

"It shouldn't be too much longer, right?" she asked.

"A week or so, three weeks at the out. Depends on how much food they can get, I guess. I've never seen one intelligent enough to make food, but that weird couple we met said they saw a group of them living in a grocery store. Until they went and torched the place."

"You think they were telling the truth?"

"I don't know. We've been out here a while. Have you seen anything that would show they could survive?"

"Not really, I guess." Charlotte stirred the beans, getting lost in an act that would have been commonplace a few weeks

ago. James walked to a water pump in front of the house. Walking back, he poured some into a bowl for Roscoe.

“Where do you think the Army is?”

“Who knows if there even is an Army anymore. They sure haven’t been around to help us.”

Charlotte grew frustrated. “How are we supposed to live out here? How are kids supposed to grow up in this world? Even if we outlive the wasters, how do sewers work? How does electricity work? Have you ever farmed before? What about this?” she asked, holding up her bright red inhaler.

James was resigned. He had no answers to give and was as confused as Charlotte.

The bombs had created the wasters, but it had also changed the topography and composition of the exposed areas. Rifts in bedrock were common, thrust upward or downward according to the spin of the particles exuded by the bomb. Trees sliced in half, flowers branching in unexpected directions, grasses of every color but green; all randomized by the indiscriminate nature of the bombs’ quantum effects. Less predictable, however, were the humans and other creatures caught within the radii of the bombs. While the damaged fauna and bizarre rock formations were trapped where they were, the wasters could move freely across the landscape, far from the reach of the blast zones.

Charlotte turned the truck around the bend in the road and looked out at the strip mall as they passed. She wondered why the bombs worked the way they did. Why her home had been hit. Why she had been at the grocery store that day and been caught outside of it. How her neighbors could be changed and she could be fine. How her family....

James slid the window open. “We should probably find somewhere to spend the night. These neighborhoods up ahead look pretty good.” Charlotte had never felt safe in the suburban backyards, but James always assured her that the wasters wouldn’t be able to get in. The fences would confuse them, he said.

Charlotte drove through the neighborhood of orderly four-

bedroom, three-bath homes until they found one with a fence taller than their heads. Charlotte backed the truck up against the door of the fence and James hopped out with Roscoe. The grass reached up to her knees, scratching her calves. She thought about ticks and knew she'd have to check Roscoe that night. Roscoe peed on a white dogwood and headed towards the fence, smelling along the perimeter.

James threw a duffle bag over the top of the fence as Charlotte climbed back onto the truck to get over the fence easier. The wind caught her dress and blew it against her body as she stared off into the distance. One of the homes on the block was burnt to the ground. There were cars in the driveways, cars smashed into trees, cars askew on the road, cars everywhere. It seemed like a completely different life.

James threw his legs over the fence and hopped down into the backyard. Charlotte straddled the top of the fence, taking in the brick patio, the inflatable swimming pool, and the lawn chairs before grabbing Roscoe out of the truck and passing him down to James. "This is pretty good," she said.

James had cleared the house while Charlotte started unpacking. She had the tent up and had pulled some things together to burn by the time James came back out. He was holding his rifle out instead of slung over his shoulder like usual. "What's wrong?" Charlotte asked.

"There was a waster in the street. I had to get it from the window upstairs. Nothing in the house, though." Reaching back inside, he pulled out a large tin can and presented it to Charlotte. "Hot dogs in a can! I've never even heard of these." Charlotte smiled, but was still nervous about the safety of their temporary encampment.

The two started a fire on the patio and were cooking the hot dogs and a can of collard greens they had found earlier. The sun was setting in the distance and the orange twilight of the summer night peaked over the edges of the fence. Roscoe lay at Charlotte's feet, eating a charred hot dog. She leaned back in her chair. "What do you think is going to happen after they die?" she asked James.

“What do you mean?” James asked, pushing aside the abandoned photo album he was flipping through.

“How many of us could be left? Ten percent of the population, five percent? Who’s going to run the power plants or grow the food. I don’t even know where metal or baking soda comes from.”

James pulled his hot dog away from the fire and squeezed a line of mustard along it. “I figure we can live off of this world for a while. There are plenty of essentials to go around. I don’t know about restarting society. We’ll have to coalesce after the wasters run themselves off and see who’s left, take an inventory.”

“Then why are we going to Gentian Beach? Shouldn’t we be going to New York or Hollywood or something? Somewhere that other people would choose, at least. Nobody is going to be going to Gentian Beach.”

“I used to go there as a kid. There are plenty of houses along the coast that were probably abandoned, but my real goal is getting to a piece of land there that juts into the ocean. We’d be protected by water on three sides and could build up a wall to protect ourselves for the next few weeks.”

“Few weeks?”

“Who knows how long the wasters are going to last. We, and the others we’ve met, are assuming that they’ll only live as long as we will. What if they get smarter? What if they learn how to find food? Plus, we’ll be protected from any gangs or crazies going around. It will be safe there.”

Charlotte pulled her hot dog away from the fire, charred and blistered. She bit into it and realized that for a canned hot dog, it was the best food she had had in weeks. She looked at James, who was calmly peeling the bark off of his stick, his gun slung over the side of his chair.

A knock rattled the wooden door of the fence and the two froze.

The wasters had no sense of smell. After they were refocused, their ability to smell simply did not come back on. Yet their sight had taken on a distinct acuity that most people had not

been able to possess before the bombs. Stories told of wasters burning people from hundreds of yards away, even at night. It was dangerous to be out in the open without moving, light or not. Rumors persisted amongst the survivors that they could even sense heat.

Charlotte's eyes darted to the section of the fence the knock had come from. In the distance, the moon arced high over a water tower, but the night was getting terribly dark.

"We're other survivors! We don't mean any harm!" a man's voice blurted out through the black void, trying to fill the distance between the fence and the fire with calming words. "I'm sorry, I know it's not safe to come barging around at night, but we smelled your food cooking! We haven't seen anyone in a week. I promise we're good guys."

James grabbed his rifle and moved towards the gate. Charlotte stood up and walked Roscoe by his collar towards the house, hooking him onto a leash there. James stood behind the fence with his rifle pulled close. "What's your name?" he asked.

"Mine's Norberto. I've got my brother Elia here with me, too. If you don't want us to come in, just say it. We'll move on, no troubles."

James shot a glance at Charlotte. They looked at each other for a second before she nodded to him. "Hop on the truck and over the fence," James yelled over. "But let's keep our voices down now."

Norberto, the taller of the two men, landed on the ground first. His long black hair was pulled tight behind his head. Charlotte saw he had a holster around his waist and could see two pistol butts sticking out. She thought he looked like a modern-day cowboy. Elia threw his legs over the side and landed, but fell forward and ran a little to regain his balance. This brought him right up to the ground in front of Charlotte and Roscoe. His close-cropped hair and forehead were dappled with sweat. "Nice to meet you," he said as he stuck out his hand.

Charlotte laughed. "Nice to meet you, too." She motioned down to the dog. "This is Roscoe. He's okay, don't worry."

James pulled over two chairs and placed them around the fire. “Come on, have some food. Where are you two from?”

Norberto spoke. “Thanks, thanks. We were from the northern part of the state. There was glowing all throughout the coast, so we’ve slowly made our way down here, hoping to get to a warmer area. The beach or something, I guess.”

“We were headed to Gentian Beach!” Charlotte said excitedly. James looked at her.

“Really? We were planning on going more south, but that doesn’t sound too bad,” Norberto said. “We noticed the wasters thinning out as the days have wore on. Have you all noticed that?”

“Yeah,” James answered. “I hope we only have a week or two at most until we’ve waited them out, but that’s being optimistic.

“This neighborhood is great. That’s why we were over here. Fenced-in, huge houses full of stuff, great pantries. We’ve cleaned out a lot, though.”

“You should come with us,” Charlotte said. “Your guns,” she motioned towards them. “I assume you’ve used them well if you’ve made it this long. We can never be too safe.”

“Me and Elia have used them more than we like to remember. We started out with our brother, Ulysses, with us. We were surrounded at a pass in the valley. I can’t remember much – Elia does – but we eventually got out. Ulysses was burned bad, though, right in the chest. He lived for maybe a day or two.”

“Wait, your brother was burnt and lived?” James asked, incredulous.

“He was very strong. The burn was just too much, but he held on like a fighter. I wouldn’t believe it, either, unless I had seen it with my own eyes.”

“Sorry to hear that,” Charlotte said. She looked at Elia, who was staring intensely into the fire. “Well, you’re welcome to our food. There’s plenty to go around.”

James looked out the window, past the rambling farmhouses lining the road. Charlotte hung her head out the window, letting her hair roll in the wind. Thinking she saw some

movement in the distance, she opened her eyes and scanned the horizon. “Is that smoke?” she asked.

James pushed his sunglasses onto his head, looking to the northwest. He could make out a faint column of grey smoke wisping its way into the clouds. There had been many fires after the bomb, ravaging large swaths of old forests and new developments, but this was more deliberate, more focused than those larger conflagrations.

“Norberto, take a look at this. You think that’s on the coast?”

Norberto stood up in the back of the truck cab. Using his hand to block the sun, he looked into the distance. “Could be anything. Maybe a house going up.” He yelled to Elia in Spanish, but his brother stayed in the bed of the truck, his hat pulled over his eyes.

Charlotte stood her ground. “I think it’s worth checking on. We haven’t passed people in days.”

James nodded. “It’s not too far out of our way. Looks like it’s real close to the coastline, too. We’ll have to get gas first.”

Several miles down the road, James pulled the truck into a parking lot in downtown Sully. Charlotte and Norberto picked up the gas cans from the truckbed and went to work siphoning from the abandoned cars.

James stood guard with his rifle, but found nothing to guard against. He called over to Elia. “Nothing. No people, no wasters,” he said to the brother. Elia shrugged and turned towards the side of the truck to block out the afternoon sun.

By late afternoon, the group had made it up the range and within a few miles of the smoke column, which Norberto judged to be along the interstate that ran down along the coast. James’ eyes grew tired, the summer twilight impeding his ability to judge distances. Huge trees, seemingly thrust up from some prehistoric age, began to surround them as they got farther west.

Charlotte grabbed James on the shoulder. “Hang in there. We’ll be able to rest soon, after we check out this place.” James nodded and patted Roscoe on the head. The car wound through

the forest, back and forth through the mighty wooden spires. There were few abandoned cars on the road, which made James nervous.

“There it is!” shouted Norberto from the back of the truck. “Up ahead is the smoke.”

Charlotte looked out the windshield and spotted it. James rounded the corner and they could see the remnants of a house that was once standing there. Along a quarter mile stretch of the road were five modern houses; low-slung, sleek designs in steel and stone, that crested the ridge and looked out onto the beaches below.

The smoke rose from the housesite less forcefully than it had hours ago as the fuel for the fire slowly burned out. James pulled the truck to the side of the road. He turned to look through the back window to Norberto, “What do you think we should do—”

Coming towards the truck from the rear was an older man, his clothes torn, gripping a pistol. Norberto yelled and Elia sprang to his feet. “He’s not one of them!” Elia yelled before the others had time to even react. Elia had grown adept at quickly judging between normal people and wasters over the course of the brothers’ travels.

The four of them looked at the man as he staggered towards the truck. His brown leather shoes were scratched and pitted from the gravel on the side of the road. His khakis were torn and the sleeves on his shirt were shredded beneath the elbow. His hands were covered in blood, the flesh on his knuckles freshly torn.

He gained in speed as he walked towards the truck and then hopped into the bed, dazed. Pulling himself in and leaning against the side of the truckbed, he took a minute to catch his breath. Elia was at attention and leaning into the man, nearly falling over. Norberto grabbed him on the shoulder. “Hey, hey, are you okay?” he asked. “You’re safe now.”

The man looked around, taking in the four travelers. “I haven’t seen people for weeks. I was living up here alone. I was single before everything, so it wasn’t too much of a change. I was just waiting it out. Nobody seemed to come by, no looters or

gangs. I had a generator and a radio sending out signals. Yesterday, a whole horde of them came out of the woods. There were hundreds, maybe thousands, I don't know. I thought they were here or there, scattered, that the Army was fighting them or something. But this was a mass movement of them, trudging through the undergrowth. They saw me and became more determined. I was able to kill some and outrun the rest, but they must still be in the area."

"Was that your house?" James pointed to the smoldering ruins.

"I trapped some inside and set it on fire." Elia jerked, putting his hand over the man's mouth and training his rifle on the edge of the woods. The rest of them looked over and saw several heads bobbing slowly above the ridge of the road. Charlotte urgently tapped James on the shoulder and he put the truck in gear, throwing up pebbles as the tires spun.

James turned the truck onto the road and only drove a hundred yards before a group of wasters appeared from the trees. James swerved and the truck hit an embankment, crushing the front axle and deploying the air bags. Charlotte opened the door and fell out, coughing. She picked herself up and began running. Looking back, she saw Norberto carrying Elia over his shoulder. Blood was pouring from Elia's mouth.

The other man lay motionless in the grass. All three had been thrown from the back of the truck during the crash. James grabbed Charlotte by the arm and said "No time, no time," as they ran towards another house facing the coast. Roscoe was ahead of the group, instinctively leading them towards the house and barking the entire way.

Norberto put Elia down on a chair in front of the house's garage. He pressed his rifle against his shoulder and began firing into the crowd of wasters pressing out of the woods. Roscoe was at Charlotte's feet barking as she threw open the garage door. James had pulled out his pistol and shot a waster in the chest.

"Get in!" Charlotte yelled, as she fired off several rounds into the oncoming horde. James grabbed the dog by the collar and pushed him under the door. Norberto approached Elia, who shook

him off. The brothers stared at each other for a second before Norberto spoke in Spanish. Elia nodded and Norberto gave him his rifle before running for the garage door.

The group pulled into the garage as Charlotte slammed the door down. They waited for a second as rounds of bullets pierced the air. They could hear the thud as the metal pierced the wasters' bodies and as they ripped into the surrounding trees. Elia began to scream as the multitude of wasters were able to burn him, over and over, their fury focused on the sole human they were able to detect.

There was no time to wait any longer. Norberto was the first to begin moving through the house. Sparsely furnished, the house had a large window along the entire back that faced onto the water. James instinctively ran towards the kitchen, throwing open cupboard doors and opening bins. "That guy must have got everything in the area," he told Charlotte.

The three of them could hear the crush of waster bodies against the house. They pressed against the door, the siding, the windows. Unable to open them by conventional means, the sheer force of them would eventually make an opening somewhere.

Charlotte looked out the window. She could see they were on a high cliff now, overlooking the water. "We have to get down there," she said. "There's nowhere for us to go up here. If they can follow us, maybe they'll just fall like lemmings."

Opening the back door, she stepped out onto a deck that was cantilevered from the house out into the air over the beach below. A door on the bottom of the deck opened onto a spiral of stairs that connected to a set of steps rough-hewn into the cliff face.

The group dropped through the hole and made their way down the sharply descending steps, Charlotte dragging the reticent dog by its collar. From their perch, they could hear the house being torn apart on the ground above them. Norberto looked down at the water and spotted a boat. He had grown up in a small fishing community and knew he could pilot it if they could get to it. Their feet nearly fell over each other to get to the waterline.

Norberto pulled the boat around the tip of land that jutted out into water. The beach at the tip cut up to a plateau that rose over the surface. Roscoe stood on the bow, the seaspray clinging to his golden fur.

“There’s nobody here. It’s empty,” Charlotte said, scanning the horizon.

James jumped out of the boat and began swimming. After a few dozen yards, he was able to stand up, the water breaking at his shoulders. As the beach came closer, he began running, quicker now that there was less water slowing him down.

He got to the beach and reached down, running his hands across the surface of the shore. Norberto and Charlotte watched him, puzzled, as he raced back and forth over the beach, grabbing and scraping whatever he could. He turned to the boat and raised his arms, hands outstretched.

Norberto moved the boat closer to the shore as James began to swim back. Reaching the boat, he wiped the water from his hair and face. “It’s glass. The entire beach is solid glass. It was caught in the blast. I can’t believe it.” He trailed off.

“We’ll just keep sailing. Go down the coast,” Charlotte suggested, trying to reassure James.

“And then what? What if nobody’s there, either?”

“Calm down, James. We’ll be okay,” she said.

Norberto spoke up. “I know this coast. We can sail for a few more days and see if we spot anything before we’ll have to turn around to stay near the cities.”

Charlotte looked at James, pleadingly. She trusted Norberto. He had proven himself these past few days. “Okay, okay,” James said, somehow managing a smile. “I trust you. Both of you.”

Norberto swung the boat around, away from the nagging pull of the coast. They only had a few hours of sunlight left before he would have to drop anchor. Charlotte sat on the bow with Roscoe, taking in the sun’s rays. She felt relaxed for the first time in weeks. Not having to look over her shoulder or worry where a gun was stored. Free from the constant terror of being trapped somewhere or overrun by wasters.

She closed her eyes and remembered the smell of bread baking and drinking ice cold soda on afternoons like this. She opened her eyes and looked out across the water, and, in some respects, towards her future. Three sails peaked on the horizon to the south, their masts cutting through the blue sky.

“Look!” Charlotte yelled.

Detent/Escapement

I realize the following story will be dismissed out of hand by most of the general public, but I assure you the facts I shall present forthwith are undoubtedly true and were experienced by me many years ago. I waited to tell my story, unsure of the reality of it myself, for some time before a more contemporary occurrence, which will be explained later, came to light and assured me of some basis for the events that had lived on in my memory.

As I put pen to paper all these years later, it may seem to the reader that I am confused about certain events or perhaps the order of occurrences, but I assure all that this is how they happened. Time was a fickle beast during my trial, yet I wrote down notes a few months after returning to civilization and am certain of my version.

My story began as I awoke in the desert, the harsh wind blowing burning sand across my arms and legs. I knew not where I was then, or perhaps, even now, but I knew I could not last long in the deadly *irifi*, the Saharan desert wind. Pulling myself up, I noticed the tattered and frayed ends of my decidedly Western clothing.

I quickly scanned my surroundings to locate any possible compatriots I may have been with – I couldn't imagine myself heading into the desert alone – but upon finding none, began to head west with the wind at my back. This, at least, afforded me some protection and visibility, however limited, in the wasteland and seemed to present the only possible route to salvation.

What I could only describe at the moment as a miracle then presented itself before me. The wind's speed and force tapered for a few minutes and in front of me appeared a building, two or three stories at most in a distinctly Victorian fashion, beckoning me towards it. I wiped my eyes and shook my head

with the full knowledge that the desert could play tricks on one trapped within its currents, but still the vision persisted.

At that moment, the irifi again picked up force and battered me with gusts of fiery sand. This oasis would be my last chance, I thought. Putting my arm up to my face for protection, I headed towards the dilapidated structure, unsure of what exactly I had stumbled upon.

As the sand and wind continued to whip around me, I made my way closer to the building and could see that it had wood siding painted a deep red, which been exposed to the elements for some time. I could hear a rustling off in the western distance, quite distinct from the blowing of the wind, which I would later find out was the Atlantic Ocean. The absurdity of the blinding dryness of the desert and the proximity of the planet's nourishment would never be lost on me from that point on.

I pushed forward to the front steps and made it onto the porch of the building, which shielded me from some of the wind-swept sand. Despite the seemingly ancient nature of the exterior, the gingerbread decoration and carved ornamentation on the various spindles defied logic. Piles of the golden dust had built up in the corners and creases of the porch and I knew I had to get inside of the structure and wait out the storm.

As I came nearer the door, I was caught off guard and, frankly, somewhat scared by what I then experienced. Inside, I could hear the clatter of glasses and voices muffled by the framing of the building. I stood in confusion for some time, wondering how this bustling building could exist in the desert and how anybody at all could be occupying it. The increasing intensity of the irifi forced my hand.

I pushed open the door and made my way inside to what I quickly gathered was a hotel of some sort. The main room was woefully dark owing to the sand blocking the windows, but I could make out the general layout of the hall from the threshold. The main floor was open up to the second story, with a stairway in the back leading up to a landing that connected the rooms. To the right was a long bar running the length of the open room. The center of the room contained several circular tables with a piano

against the back wall, underneath the stairs.

As I stood in the doorway, I noticed, beyond any of my expectations, that there was quite a full house. A bartender tended to the drinks while a piano player rolled off melodies to several couples and a few solitary gentlemen sitting at the tables or the bar. Despite my amazement at finding a Western structure in the middle of the desert, the absurdity that it was so populated nonetheless seemed completely dissonant at this oasis amidst the dunes.

I wondered to myself if any of it was even real as my entrance had failed to register with any of the patrons until the bartender yelled across to me to shut the door. I dazedly walked to the bar and asked the thin man behind it where I was.

“This here is the Dew Drop Inn, the finest hotel you’ve probably ever set foot in.”

“Where exactly are we?” I asked.

“A far way from home for you, I gather.”

I pressed the question while he continued evading me. He poured me a gin, on the house, which I proceeded to quickly imbibe, yet when I turned to ask him more questions, he had slid down to the other end of the bar to serve an older man in dungarees with a much younger woman on his arm. I would come to realize that asking the bartender much of anything would be a futile and confusing experience for the rest of my time at the inn.

Resigned, I turned my back to the bar and took in the first level of the building. There were eight circular tables arranged in a haphazard fashion in the center, each with its own assortment of stains and spills across the tops. There were several couples of varying ages and backgrounds at the tables and a couple of single men at the bar, as well.

Along the wall opposite the bar were several plush chairs facing the tables, with lamps for reading. Seated in one of these chairs was an older man, clean-shaven, outfitted in a full suit and vest. He drew long breaths from a cigar as the smoke slenderly wound its way up to the second level.

I’m not entirely clear what drew me to this man, but if you met him you would understand the quality of his presence and

deportment that drew me to him.

“Pull up a chair,” he said, pulling his cigar away from his mouth. “American, yes?” he asked.

“I’m not sure. Perhaps,” was all I was able to reply at the moment.

“My name is Franco, Franco Piretzi,” he said, extending his hand to me.

I knew not what my name was then, but chose Matthew as a simple substitute until I could better understand my predicament. This Piretzi was exceptionally friendly at our first meeting, but seemed detached, always looking off to the other characters in the hotel. I inquired several times about where we were and what the place was, however, he was able to cryptically outmaneuver answering these questions. At one point, he called over to Cary, which I then surmised was the bartender’s name, and ordered a round of drinks over.

“Terrible out there, no?” he asked.

“Yes, yes. What is this place?” I asked, as Cary brought over two whiskeys.

“A spot for travelers, weary souls. Let me ask you, when you came in, did you notice a pole in front of the porch at all?”

I thought back and did remember that I had seen a squat metal pole outside. “There was an orange one, yes,” I told the man.

He nodded his head and pulled out a small notebook, jotting something into it with a small wooden pencil. Piretzi raised his glass and we toasted, before he excused himself to attend to some matter or other in his bedroom.

Coming to grips with my plight, I implored the bartender, who by Piretzi’s insinuations I deduced was also the owner of the establishment, to front me room and board until I could find out more about myself. After some bartering in terms of payment, we agreed that I would assist Cary in matters around the inn, as he was desiring to remove himself from the daily duties of upkeep.

With this resolved, I retired to my room for the night, a sparsely-decorated accommodation, but more than enough to fulfill my needs for the foreseeable future. As I laid down that night and my dreams enveloped me, I quickly realized that there was

more to my story than I could remember in my waking hours.

I dreamt that night of cold water from a rushing river. I stood on the shore, underneath chestnut trees, and could see a small town on the other side. Smoke billowed up from houses; I could make out figures in the windows moving about. I stood on the shore for what seemed like hours, but was awoken from my slumber by a fracas carrying on outside my door. By the time I had dressed, it was over, but Piretzi informed me that it was the work of a Dutch soldier, one Andries Jansz, having a disagreement with Cary's assistant, a giant mute named Ezra. The altercation had been over a supposed slight that neither side even knew by the end.

It became clear to me at this point that Piretzi had a long simmering disdain for the former soldier from the Netherlands. One could only guess the background of their animosity, but it was surely shared between the two through tense glares and cold shoulders. I never spoke directly to Jansz my entire stay, although he seemed to carry on quite well with the women in the establishment, yet was prone to drinking himself into a stupor often.

Later that night, I was awakened by the sound of violin and piano weaving throughout the vacant building. The plodding piano notes danced across the aging wooden walls, the violin airs recalling far distant memories, evoking lost loves and sun-dappled skin. I almost could not tell whether the experience was real at first. Yet, pulling my clothes back on, I opened the door and stepped out into the hall.

The entire foyer below me was draped in red light from the rose-colored glass covering the flickering lamps. At the piano was Ezra, more alive and prescient than I had seen him before or since, while Cary played violin, seated in a small, wooden chair. The two were almost in a trance, weaving in and out of movements together. But, while the light was dim, I could make out a man sitting at a table, his trail of cigar smoke blithely moving about the room. I strained my eyes through the darkened room and realized it was Piretzi, lost in thought, staring through the two men as they played. He saw me standing at the second-

level railing and beckoned me down. I shook him off, still being in my borrowed night clothes, and returned to my room, the haunting strains of the music lulling me into a disturbed sleep.

I awoke strangely refreshed the next morning before dawn and looked out my window across the dune-marked landscape. The sands had shifted from the night before, retreating and returning in slightly different patterns than the ones I had left during my misadventure outside. I suddenly realized the hunger my body was forcing upon my mind and quickly got dressed, noticing the dried blood under my nose in the mirror. I wiped it away and exited my room, alighting to the bar for whatever was on hand.

Cary was wiping the counter down as Ezra served meat, biscuits, and coffee to the patrons. I asked him about the music last night to prove to myself it was real. He evaded me for some time before relenting. He told me it César Franck's *Sonata for Violin and Piano in A Major*, a piece and composer I had no recollection of, but subsequent research revealed to be a Parisian composition from the mid-1880s. I mention all this only as a precursor to what would come later. In retrospect, the bizarre nature of the hotel should have been apparent to me by that time, but I believe my weakened body and mind were unable to grasp the absurdity of my predicament.

Nonetheless, I tried finding out more about the inn from the other patrons, but found extracting this information exceedingly difficult. Many enjoyed being there, either having escaped from something at home or unsure of where they were going next. To be perfectly honest, as the desert winds continually howled across the creaking wooden body of the building, I felt fairly safe and content to be there, as well. I couldn't say then that I would have been happy to go back to whatever misfortune had dropped me in that relentless desert.

So in that way, several days or maybe weeks went by. It is difficult to say with any certainty, as much of the time blended together. Card games, dancing, drinking, and other passtimes kept us busy. Several times, as I worked for Cary in the recesses of the building, I could here men knock on the back door and Cary

would have conversations with them before calling me to ferry new shipments of goods this way or that. Once, I could barely understand the conversation between Cary and the men and rushed to the window to see them as they left with full bags and us having fresh meat. The men I saw were *Sahrawi*, natives of the desert, nomads carrying on a centuries-old way of life.

This was how the inn was kept in stock. Traders would come, seemingly clandestinely, and trade their goods for whatever Cary could barter from the till. Some nights there would be little food and whatever was available was meted out between us all. However, there was always alcohol available. Whisky, gin, cognac, bitter Italian spirits, beer, wine, all were kept in stock for what seemed like an end of the world celebration.

Watching the regulars at the hotel became something of a passtime for me. There was Jansz, of course, the lean soldier from Holland with a short temper. A Spanish couple by the name of Ferrás, who mainly kept to themselves, quietly discussed ancient poetry most nights. A young Briton, Collins, was a talkative fellow, a farmer by trade it seemed, but kept abreast of nearly everything under the sun. Cary could always be counted upon to lend an ear or a bit of advice. There were others: Ekaterina, the Russian I surmised had left a monster of a husband behind in her homeland; an ancient Scottish seadog that went by Davis; Byrn, the young esoteric occultist, her wild outfits always a delight. All manner of people had made it to the hotel and all were interesting in their own ways.

Piretzi, however, was the one patron I became the closest with. He had led a whirlwind of a life, traveling across Europe, Asia, and Africa. There were stories of trickery, romance, gunfights, and other dime-novel exploits. His jack-of-all-trades persona enthralled the entire hotel when he would begin a story. Looking back, I cannot say they were all true, but they were certainly thoroughly entertaining.

The Italian also took a liking to me, probing me for details of my background and, surely, creating a mental picture of my life as I slowly regained my memories. We would often drink late into the evening, discussing the finer points of subjects as diverse as

knot-tying, the experiences of the working class, marksmanship, and the reality of heaven and hell. Whatever bizarre occurrences plagued my time at the hotel, I look back fondly on these moments of levity and lasting thought, with a man I consider a true friend.

Yet despite my comfort at the inn, my dreams weighed heavily on me every night. To spare the reader excessive description, I can say that I experienced in these dreams a life in a verdant countryside, small-town occurrences, daily work on ships, and time spent on the open sea among other sailors. These images would reoccur continually throughout various dreams, which allowed me to piece together some of my probable history as a sailor from New England.

The one persistent and unwavering vision I had was of a woman that I, almost compulsively, believed was my wife. We were often in a house together or walking down cobblestone streets with our children, holding hands, shopping, eating. I felt a great happiness in these moments with her and would wake with a deep longing that I could not shake.

However, there were other, more terrible, dreams that began to pervade my sleep. I glimpsed giant storms over the ocean, felt myself submerged and pulled violently underwater, gasping for breath, and being smashed against rocks. Through these, I soon came to believe the ship I was working on had been dashed to pieces on some forsaken coastline, and I was possibly the only shipwrecked survivor to make it out alive.

These images persisted and became stronger as time passed and, in large part, contributed to my urge to leave the inn. However, I must make note of two junctures that facilitated my departure even more so. The reader may find these following tales to be unbelievable; I would, too, if I heard them. But I swear to you that they are the candid and unembellished version of events.

The first development occurred one evening roughly a few weeks into my stay, if I am forced to put a timeline to the affair. The patrons were quiet that night, and though the moon was only a slit that cut an arc across the dark sky, I watched through a window at the desert sands shifting in the nocturnal wind. As I

gazed out, I saw a group of men off in the distance, white men in breeches and shirts, not the billowing robes of the nomads. I knew that if I could get to them I may be able to corroborate some version of the events I believed to be my personal history. They may have heard of a shipwreck on the coast or maybe rumors that Americans were stranded in the desert.

As Cary's suppliers were often gone before I had a chance to interact with them, I opened the door of the inn and trekked out into the desert against perhaps my better judgment, but all in the hope of returning to the woman I saw nightly in my dreams. I ran in the direction I had spotted the men, my feet sinking in the formless sand, my muscles struggling to move any noticeable distance from the moment before. Alas, they were nowhere to be found, only apparitions in the vacillating sands. My hopes of escaping the hotel were dashed and I resigned myself to returning there empty-handed.

It was unsafe to be alone out in the desert at night, so I made my way back to the porch of the inn as quickly as possible. However, as I re-approached the hotel, I realized that the door had been locked since my exit. I rapt the front entry several times to no avail. I listened closely and it became apparent to me that all my fellow denizens had left and the lights had been inexplicably turned off. I managed to clear away enough sand and debris from one of the windows and peered inside. Gone were the glasses and bottles of alcohol, the tables were overturned, the bar covered in a thick coat of grime. It no longer looked as if they had been gone for a few minutes, but rather years or decades had passed since I eagerly attempted to contact the travelers.

I walked out into the dunes and stared again at the hotel. Through the clear, cold desert night, I could see a small candle flickering in an upper window. Running through the layout of the upper rooms in my mind, it dawned on me that this was the room I had been lodging in. I began running towards the now-vacant structure and ran through methods in my mind that I could use to restore myself to the second-story room. I could vaguely envision makeshift footholds in the wood slats on the building and used my momentum from running to propel myself up the wall beneath my

window. My fingers gripped into the siding and as I pulled myself up, several slats came loose at the last moment as my feet pulled away. I was able to pry open the window from the outside with my free hand and drag myself in.

The candle had died down to almost nothing, yet I could make out my jacket laying across the bed as I had left it. Exhausted, though, I collapsed onto the bed and very well may have drifted off because, as I came to, I could hear laughing and chattering carrying itself up the hallway outside my door. Remembering the ordeal of the abandoned and desolate hotel, I rushed to the door, gripping the handle and throwing the door open, as if the forcefulness of it would bring reality back.

As I stepped into the hallway, I nearly ran into Ezra carrying a tray to my door. He must have grasped my disbelief because he just stared at me as I spun to gather my surroundings. Cary called from down below and told me to come down and get a drink. What had happened I could not, and can not, adequately explain, but the second event that initiated my desire for departure may shed some further light on the matter.

Some time after the first incident, I was assisting Ezra in preparing dinner for the night, when Cary pulled me aside. He told me that Piretzi wished to dine with me. Not one to turn down a free meal, I headed towards the Italian with two glasses of gin.

We exchanged pleasantries and the conversation eventually shifted towards the dreams I had been having. He was greatly intrigued by these and pressed for as much information as I could glean from them. He continued trying to extract more information from me, my dreams, my memories. I became fed up with his questions and fed up with the absurdity of the hotel and the various patrons.

“There’s no need to be upset,” Piretzi told me.

“Then tell me what this place is,” I told him.

“That is a good question. This hotel is – was – a trading outpost. A stop for various connected governments to land, exchange information, allow important people to get away.”

“So that’s why everything is so secretive?”

“Somewhat, yes. There are other reasons, also,” he said,

stamping his cigar into an ashtray and gulping back his gin.

“What do you mean?”

“There are aspects of this building, this piece of space, that are not sufficiently explainable to a layman.”

“Just tell me how to get out of here,” I told him.

“Escaping isn’t quite as easy as one would think. There are rules.”

“Like what?”

“The pole you saw when you came in, the orange one? Remember? If you truly wish to leave, you must only leave when you see it. When you can see it and be sure that it is orange.”

“Why is that?”

“There are precautions we must take to arrive and leave. It was there when you came.”

“Why don’t we just all leave? What is the purpose of this place?”

“There are certain—” he paused. “Certain reasons why this hotel is here that are fully the fault of my own exuberances. I owe this place and these people a debt that, in some respects, I can never fully repay.”

“I’m not some backwoods hayseed, Franco. I believe you can tell me more than cryptic warnings and vague allusions to future problems.”

Pausing, Piretzi looked out the window at the scrub and sand. “I am, or was, a scientist, Matthew. I dabbled in theories and facts that are some years beyond the current vogue.”

I pressed the Italian harder for an explanation. Pulling out a sheet of paper, he tore a circle from it and fashioned a crude spiral.

“Imagine you are standing here,” he said, pointing to the top of the spiral. “Now, imagine that you want to get off on this side,” he said, pointing towards a piece of the spiral nearest to me. “Instead of traveling along the surface, you can simply skip to the loop below it,” he said, pointing to the next stratum, “or, one level down, or the next level down, and so on.” As he rattled these off, he pointed to points on the strip of paper a full revolution down the spiral from the preceding one. “Do you follow?” he asked.

“Somewhat,” I told him.

“Okay, then. Now imagine that instead of getting to freely travel between various positions on the spiral, you have to mount or disembark at the specific points I touched. They’re anchors, if you will. So you can only get out at those points.”

“Hmm, okay,” was all I could mutter at the time.

“Finally, imagine that the whole spiral is spinning, constantly. You can get off at each point, but if you miss one, because you’re running to catch up, you’ll end up getting off at the next one. And so on. And this spiral loops back on itself, so the work is endless and tiresome. But you eventually get where you want to go. If, indeed, going is you want to do.”

“So that’s us? We’re spinning?”

“The hotel, yes. Or, more precisely, the point the hotel sits upon. It is absurd, I know, Matthew.”

I got up to leave, frustrated and exhausted from thinking about the scenario. It was at that moment that I could see Jansz up on the second level, brandishing a silver revolver from some long-forgotten battle. He was visibly drunk, stumbling towards the stairs, his shirt ripped.

He leveled the pistol at Cary and fired, shattering the mirror behind the bar, but missing the owner. Shards of silver glass fell to the ground as the entire mirror broke apart. People began running for cover, either into the backrooms or behind tables and chairs. I imagine Cary was trying to get to his breech-loading rifle attached to the other end of the bar.

Piretzi was calm the entire time, trying to talk to me, trying to communicate pieces of information that I could only barely make out over the fracas. He kept saying that Jansz always did this, that he was tired of it, that he wished there was a way out. By this point, Ezra, the mute, had attempted to ascend the stairs and block Jansz, but was shot deep in the shoulder, forcing him to stagger back to the main level.

By the time Ezra fell, I had positioned myself behind the chairs at the end of the room and watched Jansz descend to the first floor of the hotel. He hit one of the women in the face as she tried to run past him into a back room. He began firing

indiscriminately, hitting chandeliers and the walls of the building. Piretzi pulled out a knife and began to approach the crazed Dutchman, so drunk that he could barely even aim at the Italian moving deftly towards him.

Jansz fired and I felt the hot touch of a bullet rip through my waist. Shocked, I reached toward the wound and felt warm blood over my hands. I managed to get to the door and fell into the handle, my hand slippery from probing the gash. I was able to look back and saw Piretzi and Jansz locked in combat, throwing each other across the room.

I fell and the door pushed open. I crawled further out onto the porch, clutching my abdomen. I was able to stand for a minute, but became dizzy, collapsing on the wooden planks, my last vision being the orange pole, the beacon that signaled my way out of the bizarre hotel.

Waking up an indeterminate amount of time later, my torso ached from the bullet's puncture. Examining my stomach wound, I could see that it had stopped bleeding, the fabric of my shirt having stopped much of the exsanguination. Still, I felt better than I had expected, all considered.

I got to my feet and realized the orange pole was gone. The hotel patrons were gone, as well, I had realized after opening the door. Regardless of if they would return like the last time, I knew I had to get out of that infernal place. I remembered having during my unconsciousness a vivid vision of my wife and children and decided then that I would get home no matter what it took.

Pulling my clothes tight, I began heading north up the coast, determined that I would get somewhere eventually. The natives descended upon me in a few hours and I picked up enough from their body language to know that they were interested in trading me for goods at the nearest waystation. Using signals, I tried to communicate to them about the hotel, but they either could not understand or did not know of the inn.

My time with the Sahrawi was fairly uneventful and fell in line with many other narratives on travel with the indigenous nomads. For those wishing for a similar description to mine, I suggest the fantastic Desert of Allah, an account by the noted

surgeon, presidential advisor, and novelist J. Decatur Hoyle that chronicles his capture by the group after humanitarian work led him to the Great Desert.

Upon my ransoming to the American consul in Morocco, I quickly set to work to investigate my history. It was not long before a government official found the correct port log showing a ship, the brig *Innocence*, that did not make it to the Cape of Good Hope. I secured passage back to America, arriving in New York and quickly piecing together my history. To spare my personal life, I shall decline to publish further details of my affairs; suffice to say, however, that I am happy and back with my wife and family.

I told not a soul of my capture for some years, until, by sheer happenstance, I was at a cafe in Boston and overheard two students discussing the recent research by Mr. Einstein. I caught the name Piretzi, just a slight fragment at that, and pressed the young woman and man for more information. Sadly, they had only a few pieces of information; namely, that he was a young physicist out of Rome that had published work on the theory of relativity.

I could track down only a few mentions in physics journals of the Italian man I had known in the desert, all concerning ideas that were far beyond my skills. I quickly wrote a letter to the Sapienza University of Rome, one of the schools seemingly connected to the scientist. Months passed before a letter returned from one of his colleagues. I could tell by his language that the two were close and that he was baffled by my interest in such an obscure figure.

Nonetheless, he informed me that Franco had been working on applications for the government derived from one of his theories. He told me, in layman's terms, that Franco's theoretical work revolved around bridging points in time, but he was unsure what the government had needed from his friend. It had enlisted him for service the summer before and a letter sent from an Italian port before Piretzi headed into the Mediterranean on a naval ship was the last correspondence his relations had with him. A few months after that, the government had sent a letter to

Franco's family stating simply that he had died of natural causes and that was the last he had heard of his friend until my letter.

While I may be only a simple man, it became clear to me that perhaps the inn had been a result of this work. I searched for references to the structure and found that there had been such a building on the African coast near the Canary Straits during the early 1800s, but no records of it existed afterwards. I believe that this point in the universe, this point where the hotel stood that certainly saved my life from the brutality of the desert, this point that drove various people together and ultimately tore them apart through bloodshed, was somehow able to move freely through time and that Piretzi was possibly the cause, although how involved he was I can never be sure.

I was resigned to the fact that Piretzi was gone and chose to reserve my story for another time. However, I wrote back to the friend of Franco, informing him that I had met the scientist years ago on a trip through Europe and that we had become quick friends, but I had lost touch with him. My final line may have been lost on this friend and fellow scientist, or at least taken out of context, but I could not leave the matter without letting somebody, anybody, know that there was more to this world than what we were currently experiencing. So, before I sealed the letter and mailed it off, I scrawled across the bottom, "Franco Piretzi is not dead. Franco Piretzi lives!"



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