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*University of Southern Mississippi*

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The University of Southern Mississippi

[BLIP] AND OTHER NOISES

by

Jennifer Jacob Brown

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Graduate School  
of The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts

Approved:

Steven Barthelme  
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ABSTRACT

[BLIP] AND OTHER NOISES

by Jennifer Jacob Brown

August 2014

*[Blip] and Other Noises* is a collection of short stories that explores the illusory nature of identity, time, space, and our experience of reality. Its principal characters include a sea captain, an Elvis fanatic, a space alien, and some very confused children. Its principal settings include small town Mississippi, the Gulf of Mexico, the Indiana wilderness, and uncharted (by humans) outer space. This collection is accompanied by a critical introduction.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ..... ii

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ..... iii

INTRODUCTION ..... v

WORKS CITED ..... xv

    DIRT BIRTHRIGHT ..... 1

    KING TUPELO ..... 23

    [BLIP] ..... 48

    BLACK-EYED SUSAN ..... 73

## INTRODUCTION

One of the most delicate things about writing fiction is prioritizing. There is a balancing act between a whole slew of considerations in every step of the writing process, and if any one of them is not just right, the end result falls short of its potential. Along with character, story, and ideas, you have to balance craft, prose, emotion, originality, message, tone, setting, and anything else you might care about in your work. The key to any work of fiction is which of those things the writer values most in it. One author may be defined by a fascination with the finer points of craft, another by a talent for creating deep and compelling characters.

For some writers, priorities seem to be obvious and unchangeable. Ray Bradbury, for example, saw fiction as a vehicle for ideas. Ideas were, he said, what gave him the adrenaline to write, so much so that he ran on “borrow[ed] energy from the ideas themselves” (Bradbury). That energy was considerable – he says in his 2010 *Paris Review* interview that he often completed drafts of short stories within hours of getting the ideas for them, and drafted *Fahrenheit 451* in nine days on an uncomfortable basement typewriter (Bradbury).

Bradbury’s prioritization of ideas is clear in his work. His short story “The Veldt” is one of my favorites, but I couldn’t tell you much about the characters. There isn’t much to them. The story isn’t about them. It’s about the house those characters live in, which brings their fantasies to life. It’s driven by two ideas, one specific idea about the house, and a broader one about the dangers of technology – a recurring theme for Bradbury.

Then there are writers like J.D. Salinger. I can’t remember what happened in *The Catcher in the Rye*, but I certainly remember Holden Caulfield. Salinger’s works rarely

had much going on by way of plot, but he would return to the same Glass family characters again and again. His characters were what he wrote for, and what he wrote about.

Bradbury and Salinger were each brilliant in their own way, but it's not hard to see their heavily weighted priorities as shortcomings. Would the ideas in *Fahrenheit 451* have been expressed more fully if Bradbury had developed the character of Montag more? Would Seymour Glass have been a richer character if Salinger had created a better story for him? It could be argued that the ideas in *451* would have been obscured by a more complicated main character, or that Seymour Glass would have been less real if he'd had a different kind of story, but I tend to think those arguments underestimate the potential for the different elements of fiction to strengthen each other. That potential is proven by novels like *1984*, where characters, ideas, message, craft, and style are never neglected. It is a more powerful novel than *Fahrenheit 451*. Orwell's idea of thought police roots itself more deeply in the reader's psyche than does Bradbury's similar idea of book firemen, but Orwell doesn't rely on the idea alone to inspire fear in the reader: He makes them become attached to Winston and Julia, makes them watch the two go through trials to be together, then betray each other in a well-placed scene of rat torture. Finally, he cements the reader's fear by making Winston do the one thing it seemed he never could – love Big Brother. Writers like Bradbury and Salinger, with weighted priorities, give their readers something interesting to observe. Well-rounded writers like Orwell manipulate their readers emotionally and intellectually.

I will count my fantastic lucky stars if I ever write anything as good as “The Veldt,” much less *1984*, but I still try to follow the well-rounded model of prioritization



in my work. Ideas are always at the root of my stories – they are the first part of the story I think of, and my attempts to write stories that begin with characters have never panned out – but I always write with the interplay between each of a story’s elements in mind. The ideas don’t work as well without everything else.

Bradbury’s stories each operate on a unique concept, but often come back to the broader theme about the dangers of technology. Similarly, each of my stories each has its own smaller concept or premise, but each story is rooted in a larger theme that recurs over multiple stories. The inability to perceive the universe in a complete way, and thus the danger of thinking that you know things, is the theme connecting the four stories in this collection. Like Bradbury, it is the ideas, both big and small, that give me the adrenaline to create the stories. It is the characters that give me the will to keep them going and that give those ideas meaning. What I want most is for readers to be drawn into these stories by the characters, and to key into the ideas by experiencing something along with them. It’s not necessary for the reader to explicitly know that they have read about a particular idea, or even for the idea they find to be the same one I had in mind while writing, but I do want the stories to allow the reader to see things differently for a little while.

A literature professor here at University of Southern Mississippi, Dr. Martina Sciolino, made an interesting observation about fiction during a class. She said that fiction lets you experience other people far more intimately than you ever could in real life. This is a useful thing for fiction writers to understand about their characters – that being fictional makes them accessible, and that accessibility is part of what gives them value. As a reader, you can literally read their thoughts. You can feel their feelings. You

can understand their motivations even when they can't, and see them both as they see themselves and as others see them. That, I think, is what makes good fiction such a powerful tool – it's very hard to read it without opening your mind, if only enough to let a character or two in.

With the stories in this collection, one of the things I want readers to experience through my characters is the realization of a false truth, and the inability to replace the false truth with a true one. For the characters, that false truth comes in the form of identity. The main characters all have a hard time clinging to one.

There is a quotation I like that pretty well sums up the idea these stories want to convey. It is usually attributed to Albert Einstein, supposedly written in a letter of condolence. I don't know if he really wrote it or not. I recently found it floating around the pool of misattribution that is the Internet, and have so far been unable to trace it to its source. It goes like this:

A human being is part of the whole, called by us "Universe," a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest – a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. The striving to free oneself from this delusion is the one issue of true religion. Not to nourish the delusion but to try to overcome it is the way to reach the attainable measure of peace of mind ("The delusion").

There's a more well-known saying about peace of mind that might seem to contradict the above: Ignorance is bliss. People who don't know or care about ideas of individual consciousness as a delusion might be seen as having a greater chance at peace

of mind than those who do. But I don't think this is necessarily the case. I think the ability to accept or embrace reality – even if the reality you accept is that you can never really know anything and your experience of the universe is profoundly limited – can bring a deeper and more sustainable peace of mind than “blissful ignorance,” which is just a nicer way of framing denial.

The stories in this collection differ greatly in genre and character and premise, but they are all unified in that each deals, in one way or another, with the same delusion of identity that Mr. Einstein/Faux-Einstein wrote about in that letter, and they explore the consequences of its denial or acceptance.

I tried to arrange the stories in the order of least to most abstracted identities. It begins with “Dirt Birthright,” a story of a child having a difficult time finding identity through his parents and culture. The next story, “King Tupelo,” follows a man who attempts to shed his fabricated identity. “[Blip]” is the story of a character who tries to place an identity on something that doesn't have one, and finally, in “Black-Eyed Susan” the illusion of identity breaks and characters, places, and times become confused with one another.

“Dirt Birthright” follows Raphael Shaw, a half-Caucasian, half-Miami Indian child who is left to live with a white woman when his mother dies. He is kidnapped by his mentally ill father, who believes the caretaker will send him to an assimilation camp.

Raphael's situation in life doesn't offer him a pre-packaged identity. He can't say to himself, “I am a free white American,” and judge himself based on what he thinks a free white American is supposed to be. Neither can he say to himself, “I am a Miami Indian.” He doesn't know anything about being a Miami Indian. The only Miami he ever

met was his mother, who has died and left him. His situation makes the other characters uncomfortable. His caretaker tries to force him into the identity of the free white American. His father, who has rejected his own heritage as a middle-class Scotsman, tries to force him into the identity of the American Indian. Neither of these adults brings the very young Raphael any comfort or sense of purpose.

When I wrote “Dirt Birthright” I was thinking much more about little ideas than big philosophical ones. I was thinking mainly about Raphael Shaw as a character I had written about before. I wrote him as an adult character in “Black-Eyed Susan.” “Dirt Birthright” is an exploration of how he became that adult. So the initial idea for this story was to write about this character’s childhood trauma. My ideas for the nature of that trauma came from my own interests. I’ve always been interested in the part of American history that Raphael experiences and embodies – the transition from an Indian country to a white European one. The Euro-American genocide of the American Indian worked like other genocides have, in that an entire culture participates in a slew of defense mechanisms in order to make the genocide psychologically possible. It is rationalized and intellectualized, and the offenders project their “savagery” onto their victims. This is all done out of some strange need for a culture to expand and grow, similar to what Freud thought was the individual’s subconscious need to procreate (Freud, 42). Some of Freud’s theories about the subconscious seem to work more neatly when applied to cultures or other large groups than to individuals. “Dirt Birthright” also explores the topic of mental illness. Part of what interests me about mental illness is the effect it has on identity and vice versa. If you think you are mentally ill, will you become so? If you become mentally ill, have you changed fundamentally or only physiologically? Is there a difference

between the two? Is mental illness caused by struggles with self-perception and reality-perception, or is it the cause of those struggles? In both “Dirt Birthright” and “Black-Eyed Susan,” I use Raphael Shaw to explore these questions.

“King Tupelo” is the story of Billy Buntyn, an Elvis impersonator whose feats of fanaticism have brought notoriety to his small town. Billy decides one day that he is sick and tired of Elvis, but his attempts to shed his #1 Elvis Fan persona are met with hostility from the locals.

In this story, every major character has placed himself into some sort of fabricated persona. Billy’s stepson, Kevin, has chosen the identity of the carefree surfer guy despite being landlocked in a small town in the South; mailman Steve Obenshain happily imitates the mailman character from *Cheers*; Chip Welsh, the county attorney, is the typical good ‘ol boy lawyer; and so forth. What sets Billy apart from these other characters is his awareness. He happens into a situation that makes it easier for him to see that he is play acting for an audience that, until the story begins, included himself. Billy’s identity hinges on three sources of pride – his Elvis fanaticism, his friendliness, and his job as a housepainter. When his painting business encounters problems, his self-perception begins to fall apart, and he wakes up one morning realizing that he doesn’t much care for Elvis anymore, and he doesn’t really feel all that friendly.

This story was largely the result of my work as a newspaper reporter in a small town. As a reporter, I met all of the town characters and watched them carry out roles that determined what happened in the town as a whole. Often, I felt like I was meeting the same people over and over again, and many of those people appeared, from my distant but scrutinous vantage point, to have little control over what they were doing. A good

majority of the attorneys I interacted with, for example, seemed to have chosen from two or three set ways that an attorney in a small town in the South could act. It was as if they *had* to act the way they did, because that was how small town attorneys acted. It was the same with the whole cast of local characters, from the conspiracy theorists to the politicians and businessmen (there was a noticeable lack of businesswomen) – as long as they were in public, most of them picked a persona and stuck to it as predictably as any sitcom character. The town would not have worked the same way if these people had not acted according to script. More so than any other story in this collection, “King Tupelo” is a direct reflection of my own observations of the world.

“[Blip]” is the opposite. It is a science-fiction story that is set in outer-space and stars a bunch of weird fictional creatures, especially a self-absorbed space alien named Freeyu. She is made out of metal and lives in the vacuum of space, so it’s understandable that when she encounters another metal contraption floating around in space, she thinks it’s alive like her. She names it Blip and takes it home for repair, constructing an identity for it along the way.

Freeyu’s attachment to Blip is a result of her own problems of self-perception. Freeyu is a member of a tight-knit group of individuals who each make some sort of contribution to the whole. Her own contribution seems inadequate until she finds this strange new creature. Blip makes her feel important. When it seems that Blip may not be an intelligent creature after all, she is unable to let go of the identity she has crafted for him. He is real to her, in a way that affects her completely but cannot affect him at all. Her own identity has become tied up in the one she created for him.

This story is more intentionally tied to its big philosophical idea than the previous two. In a class discussion of thing theory, someone said, “What happens when you try to give life to an object that has none,” and I decided I wanted to write a character who takes that to an extreme. I had also been wanting to write something that looked outside the tiny human environment and to take a stab at the special challenges of writing sci-fi. I thought that these things worked together – in a sci-fi story, I could write a character who not only wanted to give life to an object, but resembled an object herself, and I could make it reasonable for her to think, at least at first, that the object had life.

The final story in this collection is “Black-Eyed Susan,” in which two of the main characters get their identities confused. In this story, a grown-up Raphael Shaw and a boy named Daniel Semmes each slip out of the usual protective confines of human perception and begin to experience a oneness in space, time, and identity.

Raphael Shaw is a character to whom the world does not make much sense. Rules that seem unalterable to others appear arbitrary to him, so when those rules begin to slip away, the new version of reality is more clear to Shaw than it is to Daniel, who is willful and confident and has a strong sense of self. To Daniel, reality as he experiences it is obvious and the lines that separate times, places, and individuals are clear. To Shaw, those lines exist, but they are blurred, and the experience of reality is anything but obvious. Shaw’s opium addiction further blurs those lines for him. When the lines are erased, things eventually become more clear to Shaw, but remain terrifying and confusing to Daniel.

My initial idea for this story came when I visited the beach at Fort Morgan, Alabama, where there is an old naufrage that the wind continually buries and unburies

from the sand. If you visited Fort Morgan on August 15, 2012, there would have been no sign of anything interesting beneath the sand. If you visited on September 15, after Hurricane Isaac had disarranged the sand, you would have seen the burnt up hull of the *Rachel*, a schooner which wrecked there in 1923. The World War I era ship is thought to have carried cargo, but it is unknown what kind, and to have had a crew of 8. It was run ashore by a storm and it was then burned (McLaughlin).

All of the characters in “Black-Eyed Susan” were invented to tell a story about that boat, and to tell a story about the narrowness of human experience, and about the unperceived oneness of things. It is my hope, though, that the story belongs to the characters and their experiences rather than the premise or theme – otherwise, I may as well have written a non-fiction article about the *Rachel*, or an essay on universality.

Of course, if I had written either of the above, I would have been in good company. The Internet is full of news articles detailing the “Fort Morgan mystery ship,” and the ideas of universality and reality delusion had already been written many times over a very long time before I was born. Part of the point of fiction, for me, is to make both ideas and characters unique in the way they are paired together – to turn ideas into experience, and characters into ideas. Fiction is sometimes described as a tool to explore the human experience, but that, I think, is a limited view of its potential; it is equally a tool that uses the human experience to explore the universe.



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## DIRT BIRTHRIGHT

Raphael was only away from the town for a few days before his memories of it began to seem like tales of some far off time, whispered to him in secret by a friend he didn't know anymore.

He could remember Mama – her carrying piles of freshly laundered sheets through the corridors of the big wooden house, the smell of the cedar closet as she put away the good linens, him sitting at her feet and staring at a wolf-shaped spot of chipped paint on the baseboard. He could remember deliveries being made right at the front door and wagons ambling down the road. He could remember running across the shiny wood floor in his too-tight dress shoes, and getting the switch from Mrs. Morrow. He could remember all the scalding baths she'd given him, scrub-scrub-scrubbing at his face as though it was just brown from dirt and not from having an Injun for a mama.

He was taken away a month after Mama died. He remembered that very well.

He was in bed, trying hard to sleep because he knew Mrs. Morrow would expect him to be up early for Bible lessons – but he couldn't sleep because he knew he wouldn't be able to recite the verses and he wished Mama was still there to help him memorize. He hadn't seen Mama for a month.

When he heard the thumping out in the hall, he thought it must be almost morning and Mrs. Morrow was getting his bath ready. He shut his eyes and pretended to be asleep. When he opened them, he saw not his guardian, but a strange man, skinny and pale, with a dirty beard and ripe-smelling furs. He stood in the doorway with his mismatched boots and patched leather leggings stained with what looked like blood and Raphael knew he

was looking at a wild man. A wolf man. Raphael had heard stories. He was going to be eaten.

But instead of eating him, the man spoke quietly. "Raphael Shaw?"

He sat up in bed on his flat little pillow, knees pulled up to his chest, and stared. He'd seen this person before, somewhere.

The man walked across the room and knelt by Raphael's bedside.

"My name is Archie Shaw," he said. His voice was soft and immediate and felt warm at his ear, not like a wild man at all.

Raphael looked at the man's face. It was a face he knew from a picture Mama had shown him many times. In the picture he had been much cleaner, but it was him. He stared at the man, but said nothing. His chest and throat were clamped tight with fear.

"Do you know who I am?" the man asked. "Do you know your mother is dead?"

Raphael opened his mouth, but stopped. He was afraid if he tried to speak no sound would come out.

"Go ahead," said Shaw.

"Mrs. Morrow said she's in the kingdom of Heaven," he whispered.

Archie Shaw narrowed his eyes. "Well," he said. "Now your mother's gone up there, I'm taking you with me. That be all right?"

Raphael looked at him. He was a stranger, but he was kin. Mama told him about kin. They're like you. They help you. They're not really strangers at all. And Mrs. Morrow was probably waiting with a bath for him right now.

"Yes, sir," he said.

“Then hurry up,” said Shaw. “Put on your warmest clothes, and bring whatever you can’t do without.”

As Raphael changed, the man picked up a little framed photo of Mama.

“You don’t want to forget this, son,” he said. “We’ll not be coming back.”

\*

Shaw gripped Raphael’s wrist too tightly, pulling him along without looking at him much as they snuck out of the big house, out of the town, and into the thick wood. Raphael wondered for a moment where they were going, but everything went so quickly. It was cold right through all the layers of wool and leather and fur that Raphael wore, and he felt naked.

They walked and walked, Shaw’s feet crunching the dry leaves, and Raphael imagined that the cold was a solid sheet covering everything, and he was a hot knife cutting through the sheet, getting hotter with every step.

There was a sliver of moon overhead, but it was blotted out by the thick tree canopy, and Raphael wondered how Shaw knew which way to go in such darkness. He never let go of Raphael’s wrist, and Raphael was glad. It made him feel like he could see him better, being able to feel him.

They walked until Raphael’s feet were numb and he felt like he was walking on clouds – he could tell there was something there, below his feet, but it seemed to move and dissipate, and he couldn’t find good footing. His feet gave out underneath him, and Shaw picked him up, slinging him over his shoulder like a sack of flour.

“We’re nearly there,” he said, but Raphael was too tired to hear, and he fell asleep despite being carried upside down. When his father shook him awake, it was still nighttime, and they were on the water, in a canoe, and the little crescent moon cast a dim light over them.

“I’ve never been on the river before,” he said.

“Yes you have,” said Shaw. “You just don’t remember.”

Raphael leaned so he could watch the edge of the canoe cut through the dark water. He thought about leaving Mrs. Morrow’s house. All those thumps and thuds, and then she was nowhere to be seen as they snuck out the kitchen door.

“What happened to Mrs. Morrow?” he asked.

“When she doesn’t show up to church in the morning, someone will come find her.”

“Is it the same night as when we left?”

“It is,” Shaw said as the canoe butted up onto the shore. “We can still get a few hours of sleep,” he hopped out of the canoe held it in the water while Raphael climbed out, “and we’ll travel by day from here on.”

Raphael meant to ask where they were going, but instead he said. “Are you a madman?”

Archie Shaw smiled. It was the first time Raphael had seen him do it. It was only a half-smile and half covered by his beard, but Raphael recognized it. It was the smile he saw each morning in the washroom mirror. He wondered if his father ever smiled at himself in the washroom, and he came down decidedly against it. This was not a man who had a washroom mirror.

“Are you?” Raphael pressed. “I just remembered it that Mama said you were.”

“What a moment to remember,” Shaw said, still smiling as he pushed the canoe out into the river with the heel of his boot. Raphael watched it float off into the darkness.

“Why did you do that?” he said.

“In case anyone comes looking for us,” Shaw said as he secured a pack over his shoulders.

“Who?” asked Raphael.

“We’re fugitives, son,” said Shaw.

“What’s a fugitive?”

Shaw held out his hand so Raphael could hold it as they walked. “The old lady was your legal guardian. That makes me guilty of kidnapping, which is against the law.”

Raphael had never heard of kidnapping, but he did know what happens if you do something that’s against the law.

“Are we going to be hung?” he asked.

“I will, if we’re caught. You will be put into an assimilation camp for good little Indians.”

“Do you think – Will they find us?”

“I don’t know if they’ll try,” said Shaw. “We might not be worth the trouble. They won’t be happy about the old woman, though.”

“Why do you talk so strange?” Raphael said.

“Strangely,” his father corrected.

“Why do you talk so strangely?” Raphael asked.

“This is how Scotsmen talk when they’ve been in America for a long time.”

“I never saw a Scotsman.”

“Yes, you have,” said Shaw. “You just don’t remember.”

“What happened to Mama?”

“She got sick and died.”

“Are you a mad man?” he asked.

Shaw turned to look at his son, his face crusty and wild, his eyes bright. “Only sometimes,” he said. Raphael watched his father’s breath turn to vapor in the air, and he remembered how cold it was. “Now, don’t let go of my hand. It’s about to be dark again.”

\*

Raphael had been cold before. At Mrs. Morrow’s house, it had been his job to stuff rags into all the door jambs while Mama tended the coal heater and fireplaces. When they were done, she would bundle him up in wool long johns and wool socks and tuck him in under three blankets, but the cold would still bite at his feet and fingers, and sneak under his little cot to freeze his bottom, so he would squeeze into bed with her. She would rub him down with her icy fingers until they both felt just a little bit better, like maybe they could get a little sleep if they stayed close.

Raphael had learned to like the cold because it reminded him of Mama. This was a new kind of cold with his father - a kind he did not like at all because it did not feel safe, and there was no coal burning stove and no Mama to make it soft.

Shaw, by all outward appearances, seemed immune. But he was very careful with his arrangement of the campfire. Raphael watched with impatience as his father arranged

the bits of woods just so – first a pile of kindling, surrounded by a teepee of middle sized sticks, that surrounded by an arrangement of larger ones, with a pile of big, thigh-sized logs off to the side. Once all was arranged, Shaw would use a match to light a bundle of pine needles, which he would stick right into the middle of the pile. He would continue adding them until the fire was roaring, and he would give it all his attention for the next hour, adding a log here, moving a stick there.

On the first night in the wilderness, Raphael fell asleep before the fire was going. On the second night, he shivered and hugged himself around the knees as he waited.

“Why is it taking so long?” he said.

“Because we have to do it right if we don’t want it to burn out,” said Shaw.

“I’m cold,” said Raphael.

Shaw turned to look at him. He was skinny. Mrs. Morrow had thought that underfeeding him – just a bit, mind you – might make him a shade paler. If he was just a shade paler he could pass for white.

“Why don’t you walk a bit,” he said. “Gather some wood for me. Staying still makes you colder.”

Raphael stood up. It was getting too dark to hunt for wood, so he just paced back and forth.

“Here,” said Shaw, handing his son a log from the pile by the fire. “Move this pile of logs from this side of the fire to the other side, and I’ll tell you a story about yourself.”

Raphael stopped pacing for moment. He’d forgotten that anyone besides Mama could have stories about him.

“Me?” he said.



“Yes,” said Shaw. “Now, start moving that pile of wood.”

“Yes, sir,” Raphael said, and as Shaw built the fire and talked, Raphael stacked logs and listened.

“Now,” said Shaw. “Any story about you has to start with me. Me and your mother.”

Raphael felt warmer already. His mother.

“I was born in a far away land. You’ve heard of Scotsmen. Well, Scotsmen are men who come from a big island far, far, far across the ocean. That island is called Great Britain, and the north of the Great Britain is called Scotland. Scotland is not like America. There is a king. You’ve heard stories with kings?”

Raphael nodded.

“There is a king, and it’s very rainy, and there are more cities and buildings than you’ve ever seen in Indiana. It’s full of Caucasians – that means whites – and there are no Injuns there. The white people have been there just as long as the Injuns have been here. Maybe longer.”

Shaw leaned toward his son, his face close, his mouth oddly twisted, his eyes bright and excited.

“I came to America less than twenty years ago,” he said, “But your mother has always been here. This is her homeland, and yours. That river back there flows through your veins. This earth,”

He picked up a clod of dirt and squeezed it.

“This earth beats in your heart. Never forget that. Your mother’s people are called the Miami, and they have been in this land since their gods made it.”

Shaw smashed the clod of dirt onto his chest, hard, then pulled a match from his pocket and struck it against a log, setting a bundle of pine needles alight, “In a week you’ll be with your people again.”

“I don’t have any people,” said Raphael.

Shaw’s eyes flashed. “Your grandfather.”

Raphael flushed. His grandfather. Mama had told him of Papa Lukee. He was a great man, she had said, a music player and a story teller and a hunter. His wife did not like Mama.

The flames now climbing up the little wooden teepee, Shaw turned back to his son. He grabbed him by the wrist and pulled Raphael’s face close to his.

“You have a birthright,” he said, breathing hard. “You have a birthright to two nations.”

Raphael stared. He didn’t know what a birthright was. His father’s eyes were biting.

“Your mother was indebted to that old Morrow woman,” Shaw said, still gripping Raphael’s wrist. “But you do not inherit that debt. Do you understand?”

Raphael did not understand. However, he said. “Yes sir.”

“You do not inherit that debt! What you inherit is this country, this wilderness, and the right to live in it. You are not meant to be locked in some room reading Bible verses, afraid to go outside because it’s too cold like some sickly English schoolboy; you are meant to commune with nature. It’s hard – it’s hard to be in the wilderness, but it’s something you were born to know. It is your birthright.”

Raphael nodded. Shaw scooped up another handful of dirt and brought it close to his face, licked it. Then he smeared it across his son's chest.

“No son of mine is going to be assimilated.”

Raphael stood motionless. “Yes, sir,” he whispered.

Shaw retrieved a harmonica from his coat and blew a note. “Now,” he said, suddenly relaxed, “Let me tell you a story about a big, fat giant with one eye and a bunch of lost sailors who found him one day.”

\*

For the next three nights, Shaw told Raphael stories to keep him warm – but he didn't talk anymore about birthrights or the Miami people. These stories were about hot places and warm foods, half told and half sung. There was a story about a giant named Prometheus, who lived forever and gave people fire. There was a story about a man who lived inside a volcano and made things out of metal, and another man who lived under the earth and tricked a beautiful woman into marrying him. There were stories about Arabs in the desert, and stories about people who hunted tigers and went around half-naked because it was so hot. There were a couple of stories that Raphael recognized from Bible lessons, but Shaw told them a lot differently than Mrs. Morrow or his Sunday school teachers.

Raphael's favorite story was about how warm it had been the day he was born.

These nights – as they sat by the fire eating smoked venison and toasted bread, with Pa telling stories during dinner and playing his harmonica afterwards – were the coldest nights of Raphael's life. Each night, even though the chill in the air was

unchanged, Raphael felt colder. It was as though the cold from the previous nights was still there, accumulating beneath the cold of the current night.

Despite the cold, they were happy nights. It was a different happiness than he'd felt with his mother. He'd taken that happiness for granted, but this happiness was a great relief. When mama died, little Raphael had assumed that he'd never be happy or have family again.

But it wasn't the kind of happiness that could cut through the cold. It wasn't the kind of cold that could be cut through – an outdoor, frigid cold. With Mama, the cold had kept Raphael awake because it was uncomfortable. In the woods, the cold kept Raphael awake because he was afraid of freezing to death. Nothing else could keep him from sleeping when he was so tired.

\*

The days were spent walking. Walking through beds of weeds, through clearings, across streams, through mud, and mostly through a forest with a hard floor of pine needles, leaves, and twigs. Walking along the river until Raphael felt like he was walking across hot coals with heavy iron weights strapped to his thighs and tight bands squeezing his knees.

At dusk, they would fish before heading into the cover of the woods to camp. Shaw prepared for fishing all day, digging for worms and snatching up bugs as they walked. Raphael carried them in a wire mesh bait basket tied to his belt loop. The first few days, they caught enough fish for supper and the next day's breakfast. The fourth day, they didn't get a nibble.

“It’s just as well,” said Shaw sniffing the air. “I sense wolves about.” He bent down at the trunk of a pine tree and sniffed the bark near the ground. “Wolf urine. I’m sure of it. I’m sure it is.” He slunk over to Raphael and grabbed him by the shoulders. “If they come for you, fool them into thinking you’re part of the pack,” he said, and he turned his face to the sky and howled.

That night, they ate bread and cheese. It was colder than ever, and Raphael didn’t really listen to his father’s stories. He was listening for wolves. Noises he’d heard every night – hooting owls, braying frogs – seemed like they could maybe be the howl of wolves. Shaw built the fire bigger than the past two nights.

“Wolves are afraid of fire,” he said. “But it’s likely there aren’t any about. We would have heard them again if there were.”

Shaw looked sideways at his son. He was staring off into the woods, twirling the bait basket around in his little hands.

“You needn’t worry about wolves, either way,” Shaw said a little more loudly. “I’ll scare them away with the terrible sound of my harmonica.”

With that, Shaw retrieved the instrument from his pocket and sang as he played, making up lyrics about frightened wolves and men shooting wolves with guns. Raphael inched his bedroll closer to the fire, and Shaw told the story of Little Red Riding Hood. The wolf gobbled her up.

“Do you think they’ll come for us?” Raphael said.

“The law men?” said Shaw. “I can’t say that I know.”

“No, the wolves.”

“What wolves?” said Shaw, without looking at Raphael.

“The wolves. You said you could smell them.”

“What do you mean? I can’t smell wolves.”

“But you said you could smell them,” Raphael said.

“There’s no wolves around here, son. What you need to worry about is the demons that live in the embers of that fire.”

Raphael was awake long after his father had fallen asleep. Each time he dozed off, he was awoken by the intensifying cold and the weakening fire. Each time, he scooted a little nearer the flames.

Once when he woke up, he thought he heard noises in the woods, but as he inched toward the fire, the warmth let him drift back into sleep. He tucked himself into a dream about fishing. They caught so many fish! They piled them into a wet, breathing little hill. But the fish slid back into the water, and the water filled with wolves. They were vicious, mouths still bloody from their most recent kill as they splashed straight into the river to surround an enormous trout. The fish swelled up as big as a dog, as big as the wolves themselves. Their eyes were fierce and red and unforgiving. The trout cried out for help, but the wolves showed no mercy. They ripped the creature to shreds, and it screamed the whole time.

The lead wolf tore off the fish’s head and shook it around in its mouth. The head wasn’t good to eat – the wolf was simply celebrating the kill. It thrust its muzzle into the chill night sky to let out a deep, victorious howl – but no sound came out. The wolf tried again with the same result – a voiceless cry of confusion. He looked back at his pack.

They, too, were trying unsuccessfully to vocalize. The lead wolf’s eyes turned from red

to black. He dropped the trout head and splashed back and forth across the shallow river, desperately trying to make any sound at all.

Raphael awoke, his eyes flying open to see a puff of his own breath dissipate into the cold. It's wasn't the chill that had woken him this time, but a deep, loud baying. A wolf. He couldn't be sure if he'd really heard it, or if it had been a part of his dream, but it woke him either way.

He tried to look around without moving his head – in case any wolves were there, he didn't want draw attention to himself. Near his feet, he could see the outline of the snoozing Shaw. To his left was the fire, everywhere else was darkness.

The cold bore down on him, but he stayed perfectly still and silent. He heard nothing. He wondered if all the other animals were quieting to listen for the wolves as well. He tried to think of what wolves might do if they found them, and what they might do if confronted by wolves. Shaw had his pistol. And there were knives, and the fire. Shaw said wolves were repelled by fire, so maybe they would stay away. The cold bit even harder now that he was too afraid to move. He lay still, wondering if it would be worse to be eaten by wolves or to freeze to death, until he finally fell asleep again.

What woke him next was not cold, but heat. As he opened his eyes, he became aware of a vague sort of pain along one side of his body, and a spire of flames very close to his face.

He wasn't sure if he was awake or dreaming until he caught a scent of burning wool. It was real.

The pain, too, had to be real. It was white-hot, and it seared the skin of his arm and leg, sending shockwaves of pain through his entire body. He whipped his head

around – still, in his panic, looking for wolves – but he couldn't see anything but flames. He flailed his arms and legs around, trying to find purchase, but his body seemed to be working against him, and he couldn't get out of the fire.

Then, everything went dark for a moment, and his burned skin was slammed by the cold. Shaw's face hovered over his, white-lipped and wide-eyed.

“Are you all right?” he said.

Raphael couldn't muster an answer. His breath was tight in his chest.

“Your blanket caught fire,” said Shaw. “Let me see your arm.”

Raphael stayed still while his father examined his burns. When his face came back into view, it had a little of its color back.

“It's not severe,” he said. “It will heal quickly if there's no infection.”

Raphael struggled to catch his breath, but it came and went against his will, quick and shallow.

“Stop,” Shaw said. “Just close your eyes and breathe normally. Try not to panic. The demons are attracted to panic.”

But Raphael continued to struggle against his breath. There was something he needed to ask.

“It's over now,” said Shaw, then, “You can have my blankets. I'll sleep under the burned ones.”

Raphael managed a deep breath as Archie Shaw turned around and reached for something in the pack. “Papa,” he said. “Are they coming? The wolves, can they smell me?”

“No,” said Shaw. “There aren't any wolves.”



“It hurts.”

“I know,” said Shaw, turning back to face Raphael. “Have a bit of this.”

Raphael reached out and took a small bottle of dark liquid from his father.

“Just a bit, now,” said Shaw.

Raphael swallowed. It burned just as if the fire had jumped down his throat. This was not what he needed.

“Ragh!”

“I know,” said Shaw, “but in a moment you may feel a bit better. Here, I’m going to prop you up against the pack, but don’t try to sit up any higher.”

Raphael allowed himself to be moved while the pain from his arm and leg washed over him. His head pounded with it. If he had been with his mother, he would have cried, but he didn’t want to look weak in front of his father. He tried to look at the burns, but his head swam when he turned it. He reached toward the injured leg.

“Don’t touch it,” said Shaw. “Try to think about something else. Think about how cold it is, and I’ll tell you a story.”

“No,” said Raphael, thinking of the stories about hot deserts and volcanoes and wolves.

“You’ll like this one,” said Shaw. “It’s about a sea-god. His name was Neptune. You close your eyes and try to see the story. Imagine you’re in it.”

“No,” said Raphael. It was too hard to think when his burns were throbbing. And he was a little drunk. Shaw told the story anyway. He talked about Neptune, and his trek through cool, soft waters to save a pretty star goddess from the lust of Zeus. He turned the goddess into an island. The island always had nice, cool weather.

Raphael listened to the story in a dizzy haze of cold and whisky. He looked toward the treetops and the dark moved and swirled and bubbled until it turned blue and whipped around, a fish tail that twirled and twirled into a whirlpool and crashed in icy bright blue water onto his burns, searing cold.

The water trickled down his body and across, into the fire and boiled. His father built the fires carefully and started them easily. A strike of the match, and all the kindling went up in a big poof of flame. Kindling was everywhere. The whole woods were made out of it. How easy would it be for the fire to spread and surround them and gobble them up? No wonder it repelled wolves. In the treetops Raphael saw a pack of red wolves surrounded by fire and hundreds of silver fish, their powerful teeth and paws helpless against the onslaught. There was nothing to do but wait and be devoured.

Shaw sipped at the whisky and slurred slightly as he told a new story about some men on a ship, and how Neptune would entertain himself by swimming along ahead of them and causing all kinds of mischief.

“What is there more of in the world?” Raphael interrupted. “Water or fire?”

“Water,” said Shaw. “Much, much more water.”

“Like the river?” said Raphael.

“And the ocean, and all the lakes and seas. Quite a lot of water.”

\*

Early the next morning, Raphael was awoken by the pain in his arm and leg. He'd learned from sticking his thumb on the stove one time that the burns aren't as easy to ignore as scrapes and bruises. The pain had been urgent and made his right thumb feel

like the biggest, most important part of his body. Now, he had the same feeling, only so much bigger.

Raphael looked in the trees to check for wolves, then to the fire to make sure it had gone out. It was just sunrise, and he could see without the fire, in the hazy, speckled way he associated with the very early morning.

After he felt safe, he pulled back his blankets, pulled off Shaw's coat, which he was wearing over his holey clothes, and inspected his wounds. There was a big shiny burn running all the way from bicep to wrist, covering at least one third of his arm. There was a similar burn along the left side of his calf. The burns weren't blistered or bleeding, and they didn't have any pus, but they looked dirty, and the charred edges of his clothes sort of stuck to them. He felt his face, which he'd only just noticed was hurting. He jerked his hand away in pain after pressing a burn on his jaw. The burns throbbed, and each throb sent a dull ache over his body. His head felt tight and heavy, his stomach a little queasy.

He got up, and the chill morning air snuck in through the holes in his clothing. He threw on Shaw's coat, but it felt too warm over the hot burns. He wished he had another set of clothes. These weren't only holey, but filthy. He looked at his father, who was snoring under the burnt blankets, and carried the good blankets over to him, then paced back and forth for want of anything else to do. In a few moments, his father spoke.

"You're awake," he said.

"Uh huh," said Raphael.

"Do you feel sick?"

"Some."

“Keep pacing.”

Shaw got up and retrieved a couple of hunks of bread and cheese from the pack, handing some to Raphael. He had an odd, lopsided sneer, and his eyes glowed. Raphael reached for the cheese, and Shaw’s hand snapped around his wrist, squeezing hard, aggravating the burn.

“Don’t forget,” said Shaw, “this is your birthright.”

Raphael nodded.

“This cheese,” he said.

Raphael stared.

“All the spoils of this land are yours. Don’t let anyone take them from you. If you want them, you will have to fight for them.”

“Papa,” said Raphael.

“No one else has a right to this cheese,” he said.

“Papa, your hand.”

“If you want this cheese, then take it from me.”

Raphael reached for the cheese with his free hand, and Shaw snatched it back.

“Ha-ha!” said Shaw. “Fight for it!”

Raphael lunged for the cheese, but Shaw took it away again.

“I’m hungry,” said Raphael.

“Coward!” Shaw yelled. “Weakling!” and he threw the cheese into the dirt.

Raphael didn’t know what to do, so he just stood there. Shaw spat on the ground and stepped away to pack. Raphael turned to look at the burnt out remains of the

campfire. A few embers still glowed in the bottom. Why had it burned him? What had it wanted? He had done something wrong.

“Today is the last day,” said Shaw. “We meet Papa Lukee at the river junction.”

Raphael stared at the hunk of cheese in the dirt. He wiped it off and shoved it into his mouth.

Shaw didn't collect bugs and worms that day as they walked along the river bank. He just trudged forward, and to Raphael the day seemed hard and rough, like a dull knife. The sun stayed in his eyes and air smelled metallic.

After only a few hours, they arrived at a junction with a large, fast-flowing river. The forest thinned and gave way to a weedy field, which itself thinned and gave way to a sandy beach. They waited at the beach.

“Where is he?” said Raphael.

“He'll be here any minute,” said Shaw.

“Where does he live?”

“With the Indians,” Shaw said, and he played his harmonica while they waited, “My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean.”

“You know the words. Sing,” he said.

Raphael shook his head. The burns throbbed. He had no energy to sing.

“Sing,” Shaw insisted. “The monsters fear the voices of Indians.”

Raphael shook his head again, then Shaw pointed upriver.

“He comes to claim what's his,” he said.

Raphael could just make out a man on a horse. It seemed a long time before he arrived. The man was in his forties or fifties, grey-haired, clad neatly in leather. He

hopped from his horse and walked over to Raphael. Bending down to Raphael's eye level, he reached out and took him by the shoulders.

"You look like your mother," he said. "Unfortunately you look like your father also."

The man chuckled. Raphael pulled away. The man had grabbed his burn, which was not visible under the coat.

"Don't be afraid," said the man. "I'm your grandfather."

Raphael nodded. He tried to smile, but wasn't sure if he'd succeeded. The man stood up and turned to Shaw.

"He's only been with you a few days and he looks like he's been dragged behind a horse," he said.

"His blanket caught fire," said Shaw.

"I'm not surprised to find him like this."

"The burns aren't bad," said Shaw. "They haven't attracted any demons."

The man bent down again, this time to examine Raphael's wounds.

"He'll come around," said Shaw. "And now, you must excuse me."

"Yes," said Papa Lukee. "Raphael, you will ride on my horse with me."

But Raphael was looking at his father.

"You're not coming?" he said.

"Not now," said Shaw.

"Why not?"

Shaw didn't answer, but handed Raphael his harmonica. "Protect yourself with this."

Raphael dropped it on the ground. “No,” he said.

“It’s time to go,” Papa Lukee said. He took Raphael’s hand, and Raphael did not resist as they walked to the horse, but neither did he stop glaring at Shaw, pleading.

They mounted the horse and, for a long time, Raphael did not speak. Papa Lukee talked, but the words whooshed by his ears and meant nothing. Finally, he heard himself ask, his voice loose and scratched, “Will he come back?”

“It would be better for you if he did not.”

Raphael closed his eyes and felt the icy wind whip into the loose folds of his father’s coat. He wondered how far his father was now, and he swore he could hear him singing about lost, lonely wolves.

## KING TUPELO

Billy Buntyn awoke the morning of August 16, 1992 the same way he did every morning – beneath a gigantic mural of Elvis Presley.

He looked, bleary-eyed, at the ceiling. “You again,” he said, pulling the sheets over his head. Throwing them right back off again, he hoisted himself up into a sitting position, rubbing the crust from his eyes as he leaned against the headboard.

He let his eyes stay closed for an extra moment - not steeling himself, he thought, just taking a moment. When he opened them again, all he could see was Elvis. The wallpaper, curtains, posters, bedsheets – everything in Billy’s room had Elvis on it, including Billy himself, who was wearing Blue Hawaii boxers. He huffed over to the edge of his bed.

The Jailhouse Rock wall clock said it was 7:30. Billy stared at the swinging pendulum legs. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d slept until 7:30 on a weekday. There was nowhere he needed to go, so he just kept staring at the clock and the stupid legs that would not stop swinging.

“Shit,” Billy said. “Sick a’ got-damn Elvis.”

He got up, threw on his robe, which said “Graceland” on the pocket, threw it back off, draped a towel over his shoulders instead and went to fix a plate of breakfast. All of his plates had Elvis on them. He shunted his peanut butter and waffles aside with the tip of his fork and scowled at the grease-smearred plastic face, mouth frozen open in song.

“Sick a’ peanut butter,” Billy said. He picked up the whole plate and dropped it in the trash can.



Back in his room, Billy dug through his closet until he found some clothing with no Elvises on it – a stained white undershirt and a pair of denim overalls. He chuckled at the drawer full of Elvis boxers. It seemed so childish, all of a sudden, like superhero pajamas.

“15 years,” he said. “I’ll be got-damned.”

For 15 years Billy had made Elvis his whole life – eating like him, wearing Elvis on all his clothes, collecting memorabilia, listening to nothing but Elvis records. He’d amassed a nice collection. He even had a bedazzled white jumpsuit that Elvis wore on stage and a tin music note that had lived on the gates of Graceland until Elvis himself dented it with his car. His favorite had been the grocery list in Elvis’ own handwriting: Fritos, peanut butter, bacon, white bread, and Neosporin. Billy kept these items on his own grocery list as well.

He walked through his living/display room and out the front door without even looking at the sparkly jumpsuit and hopped into his truck. It was already sweltering out and he rolled down the windows, reaching through with his sleeve to rub a fresh spiderweb and a thin coat of dirt from the side mirror. He looked at the clock on his console out of habit, but he was in no hurry since there were no jobs going on this week. All the houses in Okahumma were already painted, he guessed. He might have to place some bids up in Memphis if nothing local came up in the next couple of days.

He’d rather work in town, though, because there wasn’t much competition, and he sometimes got jobs even when he was outbid. This, he liked to think, was mostly because he was a damn good housepainter. But it had to do with the Elvis thing, too. He had to admit the Elvis thing helped.

Okahumma was proud of Billy and his Elvis collection. He was the only Okahumman ever to be recognized in the Guinness Book of World Records, and each year the town held its “World Record Elvis Festival” on Memorial Day weekend. The festival made money, and folks were happy to hire good ol’ Billy Buntyn when they needed something painted.

There was his house, too. He opened his front room up for viewing two weekends a month, and folks would drive down from Memphis to ogle his collection. And him. He had to admit, they came to see him, too, because he was weird. Sometimes they made him feel like a zoo animal, or a clown. They would expect him to be funny or something. Some of them were pretty weird themselves. Just last week, some lady from New Hampshire had told him he was a “real cod,” and he hadn’t been sure if it was an insult or not.

“I’m a cod... You’re an old trout,” he mumbled to himself as he cruised along Old Hwy. 16. Then he amended himself. “Nah, you’re probably a nice lady.”

Billy liked being the Elvis guy. He met lots of people that way.

\*

When he stepped through the glass front door of Gene’s World Record Café, Billy was ravenous. His winced a little as he looked at the Elvis posters, on loan from him, that hung over the Country Kitchen wallpaper, but he was too hungry to let it ruin his appetite.

“Well, hey there, Billy.” Gene walked over from behind the cash register, smiling and wiping his hands on his apron.

“Mornin’, Gene,” Billy said. He chuckled as he shook Gene’s hand, breathing in the scent of coffee and maple syrup. Much nicer than the gravy scent of the café at lunch time. Billy looked up at the picture of himself on the wall behind the cash register. He was posed in full Elvis regalia.

*Record Holder: Billy ‘King Tupelo’ Buntyn*

*Record: Longest Elvis Presley Impersonation*

*Place: Okahumma, Mississippi, USA*

*Billy Buntyn performed a singing and dancing Elvis impersonation on stage for 33 hours 12 minutes 53 seconds on August 16, 1980 for the third anniversary of Presley’s passing.*

The record had been broken the following year, but the town retained bragging rights.

“Almost didn’t recognize you in those overalls,” Gene said, directing Billy to a table. “What’s the matter? Sick of the King?”

Gene had himself a good chuckle over that one. Billy widened his smile. He was starting to get sick of smiling, too.

“Well, what can I get you this morning, Billy? You want your King Tupelo sandwich?”

“Nah, I think I’ll have something else this morning, Gene. Just a good old fashioned Gene’s breakfast. If I could just see that menu...”

“If you’re tired of the King Tupelo I could do you a peanut butter and jelly and bacon,” Gene said, pressing the menu to his chest.

“Nah, I think I’ll have something else this time,” Billy said. Still smiling, he leaned up from his seat and placed a calloused hand around the corner of the menu. He attempted to pull it away, but Gene just pulled right back and continued talking over the tug-of war.

“We could fix you some fried bologna,” he said, stepping backward so the menu slipped from Billy’s fingers. Billy leaned forward and grabbed at it again. Gene pulled until it slid out of Billy’s fingers and slapped Gene in the chest, making him stumble backward a few steps.

“You know what,” Billy said, leaning backward into his seat and unfolding his napkin. “I think you’re right. I don’t need a menu. I’ll just have me an omelet with bell peppers, plenty of cheese, and a side of buttered toast.”

“Oh,” said Gene. “I can do that. I guess.”

“Thank you very m-, uh, I do thank you for that.”

Billy began to arrange his utensils on the table, then felt a fleshy hand grip his shoulder. He knew who it was without looking, and his stomach lurched a little.

“Hey-o, Tupelo,” came a voice from behind his head.

“Hey-aven, Cliff Claven,” Billy said, turning to greet his mailman, Steve Obenshain. Obenshain was the head of the Elvis Festival committee. Billy had given him the nickname Cliff Claven after the obnoxious mailman from *Cheers*. Rather than taking offense, Obenshain had grown a moustache to better resemble his eponym.

“‘Everybody knows my name.’ What are you wearing?” He tugged at the strap over Billy’s shoulder.

“Overalls,” Billy said. “Laundry day.”

“Huh,” he said, narrowing his eyes slightly. “Welp, I better go get this mail delivered.”

Steve shuffled off, and Billy licked his lips again as Gene stepped out of the kitchen with a big tray of food. Billy imagined the big, fluffy omelet that was headed his way and tucked a napkin into his overalls, readying his fork and knife.

Gene set down Billy’s plate and took several steps away from the table. Billy’s smile collapsed – It was not the omelet, but the King Tupelo sandwich – a fried peanut butter and banana monstrosity on white bread, containing one entire banana split in half and six thick strips of bacon, glued together with what looked like half a jar of crunchy peanut butter.

Billy watched a dollop of hot peanut butter gloop off of the butter drenched bread and into a smear of bacon grease. Billy felt sick. He thought of Elvis, dead on the bathroom floor. He looked up at Gene, wanting to say something, but his chest was constricted and his stomach churned, so he just looked.

“Out of aiggs,” Gene said, scuttling off toward Steve, who had not left to deliver mail as promised. Billy heard the two of them murmuring. They weren’t even pretending not to be talking about him. He saw Gene nudge Steve, and Steve shuffled in the direction of Billy’s table.

Billy’s ears rang. He slammed his silverware down on the sticky plastic tablecloth.

“I think,” he said loudly, “I done lost my appetite.”

\*

Billy devoured two McMuffins on the way to McRae's. He felt calmer with something on his stomach. *Folks can't help it – they're just afraid of change*, he thought. *Makes 'em nervous.*

He was still wiping buttery McMuffin crumbs from the front of his overalls as he stepped through the automatic sliding doors of the department store, pausing just inside the doors to enjoy the frigid blast of A/C. Billy enjoyed department stores when they weren't busy, with their crisp air and clean linoleum, and that calming Muzak.

Soon he was greeted by a long-haired, pimply-faced young man, looking rather uncomfortable in his khakis and button-down – his ex-stepson, Kevin. Billy was hoping he'd be at work.

"Hey, Billy," Kevin smiled. "What's up?" The young man had an odd accent that was equal parts *Dukes of Hazzard* and *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*.

"Hey, Kevin." Billy said. "I'm looking for me some shirts and things. How you doing?"

"Okay, I guess," he said. "Still working here at McRae's. Mom's still with that asshole."

Billy itched a little at the mention of Kevin's mom. They'd only been married two years. Billy wondered if, now that he was thinking of leaving Elvis behind, she might feel different towards him. But it didn't much matter. He still felt the same way toward her – she was an old toad.

"So, we straight up do not have any Elvis stuff in store right now, but can I interest you in some alternate items of attire?"

“Yes, you can, Kevin,” Billy said. “Just some regular old shirts, if you don’t mind. And some blue jeans, shorts, and undershorts. No Elvis necessary.”

Kevin, who was no fan of Elvis, smiled brightly. “Sweet,” he said. “Well, we got plenty of regular shirts. Follow me. You looking for anything particular?”

“Nah, just whatever’s economical,” Billy said, stepping up to a disembodied mannequin torso. “What kind of shirt is this here?”

The mannequin wore a starched white t-shirt emblazoned with a multi-colored neon hand. Billy thought the hand looked like it was motioning people to stop, but the colors looked fun and friendly.

“What does this say on here? Body Glove? It looks like one of them Op shirts Dan Stubbins wears.”

“Op?” said Kevin. “Oh! O.P. Pretty much the same thing. Want to try it on?”

“Sure thing,” Billy said. Kevin led him to a dressing room, and had soon brought over enough clothes to keep Billy busy for half an hour.

He tried on a pair of acid-washed Levi’s and a purple nylon shirt with a pattern of red zig-zags. He turned to see the effect of the Levi’s on his backside. He thought it looked like he’d tossed a used dropcloth over a couple of throw pillows.

“Not sure about these. Looks like splatter paint,” he said through the slatted door of the dressing room.

“Here, try these,” Kevin said, passing a pair of shorts over the door. Billy fingered the embroidered logo – a jumping marlin. Marlins never had to buy new outfits, he thought. They just were marlins.

As he changed, Kevin continued talking through the slats. “So dude, why *are* you looking for a new style?”

Billy hesitated, then answered in a stage whisper, “Sick of Elvis.” Saying it out loud, his heart twitched a little.

“Right on,” Kevin said. “Just all of a sudden?”

“Not exactly. I mean, I just realized it today, but it’s been a long time coming, I guess.” Billy paused to look at himself in the mirror, in the nylon shirt and his Jailhouse Rock boxers. He’d looked at that damn clock so much, the Elvises patterned on the shorts seemed to swing their little legs. “You know, Kevin,” he said. “Sometimes I guess you have to move on, you know, in life and change.”

“Right on,” said Kevin.

“You know what else, Kevin,” he said, stage-whispering again, “I think – and this conversation don’t go no farther than us, okay?”

“Kay.”

“I’m thinking of selling some of my Elvis stuff. Then I could replace it with new stuff. CD players and what all.”

“Dude, right on,” Kevin said. “I think that’s a good-ass idea. You could get some real stuff instead. And some new hobbies and listen to some new music and stuff. *And* we just got in a sweet new CD player – seven-disc changer.”

Billy slung the marlin shorts over the top of the dressing room door.

“I’ll take these ones,” he said.

He walked to the counter and piled up his new items next to the register. Kevin shoved aside a few pieces of mail to make way for them.



Billy tried not to look at the numbers on the register as Kevin rang him up. The Elvis stuff ought to bring in a pretty penny. And there'd be plenty of jobs once he placed some bids out of county.

"Wait'll I tell Mom," Kevin said, not even looking at his hands as they scanned and folded. "She's never gonna believe you ---"

"Ehm, let's keep it under wraps for now."

"Hey, you know what you should do, Billy, you should go to California and learn to surf. That's what I'm going to do when I save up some more money. I bet there's plenty of house painting jobs out in Californ-i-a. Everybody's building junk down there. Hey! Maybe you could hire me as a housepainter when I get there!"

"Hey, you know, that actually sounds kinda nice," Billy said, handing over his credit card. "Welp, thanks for helping me pick out the new look, Kevin."

"Dude, no problem," Kevin said, sliding the imprinter over the card with a soft clank. "I think it's awesome you're changing the look. I'm kinda proud of you, man."

"Thanks, Kev." Billy said. He started to leave, but turned back after a few steps. "Listen, Kev. Don't, uh... If you want to go to California, go. Don't let anything keep you back, or anyone. Just go and, and see what happens."

"Hey, you don't have to worry about me," Kevin said cheerfully. "Soon as I save up enough money, I'm outta here."

"Good," Billy said. "You don't wanna spend the rest of your life selling t-shirts to old rednecks like me." He chuckled and walked out to the dusty parking lot, enjoying the blast of summer warmth after so much A/C. He felt the pleasant weight of the bag of new clothes, nice and fresh. Good kid, that Kevin. Always was.

Billy wiped the passenger seat with an old towel before plopping his new purchases onto the vinyl, then plopping himself into the driver seat.

Rolling down the window with one arm, he cranked the ignition with the other, then paused to take a deep breath. The truck smelled like dust and oil and McMuffin, but through the open window he could also smell grass and gardenia and a whiff of rain. A cluster of dust bunnies in the gear console shifted irascibly as Billy kicked the truck into gear and pattered out of the parking lot.

Billy felt good in his new clothes. He thought he'd clean out his truck, once he got done with the house. Get rid of all the dust bunnies and bumper stickers. He leaned back to enjoy the rain smell and the whoosh of the wind. He sped up so it flapped the sleeves of his new shirt and whipped at his cheeks.

As he pulled up to the stop light on Old Hwy. 16, he saw Obenshain's mail truck in his rearview. He clicked on his left blinker, and Obenshain did the same. For the next 10 miles, every time Billy glanced at the rearview mirror he saw the hateful little mail truck bobbing around.

*For Chrissake*, Billy thought, *doesn't this clown have mail to deliver?* Billy made a left onto a gravel road. He'd take the long way home. Obenshain continued along the highway.

When Billy pulled up to his house, he saw four vehicles, including the mail truck, parked in his front yard.

"What in the holy hell?" Billy said. He stepped out of his truck and marched across the lawn without closing the door. Gathered in his front yard was what could have been an official town meeting. Along with Obenshain, there was a county supervisor

named Bilbo Welsh, his brother, Chip Welsh, who was the attorney for the county, two city councilmen, the city attorney, a woman from the town tourism board, and Phil Williams, Billy's and near everyone else's accountant.

Williams was the first to speak, walking to meet Billy halfway across the lawn.

"Billy, I told them I can't tell them anything about your finances, but let me tell you, you've got them mightily pissed off."

"My finances?" Billy said.

"They're planning on stopping you from selling all that stuff," Phil said, removing his glasses to wipe the sweat from his brow. His veins showed through his pale skin like Christmas lights through tissue paper.

"What?" Billy said.

"They might have a case for it, too. They're bringing up the payments they made on your house, and those roof repairs. I think you better get you a lawyer. An out of town one."

Billy didn't know what to think. It was true the county had made repairs on his house and paid some of his bills, but it wasn't like he'd asked them to. When he unplugged the Elvis lights on his lawn, Bilbo had come to his house and talked him into letting the county offset the power bill so they could be turned back on. They'd decided to offset his mortgage when he'd talked about moving into a trailer to save money. They said they wanted the museum to stay like it was. Billy realized for the first time that what they'd really wanted was to keep him on display along with the Elvis junk. Could he really be indebted for that? He started to sweat and his skin felt prickly and hot. Surely not. Surely, they were the ones indebted to him for opening up his home all these years.

Williams patted Billy on the back and walked to his car. Billy looked at the convention of assholes on his lawn. The sweat seemed to evaporate and his skin felt tight and dry. Pops of white light burst in his field of vision.

Chip Welsh started to walk over toward Billy, but Obenshain shuffled out in front and clapped Billy on the shoulder.

“Hey-o, Tupelo,” he said.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Billy sputtered.

“Now, don’t get upset, Billy,” Obenshain said. “We’re just here to talk. And to help you. You seem to be – you seem to have lost your way.”

“Lost my way?” Billy said, and his voice sounded loud and far away. “You sack of ---”

“Now, Billy, don’t get your panties all in a wad,” Chip Welsh interrupted.

“Panties!”

“Billy, we’re just here to iron out the particulars, that’s all,” said Chip.

“What particulars?”

“Steve tells us that he heard you’re planning on selling your Elvis collection,” Billy looked over at Obenshain. The mail on the counter at McRae’s – he’d been eavesdropping. Chip continued, “We just dropped by to let you know that to do that you’ll have to have the county’s consent.”

“So you’re telling me I can’t do it.”

“It’s all here in the official statement,” Welsh handed him an envelope.

Billy stared at it without taking it. “How’d you get this letter written so fast? How long have you had this lying around?”

Welsh ignored the question. “Billy, the Okahumma Elvis Museum --- ”

“You mean my house,” Billy said. “Just because I let people inside to look at it don’t make it a got-damn museum.”

“Billy, you know there’s more to it than that.”

“More to it than this is my home and I own it?” Billy’s temples burned. Who did these clowns think they were? He was the one who’d spent 15 years of his life building this collection. How could they tell him what’s his wasn’t his?

“Now, Billy, just listen a minute,” Chip said. “Just let me explain the situation. We have a contract. Look at the letter.”

“I don’t give a shit for your got-damned letter!” Billy spat. He couldn’t believe this was coming from Chip. A good friend, Billy had thought. But their friendship was just about the Elvis thing, he guessed all along.

“Billy, just take a deep breath and let me explain. Then you can blow up if you want to. Now, the Okahumma Elvis Museum will be declared a town landmark at Monday’s council meeting. As an official town landmark, this museum represents a public/private partnership between yourself, the Town of Okahumma, Winnemaka County, and the State of Mississippi.” Chip paused. “Billy, you didn’t build this museum all by yourself.”

“Like hell I didn’t.”

“Billy, be reasonable. You know you didn’t.”

Billy tried to blink away the white pops of light in his vision, but they persisted. He stared at his dirty boot in the grass. The lawn was green and lush because the county

had paid to lay sod out front and keep up a sprinkler system. But he didn't give two shits for a lawn. He's always been fine with dirt and pinestraw.

"For Pete's sake Billy, we built a festival after you," Chip continued when Billy didn't speak. "The county didn't have a tourism office before all this Elvis mess. Hell, a coupla people run businesses off of your, off of this museum. It brings in people from Memphis. This town counts on this museum, Billy."

A white haze grew over Billy's vision. It was Billy that people came to see and Chip knew it. It was him the town was counting on, not his collection, and a fat lot of good it had done him. Even with the county's help, his own business was barely hanging on. Why should he have to support a town that couldn't support him?

"This town may count on me, but that doesn't mean I count on it."

"Billy," said Chip. "What kind of way is that to think?"

"A damned practical one."

"Well it may be practical, but it doesn't change the fact that the county and city have a contract with you."

Billy looked up across his lawn. Half the people who controlled the town, including that horrid mailman, all people Billy knew well, and not one of them had said a word. They were leaving it to the lawyer to talk now. Obenshain looked like he was having a hard time of it, though. He was standing behind Chip, shifting from foot to foot like he had to pee.

He looked back at Chip and spoke softly.

"You told me it was okay to sign that contract."

"Billy, I thought you understood what you were doing."

“Of course I didn’t understand what I was doing, I was desperate!” The pops of white light were gone and he could see clear now – clear and bleak. He felt cold. He looked at the ground. “God damn you, Chip.”

Billy buried his face in his fingers, squeezing the bridge of his nose. Then he felt the fat hand clap onto his shoulder. No. Not him. Not now.

“Think about it, Tupelo,” Obenshain said. “All anybody wants you to do is just keep on being yourself.”

Billy looked up. “What?”

“Just think about what day it is, Billy. What kind of day is today to leave behind the King? It’s the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his de---”

“I know good and god damned well what day it is.” Billy said. “Fact, it’s a good reminder. Elvis is dead.”

“I don’t know, Billy. You know there was a sighting just a few days ago in Kalamazoo.”

Billy couldn’t see anything but Obenshain’s sausage-like lips wagging, and the spittle that stretched between their corners as they flapped. “You son of a bitch,” he yelled. “Are you making fun of me, you fatass fart-fucker?”

Billy didn’t really remember knocking Obenshain to the ground, but standing over him while he squirmed around in the grass gave him a clear enough picture.

“Get the fuck off of my lawn,” he said. And they did, all of them.

Billy went inside and leaned against the front door. Everywhere was Elvis shit and Elvis shit and more Elvis shit. He closed his eyes.

“You’re dead,” he said, and slumped to the floor. “I ain’t gonna cry.”

But he did, and while he did he thought about lots of things, like his ex-wife leaving him, his old mom dying, and dead Elvis on the bathroom floor – but mostly he thought about all the money he'd spent on his collection. What did he have? A floundering business, some credit cards, his truck, house, and Elvis shit. And the last two, the two that he could cash in, they wanted to take away.

“No,” he said aloud. “You can't have it.”

He got up and went to a drawer in his spare room, retrieved some papers – insurance, certificates of authenticity, and the like – and shoved them into a briefcase. Then he started carrying Elvis stuff out to his truck. He was going to the auction house in Memphis. If they were going to declare his stuff theirs on Monday, he'd just have to sell it before then.

Once loaded up, Billy hopped in his truck and headed away from the highway, turning onto a dirt backroad. He hadn't made it 50 feet when a set of blue lights popped up in his mirror.

“Now what,” he sighed as he came to a stop. In his side mirror he saw Hooker Ward walking up from his patrol car.

Billy leaned his head out the window. “Howdy, Hook. Keeping cool I hope?”

“Afternoon, Billy. You know your tag's about to expire next week.”

“Yep, I saw that.”

Hooker eyed the suitcase in the passenger seat. “You leaving town?”

“Just to Memphis.”

“What's in the bag?”

“Just an overnighter. Clothes, soap, toothbrush,” Billy lied.



“I heard you was planning on selling all your Elvis stuff. That true?”

God, news traveled fast. “Well, I don’t know. I’ve barely had time to think about it.”

“Mind if I look in the bag?”

“Hooker,” said Billy, “what the hell for?”

“Is that a no?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Hmm,” said Hooker. “Smells like marijuana in here. Gonna have to do a search. Step out of the vehicle please.”

“Hooker, this is something else,” Billy said as he slid out of the truck. “This is illegal as hell.” He stood with his hands in the pockets of his shorts and watched the dust float up in little poofs around Hooker’s boots as he walked around the truck, pulling a tarp from the back to reveal Billy’s stash of Elvis stuff.

“My oh my oh me,” he said as he sorted through the memorabilia. “I’ll be. This is a lot of stuff for an overnight trip where you aren’t gonna sell nothing.”

“It’s my stuff,” Billy said.

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that,” Hooker said. “Now, you get on home and don’t take none of this stuff out of town until this business gets sorted out.”

“I’m sorting it out now.”

“You don’t get to decide, Billy. Now take this stuff home,” Hooker said, and went back to his patrol car. “You drive safe now.”

Billy did as Hooker said and went home. Once there, his first stop was the phone book. He dialed, and was answered by hold music. It was “Goodbye Yellow Brick Road.” Finally, someone picked up.

“Thank you for calling McRae--- ”

“Kevin, it’s Billy.”

“Hey, B--- ”

“Listen, what’d you say to going to California with me, tonight? Help me start a new painting business.”

Kevin did not pause to consider. “I’d say hell yes.”

“What time you get off work?”

“Seven.”

“Think you can be at my house with your van and ready to go by one in the morning?”

“Yah.”

“Alright, then. Have the van already gassed up, park around back, and if you think any deputies might see where you’re going, go somewhere else and come back later.”

“Damn, dude, what’d you do?”

“Nothing illegal. Just avoiding some folks who don’t want me to leave.” Billy didn’t see any reason to tell Kevin about the contract with the city.

“Pshh. Typical. Well, I’ll see you then, man.”

Billy hung up and looked at the clock. It was just after six. That gave him seven hours to get ready. Piece of cake. It felt good to have something to do. Billy smiled and set to packing. All his most valuable stuff was already packed up, so sorting through the

rest wasn't hard. He put all the stuff he could sell in a pile, left the rest where it was.

Then he packed his real things, personal things: photo albums, papers, letters, all his new clothes.

He picked up a cassette tape that belonged to Kevin. He'd brought it over one day in an attempt to get Billy to listen to something besides Elvis and insisted on leaving it. Billy remembered thinking it was silly, how the case had a picture of skeleton on it, but the songs had nothing to do with Halloween. He stuck it in his pocket.

Among his papers he found an old father's day card from Kevin, drawn in crayon on orange construction paper. "Happy fathers day. Your the best. your fun and Mommy. love Kevin," was written beneath three stick figures. Billy looked at the card for a long time, his thumb covering the female stick figure. He didn't really think about anything, just looked at the two smiling faces in crayon and felt happy.

He put this in his pocket, too, and returned to packing. Not long after he'd finished readying his painting equipment, a white beam of light moved across the living room. Billy peeked through the blinds to make sure it was Kevin, then went out to meet him.

"Ready?" Kevin said

"Almost." Billy led Kevin into the house, handing him a brush and a half-used can of paint.

"Let's get the murals first," he said.

Kevin stared at the brush in his hand. "Huh?"

"We're going to trash the place," Billy said. "Anything with Elvis on it."

"Damn," Kevin said. "But isn't that stuff worth money?"

“Everything worth money’s in the back of the truck. The rest is just junk.” Billy didn’t explain himself further. He was doing it to spite Chip Welsh and Steve Obenshain, to imagine the looks on their faces when they saw their town landmark, but he didn’t need to tell Kevin that.

“Damn,” Kevin said. “You sure?”

“I’m damn sure.”

“Then let’s paint this shit.”

Billy started with the bedroom. He took one last look at Elvis’ giant head on the ceiling, then smeared it with a brushfull of eggshell white. He and Kevin made their way through the rest of the house, smearing paint around like a couple of unsupervised children. When they were done, Billy put his hands on his hips and surveyed their work.

“You know tonight is the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Elvis’ death?” he said.

“No way, really?”

“15 years,” Billy said. “You know what I did when I heard? I had a poster up in my living room – that one there – I lit a candle by it, said a few words. That’s how my collection started, with that poster right there.”

“Rituals,” Kevin said.

“Right,” Billy said. “Rituals.” And he walked over to the poster and slapped it with a brushload of paint.

“You ever get mad?” Kevin asked. “At Okahumma, I mean.”

“Nah,” said Billy. “It ain’t the town’s fault, really. I’m more mad at myself, for wasting so much time.”

“Me too,” Kevin said.

“You’re 19,” said Billy.

“All the same,” said Kevin. “Let’s pack up your junk and get out of here.”

\*

Kevin’s van smelled like ashes and patchouli and was littered with McDonald’s wrappers. Billy’s stuff didn’t leave much room for them to move around, but they’d be unloading most of it in Memphis. Billy figured it would take about 40 minutes to get there.

“California here we come!” Kevin said, kicking the van into gear and heading toward the highway. Billy found that he actually enjoyed the patchouli smell, and he and Kevin didn’t talk much as they rode. It was nice. Billy didn’t miss his ex-wife much, but he’d missed being a dad. He’d been a damned good dad. He had cared.

Now Billy found himself in a position to help Kevin start his life the way he wanted to. Even with everything he’d left behind, Billy had at least \$20,000 worth of memorabilia to sell, plus three credit cards and all his painting equipment. They’d do just fine in California. He was glad he could help Kevin. He’d much rather help Kevin than the county government of Okahumma. Kevin was a little goofy, but he was a real good kid.

“Hey,” Kevin said. “Which part of California are we going to, anyway?”

Billy smiled. He was about to say, “Whichever part needs a painting service,” when he saw the blue lights in the mirror.

“Shit.”

“Shit.”

“Shit, shit, shit.”

“Shit, Billy, shit. There’s weed in my sock.”

“What? Kevin, what the hell were you thinking?”

“I wasn’t,” Kevin said, pulling the van onto the shoulder. “Shit. Shit.”

“Give it to me,” Billy said.

“What? No.”

“Just do it.”

Kevin obeyed, and Billy managed to shove it down his pants just before the deputy appeared in the window. Billy was not surprised to see it was Hooker Ward. He’d probably been waiting for him the whole time. *Stupid!* Billy thought. Kevin rolled down the window.

“Evening, officer,” Kevin said.

“Billy, Billy, Billy,” Hooker said, shaking his head, not even looking at Kevin.

“Hooker.”

“This van wouldn’t be full of county owned Elvis memorabilia, would it?”

Billy hesitated. He didn’t want Hooker to search him, or Kevin. He sighed. “Yes. It’s all in the back.”

“Now, Billy, what did I tell you about running off with this stuff?” When Billy didn’t answer he added. “I’m afraid I’m going to have to confiscate it. For the time being, anyway.”

“Fine,” Billy said dryly. “Fine, just take the shit. Just take it and let me go.”

They waited on the side of the road as Hooker went through the van, removing item after valuable item of Elvis memorabilia. Billy estimated the value of each as he

watched Hooker and a younger deputy carry them to a sheriff's department van Hooker had called in. It seemed to take hours. Billy watched his vision of a comfortable new start evaporate into a simple hope of escape. He didn't know if Hooker would come up with some reason to detain him.

Hooker went back to his patrol car for a long time. Billy and Kevin did not speak. Billy just felt the white-hot sensation behind his ears and looked out at the grainy Mississippi darkness. It stretched heavily across the flat, hot Delta. He never wanted to see it again. He could only guess that Kevin was thinking the same thing.

When Hooker finally came back, he said, "You're free to go," and left without another word.

Kevin sighed in relief. Billy was less enthusiastic. He got back into the van, the dimebag still itching at his asscrack, and watched in the side mirror as the department van disappeared with his life's savings. He'd just have to let them have it, he guessed. He couldn't go back now, broke or not, and he couldn't make Kevin go back either. At least he still had his equipment and credit cards. When they crossed into the next county, Billy took the weed out of his pants and stuck it in the glovebox.

"We don't need to stop in Memphis now. Just get on I40 for California."

"Woohoo!" Kevin said. "California or bust!"

Billy smiled. "Goodbye Winnemaka County," he said, and even though he was broker than ever, he was beginning to feel better than he had in years. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the tape Kevin had left at his house.

"Hey, you wanna listen to this?" he said.

"No way! When'd you get a Dead tape?" Kevin said. "Right on."

Billy stuck the tape in the player, and a cheerful, jangly hook burst through tinny speakers. Billy liked it. He felt good, like they'd be fine. Like lots of people lived off credit cards from time to time. Like there'd be plenty of work in California. He liked the beat, and the playful organ and guitar that meandered over it. Then the vocals kicked in.

*Truckin', got my chips cashed in,*

*Keep truckin', like the doo-da man,*

*Together, more or less in line.*

*Just keep truckin' on-oh-on.*

"Hey, I like this," Billy said.

"It's the best," said Kevin.

"Seems to fit the situation, don't it? Who'd you say it is?" Billy asked.

"Grateful Dead," said Kevin.

"I didn't know you listened to this kind of music," Billy said. "I thought you listened to Von Jovi or Von Halen or something."

Kevin wrinkled his nose. "No way. I like the Dead, Allman Brothers, that kind of stuff."

Billy listened to another couple of measures. "I guess I like that kind of stuff, too."

"This is nothing. You should see them live," Kevin said. "Or so I'm told."

"You know what," Billy said. "Maybe I will. I think I could really get into these guys."



[BLIP]

Freeyu was the first to notice the odd-looking creature. First, a faint electromagnetic fluctuation; then, a clear structure of visible light – that is, shapes.

The creature would have been easy to miss, it was so very quiet. It hovered without direction, adrift in a naked patch of space. Freeyu at first thought it was rock or debris of some sort and approached only to catalog it; but once in close range, there could be no denying it was a creature. Something with a purpose.

Deliberate, yes. But funny-looking, like it had been slapped together. There was a shoddy-looking metal dish with a faceted glass sphere at its center. The bottom of the dish was affixed to a hexagonal box from which sprang a dozen spindly antennae in varying sizes. In the middle of the sphere was a thick antenna with a transparent cap of a material Freeyu had never seen before.

The most remarkable thing about this creature was that it was unaccompanied. It must be so lonely, Freeyu thought, floating out here with no one to talk to. She had never seen anyone traveling through space alone. Freeyu, who was a Keltian, would die without her flock. This creature was more than just away from its flock; it was away from everyone. Strange indeed. Freeyu approached it carefully.

She sent it a burst of microwaves, but the creature did not return the greeting.

She tried emitting some ultra-violet light, then some infrared, but these also went unanswered.

She emitted a pattern of sound, which was encoded and carried over ribawaves.

“ShhhhKeeyop-EEEP-EEEP-EEEP-zhkszhhhhYAHT-Freee-yu,” Freeyu said.

This was the Keltian way of saying, “Hello. Are you in need of assistance? I would like to be your friend. I am Freeyu.”

It was a nice enough greeting, but there was no response. She tried the message again, this time using radio waves as the carrier. She waited a moment.

It worked.

“Blip,” said the creature, at the same time emitting a faint, short burst of red light from the odd capped antenna

This, Freeyu reasoned, must be the creature’s name.

“Blip,” Freeyu said, emitting her own red light. “Freeyu.”

“Blip,” Blip said again.

Freeyu moved closer. Blip could not communicate efficiently. He – she decided it seemed like a he – must be in need of repair.

“Shooo-ah-FLEEEEP,” Freeyu said. “Come with me. We can help you.”

Cautiously, she uncoiled one of her arms – a long, flexible metal appendage, which had been tucked beneath her hull– and extended it toward Blip. When Blip didn’t react, Freeyu coiled the wiry arm around him. He was colder than she’d expected. She talked to him as she towed him back to the flock, gliding effortlessly through space despite the extra cargo

“Don’t worry,” she said along the way. “EEEyo.”

#

The Keltians are living metal creatures. They occur in nature – no one builds them or programs them. They are proper creatures, and pretty ones, too, with shiny copper and

silver colored hulls. They are space nomads, and thought to be unique as such. Most of their time is spent in free space, where they travel from star system to star system, adding to their vast catalog of the contents of the galaxy. They often enter atmospheres to search for resources, collect knowledge, or mate. Their shapes are aerodynamic, with sleek curved sides coming to a point in the front, and they are often mistaken for spaceships or airplanes. Their hulls are composed of smoothly fitted panels which open to free their appendages and an assortment of sensors, to make their insides accessible for repair, and to incubate their young on the rare occasions of reproduction.

They exist in groups, which they never leave, moving as a flock. It is thought that individuals cannot survive outside the flock. Although this remains largely untested, it seems likely that, at the very least, a lone Keltian would eventually run out of the resources that keep it alive. Within the flock, Keltians can live indefinitely.

Freeyu had to fly off from her flock in order to inspect Blip, and she now tugged him along hurriedly in order to catch up. The flock would not leave her, but there was always anxiety when they weren't quite near. She was also worried about her new friend. He was curiously unresponsive. She sent him question after question, but he only ever said his name, "Blip." He also seemed paralyzed, not following her when she let go, giving no resistance when she pulled him along. He was so broken, he was as much like an object as a living creature. It would be difficult, but Freeyu was sure that together, the flock could repair him.

She emitted a message for the flock as she moved through empty space: "Sick person coming."

She found them waiting where she had left them, at the edge of a red giant star system with three gaseous planets and one icy moon. As they approached, Blip continued to emit and blink in steady rhythm.

“Kshhheyoo-blip – Mmpmmpshop,” she said. “That’s right, you are Blip. We’ll be with friends soon!”

Freeyu was not altogether surprised to find her friend Shhkkz waiting for her outside the heliosphere, there to warn her that she was in trouble for going out of bounds. It wasn’t the first time he’d done so. “Zeeop is not happy,” he said. “What have you been doing?”

“She won’t be mad once she sees what I found.”

Shhkkz hadn’t mentioned the spindly creature tethered to Freeyu, floating now a few feet above the crown of her hull, but he could not have failed to notice. Blip was as large as any Keltian.

“What is it?” he said.

“I don’t know,” said Freeyu. “Something new. An alien.”

“Is it dead?”

“I don’t think so,” she said. “I think it’s just broken.” They paused just to stare at this strange creature. The light from the enormous star cast his hull in deep orange, making it look rusted. The largest of the gas planets twinkled bright violet behind him, looking tiny in the distance. Next to it, Blip’s red antenna light blinked softly.

“Blip,” said Blip. “Blip ... blip ... blip ... blip.”

“See,” said Freeyu. “It keeps emitting that radio signal and blinking.”

“He’s beautiful,” said Shhkkz, gliding forward to touch him. “Cold.”

They flew into the star system together, and most of the flock took immediate interest in Freeyu's new friend. The shiny creatures surrounded them, bumping softly against Freeyu and making scan after scan of Blip.

"These are my friends," Freeyu told him with radio waves. "We're going to repair you. You can stay with us so you won't be alone."

Even Zeeop, the flock executive, examined the creature with awe. She did not stop watching him as she spoke. "You're right, Freeyu – we are your friends. So why did you endanger us again by going out of bounds?"

"I'm sorry Zeeop. It's just that I picked up the signals Blip was emitting, and I couldn't just ignore them could I?"

Freeyu did not mention that she was already quite out of bounds when she'd found Blip.

"It's not only yourself you endanger when you go out of bounds."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"If anything had happened here, we wouldn't have been able to reach you. If you had been gone longer, someone would have had to go looking for you. What if this thing had been dangerous?"

"I know."

"If we'd had to flee..."

"But we hardly ever have to flee. And look what happened – I found something important."

"Yes, you did," Zeeop said. "But you shouldn't have gone after it alone. It could have been dangerous. I wish you would consider things more carefully, Freeyu."

“I’m sorry,” Freeyu said, but her mind was already elsewhere. She burned to know what kind of creature Blip was. She’d never had anything interesting to bring back to the flock before – and now she’d just happened upon a creature living in free space. Who was he? Where had he come from? Why was he all alone and how did he come to be so broken? She thought of him already as a friend. She wanted to show him to her friend Kitz, a planetary surveyer who knew more about alien life forms than anyone else in the flock.

“Where’s Kitz?” she transmitted to the flock at large.

“Still collecting samples on the planets,” answered Shreeah, the leader of the engineering crew. “Should be back soon.”

Freeyu followed Shreeah to the engineering area they had set up just outside the orbit of the icy moon, where Shhkkz and six more engineers now surrounded Blip, unrolling their arms to feel and measure him, prodding him with their antennae. They stopped all their other work as they converged on Blip. A Keltian they had been repairing floated nearby. His nose panel was wide open, revealing a small blue crystal encased in smoky gas and a web of silvery metallic threads. Every Keltian had a heart crystal – it was their life source, like water, and the reason they went from star system to star system. They were miners. Freeyu tried not to look. It made her feel uneasy, exposed.

“Hello, I’m still half-broken over here!” the Keltian called out to the engineers.

“Oh! Sorry!” one of them said, rushing over.

“Okay, everyone better get back to what you were doing,” Shreeah said. “I’ll take stock of this new artifact and we’ll pick teams later.”

The other engineers scattered – they had work to do – but Freeyu hung around to watch Shreeah examine Blip. She was focused and methodical, going over him bit by little bit. Freeyu would have been eager to get under his panels right away, but Shreeah made careful note of all Blip’s external features, spending the longest time just hovering nearby, recording the signals he was emitting. Freeyu tried to ask some questions, but Shreeah shushed her, so she waited, growing more uncomfortable with each passing moment.

Finally, Shreeah spoke. “Hmm,” she said.

“Hmm?” Freeyu asked. “Hmm, what?”

“Freeyu, this is a really weird little guy you brought us,” as much to herself as to Freeyu.

“Really? What did you find?” Freeyu said. Shreeah was about to figure out what Blip was and how to fix him, Freeyu was sure.

“This is very interesting.”

“What’s interesting?”

“He’s emitting radio waves in that direction, but there’s nothing over there.”

“There must be something,” Freeyu said.

“The nearest system is six times out of range.”

Freeyu focused in the direction Blip was emitting – the same direction she’d brought him from. She shut down her sound and light sensors so she could direct all of her attention to her long distance sensors. She searched as far as she could reach for microwaves or radiation or magnetic fields. There was nothing but empty space for as long as she could sense.

“It’s curious,” Shreeah said. “I figured he came from the star system we’re in now, but that seems unlikely since he doesn’t try to communicate with it at all. And there are no star systems or comets or anything in the direction he does communicate. He’s just emitting signals off into empty space.”

“Kind of like us,” Freeyu said.

Freeyu had assumed Blip came from a star system, too. But if he hadn’t, maybe the Keltians had finally found another species of space nomads, like themselves. This was something they’d always looked for, but never really expected to find. Maybe Blip even had a flock of his own, out in that distance. And Freeyu was the one to find him – and not just find him, but rescue him. *That*, Freeyu thought, *would really be something*.

Then something wonderful happened to Freeyu; a bubble of static electricity erupted from inside her. It surrounded her, filling her from hull to core with a biting sort of tingling. Shreeah did the same thing, and her bubble overlapped with Freeyu’s, creating a current of shared excitement.

Most creatures have a subtler way of capturing the same sentiment: by making eye contact.

Freeyu reached an arm toward Blip and coiled it loosely around his middle. He clanked lightly in her embrace.

“Cousin!” she said, forgetting to use radio waves and using Keltian ribawaves instead. “We will help you find home!”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” Shreeah said, but the orb of static still surrounded her. “He’s broken. He could just be sending his messages the wrong way.”

“But maybe he’s sending them the right way!”



“Freeyu, don’t get overexcited.” Shreeah said. “You always get overexcited and make a fool of yourself. Think about Tau Ceti.”

Shreeah was right – Freeyu had made a fool of herself on Tau Ceti. She’d wasted a lot of the flock’s time and energy reserves when she thought she was going to find a legendary moon called Io, which was supposed to be full of heart crystals. When no one believed she could find it, she snuck away to prove them wrong, but wound up proving them right instead.

Shreeah was right to tell her not to get too excited. She tried to clear her mind by centering her awareness on the hard facts of the moment. She felt the cold of space, watched the radiation and microwaves from the nearby star, and felt calm. But as she let Blip drift back into her awareness, she couldn’t keep the excitement from coming back, too. Maybe the signals meant nothing – but maybe she really had found a cousin! She had finally done something important. And she had a new friend.

*Stop it, she thought. For now just think of how to repair him.*

*And behind that, in the back of her mind, and when he’s repaired he will tell us about his flock!*

#

Keltian flocks are the most prolific travelers known to exist, a habit made necessary by their need to mine planets for fuel. As they travel, each flock keeps extensive records of their findings, and the species has to date catalogued the content of 4,738 unique star systems. They have discovered millions of creatures living in nearly every type of environment, from comets and moons to gas pockets and star’s coronas.

The planets most likely to harbor life, they have found, are warm planets of rock with methane atmospheres. They are more interested in these and other rock planets, however, for their mineral content, and the catalog is kept mainly with the potential for crystal formation in mind.

By the time Kitz and the other surveyers returned from the planets to report that no heart crystals were found, Shreeah and her crew had learned a good deal more about Blip.

Most importantly, they learned Blip gathered energy the same way they did – from stars. But while the Keltians collected enough energy to propel themselves through space at faster than light speeds, Blip barely collected enough to power his sensors.

Blip, it was determined, was not a space nomad, and likely not intelligent. Even Shreeah now saw him as no more interesting than any other broken creature she'd tried to repair. Freeyu alone held on to the idea that he might prove to be like them, if only they could fix him.

The arrival of the survey convoy elevated her hopes. The only life the convoy found was biological, and even that was just bacteria.

“So, there wasn't even the slightest sign of metallurgical life there?” Freeyu asked Kitz a fourth time.

“No. Just rocks and lava,” he said.

“Nothing on the planets or the sun or anywhere.”

“Right,” said Kitz. “But Freeyu, that might not mean anything.”

“It means Blip didn't come from there.”

“No, it just means we don’t know anything more about where he comes from than we did be---”

“It means he didn’t come from there. He’s a long way from his flock. He must be very brave, to survive alone like that.”

Keltians, when interrupted, have a defense mechanism to prevent themselves being interrupted again, and Kitz used it now. Instead of talking to Freeyu with sound and light, in the usual way, Kitz sent her a message to be decoded all at once, so there was no time to interrupt. His message said three things:

“Be patient. See what engineering finds out.”

and

“You are making a fool of yourself.”

and

“I love you.”

Freeyu sent a message to Kitz:

“Love you too. Friends forever.”

and

“Jerk.”

She drifted to the repair area, where Shreeah was working alone on Blip.

“Oh, Freeyu, you’re back,” she said without turning away from her work. One of her arms was uncoiled and holding open a panel on the front of Blip. Inside, a bunch of different sized wires were attached to a sheet of that strange material Freeyu had noticed earlier. Some of the wires were sheathed in the material themselves. It was entirely unlike the inside of a Keltian, which was smooth and shiny and pretty.

“He’s so ... alien,” Freeyu said.

“No kidding,” Shreeah said. “What *is* this stuff?”

“If we can fix him, maybe he can tell us,” Freeyu said.

“I not sure we *can* fix it,” Shreeah said. “I’m not even sure what it is. I’ve never repaired anything even remotely like it.”

“But that’s all the more reason to try,” Freeyu said. “We should learn about him.”

“I could study this creature for a lifetime and never learn how to repair it, or even if it’s in need of repair. Maybe it’s just like this.”

“Just like, what, dumb?”

“Well, yes,” Shreeah said.

Freeyu felt a tiny point of heat well up at her center. Every time she found something really fascinating, something that might be special, the flock would find some way to make it ordinary. Just catalog it and move on to the next star. What was the point, Freeyu wondered, of knowing about something when you’re only going to leave it behind forever. She wouldn’t let them make it ordinary this time. Blip was too special to abandon. Blip could teach them about everything – the universe, themselves, where everything came from, what it was all for. They couldn’t give up his repair just because it was hard.

“If he’s just like that,” Freeyu said, “just dumb, that would mean he’s not broken.”

“Maybe not.”

“Well, if he’s not broken, that means his signals are being emitted in the right direction after all,” Freeyu said.

Shreeah considered a moment, then said, “But the point is that we can’t tell if it’s broken or not.”

“Either he’s not broken, and his signals are going in the right direction, meaning there must be something out there receiving them – or he is broken, and could be anything, intelligent or powerful or anything, once he’s repaired.”

“You’re missing the point,” Shreeah said. “It doesn’t matter if he’s broken or not. We still can’t do anything with him.”

Freeyu drifted toward Blip. He had not stopped emitting his signal. “Blip ... blip ... blip ... blip ... blip ... blip.” It had a pleasant rhythm. Freeyu wasn’t convinced by her own argument that he was either broken or emitting signals in the right direction – she was sure he was both, and that he had a flock, and that they were looking for him. He was more than special. She watched him, his red light blinking, his radio waves traveling to nowhere in precise intervals. However lost and far he was, however broken, he hadn’t stopped communicating with his flock. She admired his dedication. She imagined it was paired with courage – it must have taken great courage to venture so far alone.

“We’re going to try to find out what these unusual materials are made up of,” Shreeah said. “We’ll let you know when we do. I promise.”

“Thanks.”

And then Shreeah said something that all Keltians say to one another: “Love you.”

“You too.”

This was a goodbye, but Freeyu hung where she was.

“You’re not going?” Shreeah asked, not unkindly.

“I’d like to stay with him,” said Freeyu. “If you don’t mind.”

Shreeah took a moment to answer. “No. I suppose I don’t mind.”

Freeyu did not move for a long time. She watched Shreeah. Her blue spotlight, pointed at Blip’s dingy frame, looked violet in the light of the red giant. Freeyu switched her visual to infrared, making Shreeah into a little purplish dot and Blip into a smaller, blinking one. The star loomed violently red behind them. Despite what Shreeah had said about Blip being unfixable, Shreeah worked diligently. Freeyu knew she would do so even if no one was watching – that was why she was put in charge of engineering. Freeyu wasn’t in charge of anything. She was a scout, one of many, whose job was simply to fly around and look for things. This was the first time she’d ever found anything unexpected. Blip. A brave and lonely little creature, always calling out to his flock, never ceasing even when irrevocably broken and completely alone. She watched him; all the time Shreeah worked on him – removing panels, pulling out and replacing wires, blasting him with heat and cold – he never stopped sending his message. Always in the same rhythm.

After a long while, Freeyu felt a warm presence hovering at the edge of her wing. She knew without checking that it was Kitz.

“Freeyu, you should take a break from this. Let’s go over to the star, soak up some radiation.”

“No, thanks, Kitz. I appreciate it, but I’ll stay here.” Freeyu answered without diverting her attention from Blip.

“Come look at the samples we collected from the planets.”

“No thanks.”

“Go and finish your scouting mission. I’ll come with you.”

“No.”

“Fine.”

“Love you.”

“You too,” said Kitz, and he floated above Freeyu without speaking. He stayed for quite a while, watching Shreeah and Blip. Freeyu wondered if he could see in Blip what she saw, if only he watched long enough and hard enough. Eventually, Shreeah approached them, and it seemed to Freeyu as though she were rising out of some cloud.

“Our analysis of that material had interesting results,” she said. “It’s organic in origin – it’s made of petroleum.”

“What’s petroleum?” Freeyu said.

Kitz answered. “It’s carbon. It comes from planets, usually, when organic matter is compressed for a period of time.”

“Well, what does that mean?” Freeyu said.

Shreeah answered. “I don’t know.”

“It means you’ll keep studying him,” Freeyu said.

“Yes,” said Shreeah.

Shreeah zoomed off to find her superior, and Freeyu turned to Kitz, “If that stuff comes from a planet, does it mean Blip does, too?”

“Maybe,” Kitz said. “That’s one thing it could mean.” Freeyu thought of the broken Keltian with his nose panel open, his heart crystal exposed, a crystal they’d extracted from a planet.

“It means he’s like us,” she said. “He’s made out of something he mined, just like us! I knew it! I knew he was like us!”

“It seems possible,” Kitz said.

She bumped lightly against Kitz and then sped over to Blip and flew several circles around him. “I knew it!” she cried. “We’re not alone!”

#

Re-energized, Freeyu hung around and chattered non-stop as Shreeah continued to work on Blip.

“When I first found him, I sent all kinds of signals at him, but the only one he responded to was sound over radio,” Freeyu said.

“Yes, you told me,” Shreeah said.

“If only we could help him to talk,” Freeyu said.

“Indeed,” said Shreeah.

“Then he could just tell us how to fix the rest of him.”

“If only.”

“Can you try to fix that first?”

“Believe me, if I knew which part of him could tell me what the hell I’m doing, that’s the part I’d be working on now.”

“I wonder what he’s feeling right now,” Freeyu said. “Is he conscious, do you think? Is he holding on to some little piece of consciousness? He must be. That’s what’s allowing him to keep calling to his flock.”

“It could just be automatic,” Shreeah said. “A defense mechanism that kicks in when you break. Some creatures have that sort of thing.”



“We don’t though,” said Freeyu. “What are you finding in there? Aren’t there any parts that seem more likely to be broken?”

“No,” said Shreeah, “and, Freeyu, don’t be angry with me, but I still think it’s possible he’s not broken, and this is all it’s supposed to do – just emit out into nowhere. Maybe the signals help it find energy sources, like sonar or something.”

Freeyu hovered closer to Blip and stayed very still. She wanted to feel every kind of signal, any kind of vibration or emission, that might be coming from Blip – anything that could help her prove Shreeah wrong. There was nothing. But Shreeah was wrong. She knew it.

“That’s one hypothesis,” Freeyu said. “But I think it’s more likely he’s intelligent. Don’t you?”

“I have to be honest with you, Freeyu,” Shreeah said. She meant it literally. Keltians could sense when a member of their flock was lying. “I really don’t think it is. The more I look at its insides, the more I think they’re working exactly as they should.”

“But if that’s so, then where did that strange material come from?”

“The petroleum? I don’t --- Wait a minute.”

“What? What? What is it?”

“This is interesting.”

“What? What’s interesting?”

Shreeah did not answer, but uncoiled an arm and wove it down into the center of Blip. She spoke with incredulity. “I think there’s a message in here.”

“What?”

Shreeah shoved her arm in a little further, and a bright blue light skittered up her arm and through her hull, into her center, her heart crystal. Shreeah's copper body glowed white. She was thrown backward. She stopped moving. Her arm was limp, floating awkwardly above her. Her hull stopped glowing. It was the wrong color. It didn't shine.

"Shreeah?" Freeyu said. "Shreeah?"

There was no answer.

"Shreeah are you," Freeyu made the tiniest motion forward. "Shreeah, are you alright?"

There was still no answer.

"Shreeah!" Freeyu sent out her alarm almost automatically – a column of light and static electricity, like lightning, flashing in rhythm. Each time the alarm flashed, it was followed by the soft sound of Blip, still sounding as steadily as ever. "Shreeah!"

Freeyu shot over to her friend and threw open her hull. It was cold. Inside, Shreeah's blue crystal looked very wrong. All the gas around it was gone, and it had taken on an unnatural opacity. The web of silvery tubes was melted. *Melted*. Freeyu didn't understand how it could be. Their whole bodies worked to protect the crystal. Their cores stayed at a constant temperature. How could Shreeah's have *melted*? This wasn't just death, this was a horrible death. Shreeah was mutilated.

"Shreeah," Freeyu said. She uncoiled her arm and reached for her friend's, trying to fold it back into place under the burnt-out hull. She couldn't stand the way it was just free-floating. She coiled and folded and shoved it, but she couldn't get it to go away, and

she hated how cold it was. Her alarm would not turn off, and her panic escalated to its pitch. “Please,” she cried to the milky crystal, “don’t let this be.”

She remembered what Zeeop said, “What if this thing had been dangerous?” Freeyu thought she was bringing home something special, but had she actually brought home something malicious? She looked at Blip. He floated passively, one panel still open, the rhythm of his signals unbroken. No, she decided, he wasn’t malicious. He was simply broken. This was an accident.

She tried to look at Shreeah again, but found she couldn’t. She was horrified by what she had done. No, by what Blip had done. *No*, she thought, *by what happened. It wasn’t done. It happened.*

“Shreeah,” Freeyu said. “My friend, my friend. I’m so sorry. I’m so, so sorry.”

The rest of the flock quickly gathered in response to Freeyu’s alarm, and they each set off their own alarm – an involuntary response – upon seeing what had happened to Shreeah. It was a false sound, transmitted in code because real sound can’t travel in space. The Keltians’ decoded it into something they could hear. It was sound that didn’t vibrate or resonate or take on any richness of tone. The alarms didn’t interact with each other to create harmonics or dissonance. Instead, they just piled and layered into a schizophrenic blitz of high-pitched noise. *It’s all inside my head*, Freeyu thought, *and I can’t turn it off.*

Freeyu listened to the 1,023 alarms in her head and tried to pick out the sound of her own, but she couldn’t. She wanted to turn off the sound, but her body wouldn’t do it, not when alarms were going off. Survival. She wanted to turn off everything, her whole consciousness, but she couldn’t do that either, so she turned back toward Shreeah, turned

her attention toward her dead friend, and she would not have done it if she'd known what she would see. Another horrible thing was happening to Shreeah, or to what used to be Shreeah. The opacity that had infected her core crystal was now spreading over her entire body, like ice, and as it spread, the metal cracked noiselessly behind it. When it had covered Shreeah completely, her body broke apart at the cracks, and pieces of her floated away, one by one, leaving the opacified crystal exposed. The Keltians stared as it floated naked, still blue-white even in the light of the red giant, the big gas planet looming purple behind it. The one most precious thing, the most delicate organ, the thing that must be enshrouded and protected at all costs, broken and exposed. Freeyu felt sick at her core. "Not right, not right."

"Oh, Freeyu," Kitz's voice seemed to come from far away. "What happened? What happened?"

"An accident," she heard herself say. "She was working on Blip. She said she found something interesting ... then there was this strange light, and..."

"It was the alien," someone said. Freeyu realized everyone had been listening to her. "It's dangerous."

"It was an accident. She was tinkering. I know he didn't mean to," Freeyu found she couldn't bear the idea of Blip being blamed. They would destroy him, too. "How could he? He can't even talk."

"Accident or not, it's still dangerous," someone said.

"There are always risks when you delve into the unknown," said another. It was Shhkkz. "Shreeah knew that."

“Yes, but she can’t have known ... this,” said another voice. Zeeop. Freeyu felt cold. Zeeop would destroy Blip. Shreeah and Blip would both be dead. And for what?

“No, but ...” for a moment Shhkkz was silent, and Freeyu thought he wouldn’t be able to go on, but finally he spoke, “but she knew there could be horrors beyond our imagining, risks.”

“But this is not a risk worth taking.” Zeeop said. “There will be no further examination of the artifact.”

“But, Zeeop,” Freeyu said, and she found it incredibly hard to speak or to do anything besides stare in horror at the pieces of Shreeah floating through space. “He could be like us. This isn’t just some new type of rock or an interesting piece of vegetation or something. Blip is special. We can’t just give up.”

Freeyu tried not to think about her last conversation with Shreeah. She hadn’t thought he was special. But she had to be wrong, or she had died for nothing.

“But we *can* just give up, Freeyu.” Zeeop said. “I’m very sorry, but we are.”

“But Zeeop, please, just take some time to think about it.”

“I don’t need to,” Zeeop said. “Look around you.”

Freeyu did. She looked at the bits of floating metal, at the destroyed crystal, revolting, at the confused flock, many of whom still had bright white alarm light issuing from their crowns, and she couldn’t think of anything to say.

“This artifact is officially condemned,” Zeeop said. “The council will meet to discuss arrangements for Shreeah’s remains. After the artifact is destroyed, the flock will proceed to the next star system.”

“Zeeop, please,” Freeyu said.

“I’m very sorry, Freeyu,” said Zeeop. “I love you.”

#

Shreeah’s remains, or what could be gathered of them, were encased in ice and left on the frozen moon. Freeyu didn’t tell anyone, not even Kitz, what Shreeah had said just before she died. That Shreeah had thought Blip didn’t have a consciousness, that she didn’t expect her investigation to be worthwhile, this was Freeyu’s secret. It was the first secret she’d ever had. Everyone could tell she had one, but no one asked what it was.

She was allowed not to participate in Blip’s destruction. It was carried out with utmost care. The Keltians surrounded him, forming a giant spherical net. Together, they emitted precisely tuned ribawaves, all of the wave signatures coming together to form a magnetic dissonance with Blip at its center. His frame shook for a moment, then popped open, his pieces spreading symmetrically into space.

The flock scattered as the pieces dispersed. In the moonlight, some of them looked a little like stars, Freeyu thought. She could feel nothing but cold.

She longed to reach out and gather the pieces, tell him it would be okay, she knew he didn’t mean to hurt Shreeah, and she would fix him someday. They would find his flock someday.

“Freeyu.” It was Kitz. “We’re leaving.”

“No, I’m not leaving him.”

“Freeyu, try not to think of it as a him. I know you didn’t want it to be, but it was just a thing...”

“That’s the easiest thing to think,” Freeyu said. “It’s easier than thinking you’ve killed a person.”

“It killed Shreeah. Our friend. A *real* person”

“Blip didn’t kill her. She just was killed. An accident.”

“And what if it was an accident? There might have been more accidents.”

Freeyu looked at the dull bits of metal, the bits of Blip, floating where the bits of Shreeah had been not long ago.

“Just before it happened,” she said. “Shreeah said she saw something interesting. I’m going to find out what it was.”

“Freeyu, they’re leaving without you,” said Kitz. “You’ve scared everyone, keeping secrets, and we all want to get away from here.”

“I know. I’m staying. No one but you will mind.”

“Freeyu, this is a lost cause.”

“For you it is.”

“They’re almost out of range.”

“Goodbye, Kitz,” she said. “Love you.”

“I can’t let them get out of range,” he said. “I won’t be able to find them again.”

“Then you should hurry.”

“Don’t stay,” he said. “I can follow them, and then you can follow me.”

Before Freeyu could answer, Kitz was gone.

#

Keltians travel at six times the speed of light. Since they are able to move away from each other so quickly, it is necessary that they have extremely long range sensors which they use to identify each other by microwave signature. These enable individual Keltians to move freely without breaking up the flock. A Keltian can go quite far from its flock, so long as there is one flock member in range. There have been occasions of Keltians traveling nearly four times outside of range, with three other flock members between the individual and the main group. This is known as a Keltian Chain.

It was just such an arrangement Kitz was hoping to make with Freeyu as he hovered in scant space that allowed him to stay in range of both the flock and Freeyu. Freeyu, however, was focused on Blip.

She watched his pieces float and mentally cataloged each one she saw. When she was ready, she had decided, she would gather them all and arrange them by similarity. She would put them together over and over again until they fit together in the shape of a Blip. And if that didn't work, and if she got too lonely to bear, she would take Shreeah's remains and fly into that sun. Maybe in death there would be knowing.

She would start work soon. But not right now. Right now, her flock was leaving her, and it took all her concentration to fight the urge to follow. The urge was physical, a deep tugging sensation. She had told no one goodbye.

Freeyu scanned the vacuum. Kitz's signal was thin, but still there.

"Freeyu," it said.

The signal was gone. She was really, really alone. But she had Blip.

"Goodbye, Kitz," she said, and it seemed to be coming from outside of her, far away. She knew he couldn't hear her. Then she said, "Blip." It felt like the right thing to



do, to blip. “Blip blip blip blip blip.” If she continued long enough, another Blip might pick it up. She could keep at it. She need never stop.

## BLACK-EYED SUSAN

*Gulf of Mexico. 1868.*

Raphael Shaw stuck a little wad of tobacco into his mouth and wet it before pushing it into his pipe. It burned slower that way, soaking up the sticky residue from this morning's opium madak. He took a puff and gazed out at the water, which sparkled in the sunlight. The breeze was warm and humid and smelled like salt. The ship cut into the waves smoothly and steadily. It was a good day.

He had taken all his money and bought the ship when he was 33 or 34. It was a stupid thing to do, in most respects. He had to sink endless dollars into upkeep, and would likely have to work until he was dead.

But it was worth it. It was *his* ship, and his home.

And there were ways to make it more profitable. Today, he sailed toward port New Orleans with two tons of Turkish black tar opium underfoot. He sat at the bow and twirled the now-spent pipe around in his grimy fingers, watching the glints of sunlight play on the crests of the waves, feeling the sea rock him back and forth.

He relaxed the muscles around his eyes and let the glints of light blur and grow. He leaned back and smelled the sea, thinking of his father's old campfire stories, and slipped off into daydream. He was a mer-man, a sea-king, master of the ocean, darting to and fro with his trident, spearing fish and sea urchins to carry home for a feast. All the mer-women and mer-children gathered to thank him, but no thanks was needed, and he dove into the currents to be carried off on a joyride.

Then, he changed. He was a shark on the hunt, the blood scent filling his brain, sweet and fragile as rose petals. He pursued it on and on, maneuvering the freezing

waters, down into the pitch-black depths, then back up through a collection of ice fragments where he found his reward – an injured baby seal. The seal could not escape. He devoured it slowly, savoring every bloody, blubbery mouthful, making the fat squeak between his rows of pointed teeth.

The last bit he swallowed with a flourish of his tail. Then, shark and seal become one, he took the form of a dolphin, whistling and dancing through his own trail of bubbles, emerging to the surface in a perfect flip, then splashing back through the easy waters as he dove swiftly down and down and down.

The captain opened his eyes. The sunlight flooded his vision and, for a moment, all he could see was yellow-white. Then, little pops of black began to interrupt the yellowness, and finally the scene spilled in from the periphery. He noted what looked like rain clouds in the distance, pointed at it for a nearby crewman. He motioned to his navigator, who nodded that all was well. Sticking another small plug of madak into his pipe, just a small one, he took a puff, exhaled a smooth stream of smoke, then slipped back into his daydream, humming a little tune he'd heard a long time ago on the boardwalk.

\*\*

*Fort Banner, Mississippi. 1968.*

“Mom,” Daniel Semmes held his left ear over his bowl of cereal while his mother folded laundry at the kitchen table. “What does seal meat taste like?”

“What?” Mrs. Semmes looked up from her folding, “Why on earth do you want to know?”

“I dunno,” he said. “I was just wondering what it tastes like. No reason.”

“Well, never mind what seal meat tastes like. Just eat your Rice Krispies,” she ordered, going back to her laundry.

“One day,” he said over a mouthful of cereal, “I’m going to move to Alaska, and then I’ll become one of the Eskimos, and I’ll catch a seal, and then I’ll eat it and make a tent out of its skin.”

She looked up to raise an eyebrow.

“What?” he said. “That’s what they do. It was in *National Geographic*.”

“If you say so,” she said. “But you’re not an Eskimo, and you’re not going to be eating any seals.”

“But, I could one day, though,” he said.

“The only seals you’re ever going to see will be balancing balls on their noses at the circus.”

“Can I go to Robby’s now?”

She leaned down to inspect his bowl of cereal and found it satisfactorily eaten.

“Okay. Don’t stay in the sun too long.”

“Okay, bye Mom,” he said, and ran outside. At the door, he paused and turned, “Love you, Mom.”

Mrs. Semmes looked up, surprised, but her son was already out the door and halfway down the driveway before she could respond.

“Love you, too,” she said to the door, and smiled a little smile as she went back to her laundry.

\*

Robby was the only other boy in Fort Banner. The tiny beach community had a population of 11, including its three children and five retirees. Mr. Semmes owned the combination grocery store, liquor store, and gas station that served the vacationers who flooded the barrier island every April, while Mrs. Semmes and Robby’s mother, Mrs. Burkhart, ran a cleaning service for the stilted wooden beach cabins that were vacated every September.

The boys spent the summers complaining about the tourists, but in winter, when they all went back to New Orleans, Daniel and Robby became the kings of their natural playland. The dunes, the woods, the shore – all were theirs to explore freely.

The best place on the island was the town’s namesake, Fort Banner, an old abandoned stronghold from the Spanish-American War that had been made into a state park. It was full of old cannons and dark tunnels and turrets and was perfect for playing war.

But this Saturday Daniel and Robby chose to continue their war drama in the dunes rather than the fort. The weather was too nice to go skulking around in tunnels. It was breezy, and cloudy enough to take the edge off of the sun. They were in the middle of an intense battle when Daniel stepped into a bed of sandspurs. There was but one proper reaction to sandspurs.

“Cease Fire!” Daniel called through the warm October air. “Land mines!”

“Vietcong,” Robby yelled, running to Daniel’s side. “The bastards.”

“If they had to hit somebody, I’m just glad it was me and not any women or children,” Daniel breathed in the deepest tone his ten-year-old vocal chords could muster. He plucked two of the little burs from his tender toes and flicked them to the ground with disgust, spitting on them as they landed.

“I bet they’ll come at us with poison arrows this time,” Robby said. “We should get a move on before they find us.”

“No,” Daniel said, looking back in the direction of his house. “That’s what they’ll expect. Let’s hide, and when they get here – boom!”

They chose a spot behind a large dune and crouched in wait. In a few moments, they heard the squeak of footsteps in the sand. Robby looked up at Daniel, surprised someone was really coming. Daniel shushed him. A smirk crept across his lips, “Wait, wait, wait,” he whispered. “Now!”

Robby realized who was coming and slumped against the dune, while Daniel jumped out from the hiding place and screamed, “BAAAAA!”

He was answered by the squeal of his little sister.

“Daniel, you made me drop my samples,” she said. “Come see, I found something.”

Robby rolled out from behind the dune and pulled himself up to sit Indian style in the sand. “Hey, Susan,” he said.

“Oh, hi Robby,” She blushed and began to gather the trinkets she’d dropped in the sand.

“What kinda samples you got?” Robby asked.

“I got this,” she held out a broken piece of sand dollar, “and this,” a small, pretty-colored shell, “and this,” a bigger, slightly less broken bit of sand dollar, “and this,” she held out a small piece of dry black wood. Daniel’s eyes widened.

“What is that?” he snapped.

“Some driftwood,” Susan said. “Come look what I found.”

“Let me see that driftwood,” he said.

Susan took a step back. “Why? It’s mine. It’s for my lab.”

Daniel snatched it. He sniffed it and rubbed it with his fingernail.

“It’s all burnt,” he said.

“So?” asked Robby.

“I don’t know,” he said, shoving it in his pocket. “I want this one,” he told Susan.

“We can find you some other driftwood for your laboratory.”

Susan frowned but didn’t argue. Instead, she showed Robby her final trinket, a small yellow flower with a sticky black center.

“It’s a Black-Eyed Susan,” she said.

“Have you documented one in your log yet?”

“Yeah, but I’m gonna draw it prettier this time.”

She twirled the flower around in her fingers, and Daniel stared. The petals whirled around like little fan blades, all slow and fast at the same time. It was funny. He felt like he’d seen this flower before, a long time ago. Not one like it, but *this* one. It made him think of a song, a really old song, that he’d heard once. He started to hum. Where had he heard it? It was somewhere not home. Somewhere that smelled like rotten eggs. He stared at the flower and started to remember a few words.

*“Once hmm hmm side by side – two little maids – hmm hmm hmm pinafores – hair hmm hmm braids.”*

“Daniel ... what the hell are you doing?”

He looked up. Robby and Susan were both staring.

“What are you singing?” Susan said.

“Nothing,” said Daniel. “I wasn’t singing. Hey, let’s go to your laboratory.”

“Yes, you were,” said Robby. “You were too singing. You were singing about pinafores.”

“No, I wasn’t,” said Daniel. “Let’s go to your lab, Susan.”

“Why do you wanna go there?” Robby asked.

Daniel directed his response to Susan. “I won’t mess it up, I promise, I just want to see if you have any more driftwood.”

“What do you want to look at pieces of wood for?” said Robby.

“I wanna show you something,” Susan said. “It’s important.”

Daniel felt the driftwood in his pocket. Susan’s lab was underneath one of the stilted vacation houses. She collected all kinds of beach junk and then arranged it by type. There was tons of it. Sand dollars and starfish and other sea fauna; the various flora of the dunes, including a little pile of sandspurs; hundreds of shells arranged by shape; pieces of litter; bird feathers; and lots of driftwood. It was funny. He felt like the piece of driftwood in his pocket was *his*. Like he had a right to it, worked for it. He wanted to see if he could find more like it.

“Let’s go to your lab first,” he said.

“But I have something to show you that’s important,” she said.



“What is it?” said Robby

Susan leaned in and whispered, “It’s a pirate ship.”

Robby smiled. “Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. I found it before, but I wasn’t going to tell you about it. But now I am.”

“Let’s go,” said Robby.

“Wait,” Daniel said. “We have to go the lab first.”

“But no, Daniel, you have to see. It’s *real*.”

“Yeah,” said Robby. “The lab is boring. Let’s go find the pirate ship.”

“This way,” said Susan, and began running pitter patter toward the water. She stopped at a flat spot not far from the house fronts.

“Here it is!” she said, “Come on!”

Daniel and Robby came over to the spot, and Susan began digging around the edges of a little pyramid of burnt-looking driftwood that jutted out from the sand.

Robby dropped to his knees and began digging, too. “What is this?”

“It’s a pirate shipwreck,” Susan said. “I told you.”

The pyramid kept growing as they dug, revealing paneling still held together by rusty old nails. The bow of a ship.

“Holy smokes, Susan, this is a real shipwreck,” Robby said.

Daniel stood where he was. No, this was his. He fought off swells of vertigo. He detected a stench of smoke, heard pitiful, whining noises. His vision became clouded. His skin crawled. He shook his head, hard. The sun felt so hot and bright, and the air seemed unbearably still, even though the sky was getting darker and a strong breeze was picking

up. He checked to see if his hands were shaking. They weren't. Good. But his chest felt tight and his breathing shallow.

"Daniel. Daniel. Daniel."

Robby's voice sounded tinny and far away like a long distance phone call.

"What?" Daniel said.

"Aren't you gonna come look at this? I think it's a real ship."

Daniel did not want to come look at it. Not in front of anyone.

"Don't be stupid," Daniel said. "That's not a ship. It's just some old driftwood."

"No, look," said Robby. "When you dig, it just keeps going! I wonder how big it is."

"That's just some old busted up bits of wood," Daniel said.

"Well, you didn't seem to mind old busted up bits of wood a few minutes ago."

Robby said.

Daniel didn't have a retort, so he just said, "I'm going to the water. That's where the real treasure is."

He stood up and began to march in that direction. Robby and Susan kept digging around the shipwreck. He wanted them to leave, so he could look at the ship by himself.

He tried not to think about it and looked out at the Gulf. Some days the water at Banner Beach was beautiful and calm, a bright strip of blue green against the white sand. Today was not one of those days. The Gulf was a sickly brownish black hue, the waves choppy, the overcast sky throwing a gray shadow over everything.

Daniel stepped to the edge of the Gulf, let his toes sink into the water-softened sand. Along the shore, the water had belched up enough beach junk to fill Susan's

laboratory over and over again. Jellyfish carcasses, sand dollars, crab shells, seaweed, fish skeletons. The beach stuff spotted the water's edge as far as Daniel could see. It should have been the best day ever – a shipwreck and a beach full of sand dollars at the same time.

He grabbed a waterlogged stick and marched several yards, letting the foamy green saltwater wash over his ankles, until he reached a small tidal pool which had accumulated some shells, a couple of jellyfish, and most unusually, a live starfish. He jabbed at a jellyfish with the stick, poked the starfish with his big toe. He continued to walk, poking objects with sticks, until he got bored. He sat down on the spot, letting the water rush over his legs and waist.

For a moment, Daniel watched as the waves buried his legs with wet sand. Then, he looked out to sea and it hit him like nausea. That feeling – like he'd *been there* before.

*Of course I've been here before, he thought. I go swimming in this water every stupid day.*

But this was different. It was those same waves. This same wind. He knew he had felt this wind before. The same smell of the same salt in the same air. He stared, and he thought he could hear something from the distance – something out of place. Screams. Not like Susan's screams when he ambushed her. Real screams. Then, he felt a terrible heat. He smelled the burning wood, felt the horrible push of smoke on his lungs. He was going to suffocate.

Just like that, his life was nearly over. He thought of his parents. He would never be able to say goodbye. And Robby and Susan. Why had he been so rude to them? His only sister and his best friend. He drew a breath, knowing it would be his last.

“Hey! Earth to Daniel.”

Daniel looked up to see Robby standing over him. Of course he wasn't going to suffocate. He was in the open air.

“Daniel, aren't you going to come play? You've been sitting here for ages.”

Daniel didn't answer. He stared at the water. Something was wrong with it.

“Daniel, are you ok?”

“Robby, look at the tide. Is that right?”

Robby stared out at the ocean. The gray-green of the water was hard to distinguish from the hazy yellow-gray of the sky.

“Holy smokes,” Robby said. The tide, which had been making its slow creep inland just an hour earlier, had sunk drastically seaward, revealing yards of soggy shore.

“Is it real?” Daniel asked.

“Daniel,” Robby's voice suddenly sounded older. “Are you ok?”

“I dunno,” said Daniel.

“Maybe we should go find your dad.”

Daniel gazed at the sea for what seemed like a long while before remembering to answer. “He went to run errands in Beau Plage. He won't be back until tomorrow.”

“Your mom, then.”

“No.”

Daniel was saved from Robby's questioning by Susan, who plodded up red-faced and smiling. Her white cotton sun hat had fallen off and hung down her back, revealing her mess of dark hair. She held up a rusty nail as long as her forearm.

“It came off the pirate's ship,” she said.

“I’m going for a walk,” said Daniel. He walked off without checking if Robby and Susan had followed.

He watched his naked feet as they hit the wet sand. The rhythm of his stride was calming at first. But the easy, familiar pattern of his gait quickly became hurried, out of his control. He wanted to turn around and find Robby. Tell him that something was happening and he didn’t know what to do. But he couldn’t keep up with his own feet and he was afraid to look up. Wooden flooring whisked by beneath his toes, responding to his boot-steps with a slight bounce. A cold sweat broke upon his grimy brow. He pushed his hair – long, thick, and coarse – back onto his great square head. The tugging feeling in his chest meant it was time for another pipe of tobacco. His feet moved faster and faster beneath him until he could no longer keep up with himself. He was an exhausted man stuck on a speeding treadmill.

As he braced himself to fall, the pace mercifully slowed. The rich brown earth felt cool through his soft leather moccasins. As he sauntered along, he found he was looking for something. He was a boy again, at home in the Michigan Territory. He became aware that he was carrying something in his arms. He held out his bundle and looked at it. Sticks. He was collecting firewood.

He held one of the sticks up to his face and sniffed. The crisp scent of pine. He looked up to inspect the branches above him, but he saw only the hazy sky, and he smelled only the salt air, and felt the familiar sticky warmth and the persistent breeze. He was on Banner Beach, plodding along the shore in the wet sand. He spun around. Robby and Susan were just behind him. Robby was using the front of his t-shirt as a bucket for a

bunch of shells that clearly belonged to Susan, while Susan was chasing a little white sand crab.

Daniel watched them, trying not to think about the ship. It was here, buried in the sand, right now. But it was also out at sea, right now, out in the Gulf, not even far. And he was somehow standing in the way, standing between that man and his ship.

Right now, there was a storm picking up on the Gulf, and he was out there now, yelling out orders and tying down sails, and he was also dead for a hundred years, and he was also a little boy in the woods with his father, and he was also Daniel on a beach with what was left of his ship. The storm was there, but then it was gone for a moment, back wherever it came from, and then it was there again, and it kept flashing back and forth, and every time it came back the captain and his ship came with it.

“No,” Daniel spoke quietly. “No, it’s not real.”

He pushed the feelings away, *made* them not real, and took in a breath of perfect beach air. Beach air, he told himself, that had no trace of a storm.

Even on a gray day, Banner Beach was beautiful. Maybe not to the tourists, but it was to Daniel. He wanted to stay outside forever, be a part of the beach as much as the little sand crabs were a part of it, or the little brown birds digging for shells with their pointy beaks. He watched the shiny-stalked sea oats bend and sway in the wind, listened to the white noise of the waves and the faint sound of Robby and Susan playing somewhere nearby. He wiggled his toes to feel the sand between them. He pretended that they were his roots and he was a sea oat. *Don’t think about the ship.* Thinking, hard, about right now and his toes and the sand. *Don’t think about the storm.* He forced himself to take another deep breath. It smelled like salt air and happiness and home.

Fat raindrops began to fall pleasantly on his face. He loved a rain shower in warm weather. *Not a storm just a normal rain shower.* He closed his eyes and took a deep breath again, but this breath was different, because he could smell that same air again. He felt a jolt of panic like falling out of bed. Cold sweat. He was so scared. He could hear his heart thump in his ears. He didn't want to open his eyes. A rush of vertigo forced them open.

He was in the woods. The sun was shining, and it was biting cold. He stacked bits of tinder for a fire, whistling a tune. Papa said it was Mozart, but years later he would learn it was really Haydn.

He heard something behind him, and turned to see that he was on a boardwalk somewhere. New Jersey. A little girl sang on the street for tips. She was beautiful, with black hair and rosy cheeks and a freckled nose. Her voice was haunting. He was moved. He walked over to drop a coin in her cup, watching his boots hit the sun-bleached slats of wood as he stepped in rhythm with the song. Then, the wood turned heavy, dark and shiny. It was daytime, but the sky was dark, and he struggled to stand against the fierce winds. The rain was rapid and bit at his face like bullets.

The storm was wild and he was high as a kite and kept getting these pangs of nausea. His head swayed and for a moment it was the head of a little boy sitting on a beach in the rain. And maybe it was the opium or maybe it was the storm but he could see that they were the same person even though they were distinct, and he looked back at his crew, working furiously, and they were all the same person, too. Not even the same person, but the same thing. Him, the crew, the boy, the ship, storm, sea – all of it. Just one big thing that somehow got the idea it was different things because it grew so many

eyes. Time was nothing and he was nothing and the storm was something, and they needed to hide from it.

Panic welled in his chest. They needed to hide from it, to get to a dark, deep place. They had to secure the sails and then get below deck, else be thrown overboard. The push of vertigo and pull of nausea and the cold sweat upon his brow told him to hide. There was a swirl of black, like thick, dark smoke, and pops of light, and the directive, the compulsion, "Get below deck. NOW! NOW!"

He marched over to the main mast and reached with a shaking hand for one of the main stays. He found himself clutching a stalk of a sea oat. He was Daniel Semmes, on Banner Beach, looking at Robby and Susan, and the sand dunes and Warren pier, and the Gulf of Mexico was over there, not around him. The ship that had been beneath his feet seconds ago was gone. But the rain, the wind, and the panic remained. He stared at his two companions, wide-eyed. His face was cold with terror.

Robby stood inches from his face now, using one hand to shield his eyes from the slanted rain.

"Hey, I think there's a big storm coming. We better go home," he said.

Daniel stared. He wanted to hyperventilate, but instead he just stood there, watching his hands shake. The storm was coming. He needed to hide from it, underground somewhere. He tried to push away the feeling, but it was not just a feeling, it was an intense need beyond anything he'd ever felt and it overwhelmed him and he was sure the storm would eat them alive if they didn't find a dark, deep place to hide.

"Daniel, are you okay?" Robby asked.



Daniel closed his eyes. He opened them and he was still there with Robby and the storm.

“We have to hide,” he whispered. “Robby, I’m so scared.”

“What?” Robby said. “Dan...”

Daniel cut in angrily, “We have to hide, son, or that storm will take us.”

“Daniel, what the hell?”

“Look, if we run, we can make it to the fort in time. There’s a bunker there, down below deck.”

“What the hell are you talking about, Daniel?”

In lieu of an answer, Daniel took off at a jog, heading to the west end of the island and the fort.

“Fuck!” said Robby. It was the first time he’d ever used the word. “Susan, go home and get your mom. I’ll try to catch him.”

“No,” said Susan.

“Fuck!” he said again.

“I’m scared!” cried Susan

“Go home!” he ordered.

She just stood there, looking up at him.

“Go home, now!” he commanded, and took off at a full run after Daniel. Susan ran right after him.

Robby ran twice as hard as Daniel, who had yet to realize he was under chase, and caught up with him quickly. He grabbed him around the wrist and Daniel spun around,

losing his balance and sliding into the sand. His feet smacked into Robby's and Robby went down, too, landing on his ass. Daniel scrambled up and took off running again.

“Come on!” he yelled.

Robby caught up to Daniel and tried to grab his arm again, but he lost his footing and instead of grabbing Daniel by the wrist, he knocked him face-first, hard, into the sand. He turned to look at Robby, and he felt blood running from his nose, friction burns on his knees and elbow, mouth full of sand.

He got up and swung, hard, at Robby's face, hitting him in the jaw with the base of his palm, yelling “What the hell, Robby?”

Robby looked up, crying, and rubbed his sandy forearm across his sandy face, smearing the sandy blood everywhere. He caught his breath, yelled, “Have-you-gone-crazy-what-is-wrong-with-you?” and tried to hit Daniel back, but Daniel caught Robby's arm and kicked him full in the face. He heard Susan scream as he scrambled back to his feet, running now as fast as he could. It didn't matter. He had to get to below.

He heard Robby already up and chasing him, crying, yelling his name. He knew Susan would be behind. All the better, he thought. They needed to get to down below, too. They all needed to get to below deck right now.

Faintly, he thought he heard his mother's voice as well, calling out for them to come inside. “Mama!” he cried out softly, but he did not stop. The storm was getting dark. He ran.

It felt good to run. Easy, like running on clouds, bouncing across the sky on springy cloud trampolines. He felt like he could spear the clouds with his trident and eat

them like cotton candy. Then he could lower the trident so the bleating sheep below could bounce up and take little bites of cloud to add to their wool.

It was just over a half mile to the fort entrance. He reached it in what seemed like no time.

Robby, on the other hand, felt as though he'd been running for hours. As Daniel glided toward the entrance tunnel, giggling, Robby doubled over. His heart sank as he heard Susan clamber up behind him. He didn't think she would follow them all this way.

"Robby, I'm tired," she said.

"Shhh," he waved a hand at her. Daniel had grabbed a flashlight from their hiding place. Robby was grateful – his quarry was now carrying a beacon.

"Watch the flashlight and see which way he goes," he told Susan.

The fort was a maze of hidden rooms and underground tunnels. Above them, a high brick building made a wall around a large circular lawn. Stairs in various states of dilapidation zig-zagged around the walls of the building, leading to batteries and turrets. Smaller buildings dotted the grounds outside, including the gate house where Robby hunched catching his breath.

"Okay," he said. "Can you see where he's going?"

"That way," Susan pointed toward the main entrance to the central stronghold. "He's going in the big tunnel."

Robby took one last moment to catch his breath. He and Daniel kept a stash of supplies shelved in the eaves of the gate house. Robby stepped up onto the stone bench below and fished out his flashlight. He didn't have another one for Susan.

"Hold my hand," he said. "Don't let go unless I say so."

Susan nodded and took his hand, and they walked. There was no point running now.

The walk through the dank-smelling entrance tunnel seemed to Robby like it would never end. Susan ooh-ed and aah-ed as they trudged past every type of creepy crawly little girls were supposed to hate. Spiders crawling out from between the hundred year old bricks, frogs wallowing in the little canals that had once been used to move cannon balls. Her grip on Robby's hand loosened at the sound of mice squeaking.

“Ooh, mice!” she squeaked in kind.

Robby clamped his small fist more tightly around her tiny one.

“Pay attention,” he said. “Remember, look for the flashlight and hold my hand.”

Robby figured Daniel would be in one of the interior tunnels. The trick was to choose the right one.

The first story of the circular building was full of connecting rooms that contained the entrances to nine tunnels, each of which led to a protected underground room.

Robby decided to start with the first one to his left, then try each one going clockwise until he found Daniel. As they cleared the entrance tunnel, Robby automatically turned left, but Susan pointed straight ahead, across the lawn, and said, “Look!”

Robby looked. Daniel had not gone into a tunnel. It was hard to see, with the wind blowing rain into his face, but Robby squinted to make out Daniel and his flashlight atop the tallest turret along the southern wall. It was the look-out point.

Daniel, sharp-eyed, saw the beam of Robby's flashlight and waved both arms in the air.

“It’s coming!” he yelled. “Come on! It’s coming! We have to get below!”

All Robby and Susan heard over the wind and the distance was, “A raagh-ah! A rar! A raagh-ah! Raghar agah araagh!”

Then Daniel did something that made Robby eat his breath. There was a perfectly stable brick stairway leading back down to the lawn, but Daniel instead hopped onto a rusted old ladder that was by no means certain of holding. He was three stories up. He hung with one arm at the top of the ladder. With the other arm, he swung the flashlight around over his head, laughing.

“Daniel!” cried Robby, and he ran toward the base of the ladder, but he was helpless as Daniel made his descent.

Once he’d made it down safely, Daniel cried, “This way!” and motioned grandly for his pursuers to follow. But Robby had not forgotten why he was there. He jumped Daniel, who shoved him off and made to run. He jumped him again, grabbing him in a big bear hug from behind, locking Daniel’s arms to his sides. But Daniel was stronger. He elbowed Robby, hard, in the stomach. Robby fell off of him and doubled over. By the time he’d caught his breath and jumped up from the ground, Daniel was halfway across the lawn. Robby grabbed Susan and followed.

Daniel’s flashlight bounced into the connecting rooms. Robby cut in from a nearer entrance, and saw the light bounce into the third of the nine tunnels. That tunnel, Robby knew from many secret trips to the fort with Daniel, did not connect with any of the other tunnels, but led straight to a big underground room. All Robby had to do was go into the tunnel and walk straight, and he would catch up with Daniel.

This was easier said than done. The rooms, even with their occasional windows, were shadowy and creepy and cobwebby, like an abandoned cellar. The tunnels, on the other hand, were more like terrifying hellholes, or the secret passageways of some unhuman serial killing monster. Even in the best of times, they gave Robby the feeling he was about to stumble upon a rotting corpse. This tunnel, especially, was narrow and musty and creepy. The boys rarely used it in play, unless they needed a really, really good hiding place.

A few feet inside, the tunnel was already pitch black, save the weak beam of Robby's flashlight. He gripped Susan's hand, wishing he could stop sweating.

"Don't let go," he said. "We can walk slow."

Susan was silent, but Robby knew she was nodding her head. They took a few steps forward.

"It's too dark," Susan said.

It was cramped too, and the walls seemed to shrink as they went. Robby crouched to put some space between his head and the narrow, curved ceiling. He was sure there were cockroaches and other disgusting creatures crawling around up there. As his arms bumped into the walls, Robby wondered how grown men had ever made their way through these tunnels. Maybe they hadn't been meant for people.

The walls of this tunnel were covered in black grime so thick it was impossible to tell what they were made of underneath. There were fewer cobwebs than in the big entrance tunnel, but somehow Robby found that far from reassuring. It was as though even the spiders found this place unsettling. Perhaps it was the overwhelming musty smell, like a million dead bugs, that scared them away.

Still, the worst part by far was the floor. Oh, how Robby wished he had worn shoes. The floor was - Robby tried not to think about it as he walked - it was squishy. The floor had been a little slick the last time Robby had been in the tunnel, but now it was downright slimy. It was like walking on a bunch of algae. Each step sent a shock of nausea up his spine. Maybe it *was* algae, Robby thought. Or maybe it was a bunch of dead spiders. He wasn't about to point his flashlight down and find out. He kept it pointed straight ahead, kept a tight grip on Susan, and tried not to look at or think about what was immediately around him.

Finally, Robby heard the footsteps of his quarry ahead, moving at a regular pace.

Robby kept the same, pushing through the dankness that had grown so thick he felt like he could touch it. There was no hint of the outside in the air anymore. He wondered if the storm would pass soon. He thought about his mother, and Mrs. Semmes. What would they do when they discovered their children were missing in a storm? Would they call the police? Would Mr. Semmes organize a search party? What if his mother was out in the weather looking for them right now? These thoughts were interrupted by Daniel's shout.

"We made it!" His voice cracked maniacally.

"I wanna go back now," Susan pulled at Robby's arm.

Robby tugged her along as he kept forward, and in a few moments, they were with Daniel in a room at the end of the tunnel. The room was much larger than the tunnels, but almost identical in every other respect. There were still squishy floors and grimy walls, but the ceiling was several feet higher, and the walls were wide enough for Robby to keep a guarded distance from Daniel.

The crushing feeling of claustrophobia left Robby's lungs, but the relief was short lived as he remembered the hundreds of yards of tunnel between himself and the outside - and that he now had to face Daniel again. And keep tabs on Susan. He wished he had run for Mrs. Semmes instead of chasing after Daniel.

Daniel, meanwhile, was oblivious to the dank griminess of the bunker. He sat right down on the squishy floor.

"Good thing we have these flashlights or it'd be pretty dark in here," Daniel said as though it had just occurred to him.

Robby thought of tackling Daniel again, but he hadn't had luck with that before. Daniel seemed calm enough now, and they were out of the storm. He'd just talk to him.

"Why did you come here?" Robby asked.

"So we'd be safe," Daniel said. "It's coming."

"What's coming?" asked Robby

"The storm."

"It's already here," Robby said. "It's probably gone by now. We should go and find out."

"Gone? No," Daniel scoffed, his voice growing sharp and unnecessarily loud. "That was just the beginning. We have to take cover. There's nothing else for it. There's nothing for it but to cast the anchors and batten down the hatches, take cover. And whatever comes, comes."

"Oh," said Robby. He could think of nothing else to say.

Daniel looked up; he was back in the small wooden room, surrounded by the faces of men who'd trusted him to lead them across the Atlantic. His crew. It was his job



to keep them safe, and he felt helpless as a lily in a field. There was nothing left to do but wait and pray. The waves pounded angrily against the hull, and the men swayed back and forth in a sickening anti-rhythm. One of the men stepped meekly forward. The face was familiar, but he couldn't quite place it. He was awful young, with sea-swept, sandy hair and small, pleading brown eyes. He approached Captain Shaw with great caution.

“Daniel?” he said, lightly touching the captain's shoulder. “Daniel, our moms are probably looking for us.”

The captain stared. Who was this man-child? He looked around. He was in a dark room, musty-smelling, with the boy, and there was a little girl, black-haired ... But how did he get here?

“Captain!”

He came to his senses. One of his crewmen, McClendon, stood in front of him with his hands in his hair, pleading for guidance. This was no time for hallucinations, by God.

“Captain,” said McClendon, pacing right up to the captain's face, then backing away quickly. “Captain, there must be something we can do. We can't just sit here. That is, we could...well, we could do something. That is, we can't just sit here.”

“What you can do is sit down and quiet yourself,” the captain ordered. “The worst thing we can do right now is panic.” He was done with panicking. Now that they were safe below deck. He addressed the entire room. “Right now, there's a chance we can get out of this storm alive. Yes, it might capsize this boat and drown us all – which-as you all knew could happen when you chose to take to the sea – but it's just as good a chance that this storm'll do nothing but toss us around a bit and move on. Panicking ain't going to

help that chance. We've done all we can do. Now we wait, and we hope that we're waiting for nothing." He looked around at his crew.

"Understand?" he asked.

The crew muttered in assent.

"If we're going to die, we're going to die. And if we ain't, we ain't," he said to the crew. "So let's face up to it like men."

"Hear, hear," the men murmured – not with much enthusiasm, but at least they were calm.

The captain walked to a stool against the back wall of the room and pulled an old harmonica from his pocket. His father's. He'd never quite gotten the hang of playing it, but it was a comfort to keep it with him. He passed it from hand to hand and thought about what he'd seen in his hallucination, or vision, whatever it was.

He had the feeling he'd seen that boy before. He searched his memory, but the only place he could find him was in that vision. And the girl, she reminded him of a girl he'd seen once, a long time ago. The room, too. He knew it. Never been there before, but he knew it.

He was literally knocked out of his reverie when the boat made a sudden lurch starboard.

"Hold on! Hold your places!" he yelled to the crewmen. "Just a swell! We're all ri---"

Before he could finish the reassurance, he was interrupted by an ear-splitting crack.

"What in hell was that?" cried McClendon.

“I’m not sure,” the captain said. “I’m going to go up and see. Foster, you come with me.” He indicated a middle-aged man nearest the cabin door. Foster pushed at the door.

“It’s stuck,” Foster said.

“Well unstick it,” the captain said, making his way over to assist.

“Stuck!” cried McClendon. “Stuck! We’re trapped! We’ll suffocate!”

“We’re not going to suffocate. Now shut your mouth,” said Shaw.

He and Foster continued to try the door, but it was indeed stuck. They managed to push it open about half an inch, but something very, very heavy – probably something he needed to sail this boat, Shaw thought – was blocking it.

“Alright,” he said. “Let’s get those hinges off.”

“We don’t have any tools!” cried McClendon. The captain shoved him to the floor. “Don’t make me gag you, McClendon,” he said, unsheathing his bowie-knife. McClendon backed off, startled, but the captain turned to the door and began to unscrew a hinge with the knife tip.

“You get the other one,” he said to Foster.

It was slow work. The waves continued to jostle the ship back and forth, making every turn of the screw a labor. The captain told the crewmen to stand back, lest waves send him and his knife hurtling right into one of their chests.

“Careful there, Foster,” he said. The boat gave another great lurch. He caught himself, and looked down to see the wrong floor. It was an old, grimy floor, covered with some kind of disgusting growth. Mold or algae. He looked at his hands. They were small, a boy’s, and they were shaking – from fever or fear, he couldn’t tell. There were

scratches on his arms. He was hiding. Because the storm was coming. And he couldn't do anything to stop it. Oh please. Please, please, don't let it find us.

He looked up to see the boy and girl again. Their names came to him.

"Roger, uh, Robby!" he said. "Black-Eyed Susan!"

"Daniel," said Robby. "Daniel, do you know where we are? Can you hear? Can we go now?"

Both he and the girl had been crying.

"Go?" he said. "No, we can't go. It's coming. We have to keep cover."

"Daniel, nothing's coming. The storm is probably gone by now."

"No," he yelled, spittle flying out of his mouth. "The sea is coming."

"Daniel," the boy sobbed, "Daniel, why are you acting like this?"

The boy lunged at him and pulled and pulled at his little body. His ankles, his hands, hair. The boy wrapped both arms around his chest and pulled. But Daniel was stronger. He wrapped his own arms around an old pipe that ran up the grimy wall, and the boy couldn't make him go anywhere. Finally, the boy tired out.

He looked at the girl – the sister. "Sing me your little song, little Suzy, from the boardwalk."

"What are you talking about, Daniel?" she wiped her nose with her forearm.

"What song? What's a borgwall?"

"That little song," he said, and he began to hum. The little sister looked so like the beggar girl that sang on the boardwalk all those years ago. He'd never heard such pretty singing.

It was a silly song – about two little girls who had a falling out over an apple tree – but she made it seem so sad. Each note the little girl sung had hit him hard, but sweetly, like a magnet pulling his heart deeper into his chest. It was only a few moments, but he never forgot.

Now, in this grimy underground room, far away, the same face. The same hair. She even held a flower like the one the beggar girl had worn in her hair.

He looked at his hands, child's hands, and began to hum the song, to form the words.

*“Once there lived side by side. Two little maids. Used to dress just alike. Hair down in braids. Blue gingham pinafores. Stockings of red---”*

“Daniel,” said the little girl. “Daniel, please stop singing. I don't like it.”

He sang and sang. *“Little sun bonnets tied. On each pretty head. School days were over. Secrets they'd tell---”*

“No, stop it, Daniel. I don't like it.”

*“Whispering arm in arm. Down by the well---”*

Each note made Susan more upset. He wanted to stop, he really did. But he couldn't. He wasn't the one singing.

Then Robby punched him in the face.

“Shut up!” Robby yelled. “Quit being an idiot.”

Daniel rubbed his cheek. “Thanks,” he said. He felt dizzy. He put his hands to his head and saw that they were his own again – big, calloused, manly hands, nicked here and there by the bowie-knife, an infected splinter making a red welt on his thumb. He sucked at the splinter and spat on the floor. He looked back at his men. They were in the

same places they'd been when the hallucination started. He was still standing at the hinge, knife at the ready. Foster was below, loosening away.

“What for?” Foster said, without stopping his work.

“Hmm?” said the captain.

“Thanks for what?”

“Hmm? I didn't say anything.” The captain set to unscrewing the hinge. No time to give credence to hallucinations.

He and Foster both cut their hands a few times before the hinges finally came off. It took four men to extract the door from the jamb. It crashed to the floor with a great thud, revealing the source of the obstruction – piles and piles of dirty, wet canvas covering the entire doorway. There was no telling how much more – or what else - was behind.

The captain ignored McClendon's screams of “Oh, God, we're stuck!” and set to pulling the fallen sail.

“Tug,” he ordered. “Everyone, grab on and tug.”

Lightning had probably broken a mast. The captain had barely had time to think about what that could mean when he saw it. Smoke. Seeping in between the boards in the forward wall. Just a tiny wisp of it. This was going to happen slowly.

The captain took another breath, trying not to panic, “Again!” he called. “Ho!”

As he pulled, he looked down at the peep of sickly vapor creeping toward the toe of his boot. Then, to his great confusion, he saw water running in behind it. And it didn't creep. It flowed, tickling his bare toes, creating a new level of disgusting squishiness for the algae underfoot.

He looked up. There were the peevishly familiar children. There was the dank room, lit by the strange lights they carried.

“No!” he cried. “No! The men!”

“Daniel,” came the quiet terrified voice of Robby. “Daniel, something’s happening.”

“I have to go back! They’ll die! We’ll all die!”

“Daniel,” the boy grabbed him tightly around the wrist and pulled. “Daniel, something’s happening. We *have* to get out of here.”

The captain caught a glimpse of the canvas in front of him, felt the crush of men against his right side. There was a whiff of tobacco. It was only for a moment, but... he jerked his arm from Robby’s grasp. He reached toward the middle of the room, where he’d just seen the canvas. He waved his hands through the air like a blind man without a cane.

“Come back, come back,” he muttered. “Just come back.”

Robby shined his light at the floor, confirming what the tickle against his toes told him. The water was rising. It had risen maybe a millimeter since he first noticed it. This was no time to be gentle. He leaned toward Susan and whispered to her, unheard by Daniel, who still groped in the dark.

“I might need your help,” Robby said. “I’m going to try to drag him out, but he’s stronger than me. I want you to watch, and if you see a way that you might can help, do it. Can you do that?”

Susan nodded. “I can do it.”

Robby caught the captain by surprise. One moment, he was picturing the cabin on board his ship, his *Esther*, willing himself to return. The next moment, he was on the slimy ground, the wind knocked out of him. He felt the boy grab him around the ankles and drag.

Like Hell. He kicked with all his might, but the little girl – that tiny little girl! By God! – jumped on top of him and began pulling at his hair, scratching his face. His naked back slid easily along the slick floor and out into the tunnel. He pushed hard at the girl with both arms and flapped both legs like a dolphin's tail. He freed himself for a moment – long enough to get up and start running back toward the room. Without a light to guide him, he ran straight into a wall and was soon under the power of the boy and girl again. They grappled like the desperate children they were, kicking, scratching, biting, pulling, taking any advantage they could. In the dark, he couldn't tell who was hitting whom, and wondered if they weren't beating each other just as well as they were beating him. Finally, he felt one of the bodies relax, then the other. As he caught his breath, he heard the voice of the little girl.

“Daniel, please.”

The captain touched his fingers to the slimy floor. The water was now well over an inch deep, and rising.

“It's not real, children,” he said. “What you think you see. You think you're all your own, but you're not. It's all the same thing.” He pushed his fingers against the wet algae and mumbled, “We're all slime.”

For a moment, no one spoke. Then Robby's voice broke across the pitch dark. The flashlights were long gone, dropped in the fight.



“Susan, I have to get you out of here.”

Susan sniffled.

“Daniel,” Robby said. “I don’t know where this water is coming from or if more is coming, but if it doesn’t stop, we’ll drown down here. We’re underground, and it’s flooding. Do you get it?”

The captain said nothing.

“I can’t drag you out, but I’m begging you to come with us.”

“You won’t try to fight me again?” Daniel asked.

“No,” said Robby.

“Good,” said Daniel, and in an instant he was up and running, back into the interior chamber, his right hand sliding along the tunnel wall for guidance. Falling spectacularly after just a few steps, he bolted right back up, unfazed. It barely even slowed him down.

Robby started to yell after him, but a ticklish feeling creeping around his ankles stopped him cold.

“Oh, shit,” he said. He reached down to feel the water with his fingertips. It was deeper. So much deeper. And moving faster. Half his hand was covered.

“Oh, God,” he said. “Susan, we have to hurry. We have to really hurry,” he took her hand.

“Daniel,” she protested.

“We can’t, Susan. We have to hurry,” he grabbed her grimy little hand and led her forward. “Put your other hand out and feel the wall. Try to move fast but also try not to fall down.”

Susan was sobbing, but Robby stayed calm. He could be upset later.

“One step at a time,” he said. “That’s good, just keep going.”

Susan kept pace, but she kept looking over her shoulder, into the darkness.

“Daniel,” she cried. “Daniel, come on!”

But Daniel heard nothing. He was miles and years away, tugging for dear life.

\*

By the time Susan and Robby waded their way out of the tunnel and into the connecting rooms, the water was halfway up Robby’s shins. He carried Susan piggy back, and struggled to stay upright as he fought against her weight and the water.

When he finally reached the low steps that led to the main lawn, he set Susan down and stood in awe of the spectacle of weather before him.

Gallons and gallons of seawater spilled over a broken place in the masonry of the south wall, waxing and waning with the waves. To his right, more water spilled in through the entrance tunnel, and trickled over another low point in the wall. The rain had only gotten heavier, and the wind turned Robby’s hair into a flapping whip, and the walls into giant whistles.

“Hop on my back. We have to get to the look-out tower,” he instructed Susan. She obeyed and he trudged out into the lawn as quickly as he could drag himself.

The brick stairs to the turret were blocked by the waterfall. Robby’s only choice was to splash his way toward the same rickety ladder Daniel had descended earlier. The wind threatened to knock Robby face down into the flooded grass, and the rain lashing

his face stung like hundreds of tiny switches, and Susan was heavy, and he was terrified of the ladder, but he kept splashing toward it as fast as he could.

“Susan, it’s a hurricane,” he yelled over his shoulder, but she couldn’t hear him over the howl of wind. When they reached the ladder, Robby turned around and set Susan on the rungs.

“We have to go up!” he screamed into Susan’s ear, pointing. “Up there!”

Susan glanced at the waves splashing over the broken wall and started to climb. Robby followed, trying to remember that prayer his mother used to say when she tucked him in.

Finally they reached the top and pulled up onto the round brick look-out. Robby scrambled to look over the south wall, fighting hard against the wind as he did.

The beach was submerged. The roofs of the three one-story wooden buildings peeked up above four or five feet of floodwaters.

Robby turned back and opened a trapdoor that led to a small room below.

“We’ll be safe in here,” he said as he led Susan down the little ladder. “We’re too high to get caught in the flood. These walls are strong. They’re built to withstand cannons.”

Susan clutched at her elbows. “What if this wall breaks like that other one?”

“That wall’s been broken for years,” Robby said. He walked over to a small window about the size of his head and tried to find a position that would allow him to look outside without getting rain in his face. He looked down at the lawn. The water was three feet high inside the fort now, and rising. But they were three stories up. They would be safe, the two of them.

Susan reached into her pocket and took out what was left of the little flower. She twirled it around and around in her fingers, her brow furrowed. She set the flower down near the window and asked, “Will we ever see Daniel again?”

“No,” said Robby, without turning to look at her. “No, we won’t.”

\*\*

Raphael had always known it would come back for him someday. Fire was vengeful and wild. It devoured everything it could reach. Men were fools to think they could control it.

He listened as the waves crashed violently against the hull of his little ship. If only he had an ax, a hammer, something, to break through the hull, they could take their chances against the cold and the sea. Several men had already injured themselves trying to break down the walls with their big, meaty bodies, their knives and makeshift battering rams, but they were brittle against the backdrop of fire, water, oak.

They’d have a better chance praying to the waves, the captain thought, and he even found himself doing so. Dash us against some rocks, he pleaded, capsize us, flood the chambers. God, drown us all, please, just don’t burn us.

But that was no use either. The fire was closing in on them. It was so, so hot, and he was so, so tired. He inhaled painfully, taking in the acrid scent of smoke - not at all like the sweet-smelling pine fires he’d built with his Papa, for warmth and cooking. This fire, he thought, was created not by man, but by the gods – it had come back to reclaim the life it had nourished all those years ago.

He drew in another long breath, hoping the smoke might kill him before the fire did. Probably, he thought, sinking slowly to the floor, he was inhaling the ashes of fallen crewmates. Probably, he thought, they had died cursing him. He wondered vaguely what that whooshing sound was, like a great deal of liquid smashing into a wall, but there was no wall, because he was outside with Papa, hiding in the forest, stoking the fire for warmth. He thought he heard panicked voices, off in the distance. Children's voices. But he must be dreaming, for he and Papa were quite alone, and he was so, so cold. He absently prodded at the fire with a branch and then, he stopped thinking, and he wasn't cold anymore.

