

BURIAL

TED HAYDEN

"The more depressing the situation, the more completely one should take advantage of its
assets." - Alexander Kluge

Madeline had a bank account once, but she overdrew and got fined. She went to a teller, yelled at the teller, and got kicked out of the bank.

Now she only used cash. She didn't need a safe because she kept it with her. It stayed in her pocket when things were going well and went to her sock when things were going badly. Anyone who tried to take her cash would get a finger in their eye and a bite mark on their arm. They might get a few bucks, but she would leave a scar.

If there had been a way to scar a bank, she would have done that. If there had been a way to get born rich, she would have done that.

She had a check in her pocket. It had her name written after "Pay to the order of" and "FUCK YOU" on the memo line. The guy who wanted her to get fucked wasn't rich. But he wasn't so poor that he couldn't spare five hundred bucks. That was the kind of guy Madeline liked. Guys that made enough money to buy a beer for a girl. Guys that made enough money to impress the low-rent women who hang out at low-rent bars. Guys that eventually realized they should never have bought her a drink or brought her home. Because they made enough money for her to take money from them.

She parked and looked across four lanes of traffic. A man stood outside of Wimpy's Pawn Shop. He half-waved, half-shrugged at SUVs. He might have been hitchhiking or he might have been experiencing a psychotic break. Whatever he had sold to Wimpy, it didn't look like it would buy him more than a haircut and a laundromat spin cycle. His gray hair needed a trim. His jeans needed a wash. But maybe not as much as he needed what he had pawned away.

She left the car and walked toward people waiting for ATMs. The men had low-hanging chins and dark sunglasses. The women had skin the color of chicken fried steak. They were quiet as they watched people push wrong buttons, hit cancel, and start again.

Inside the bank, a line of customers stood on wall-to-wall orange carpet. Thick clear plastic separated them from tellers. At the other end of the room was a glass wall and another glass door. A gleaming metal lock showed the back exit wasn't for public use.

It was a busy Saturday. People needed to fill up their wallets before they bought Frosty Freezes. They had to deposit weekly checks before they drove to the reservoir, watched the drought's waterline, and wondered if this time next year fish would be flopping in mud.

She went to the back of the line. Tellers typed, reached into cash drawers, and smiled politely. They told people to swipe cards and enter pin codes. There was a security door between their closed-off workspace and the main floor. A young, freckle-faced woman held it open. She laughed as a man walked past her. Thick suspenders held heavy pants high on his waist. He wore a blue t-shirt with a fire hat logo on its chest and the words "Victorville Fire Department" in bold across its back.

Madeline recognized him. He hadn't changed too much since high school. Still knife-point skinny. Still kind of awkward. His name was Jake Wolfe. Back when she was a sophomore, he had taken her cousin to prom. The cousin had been living with her family for a few months when Jake showed up on their porch with a basketball team buzz cut and a rented tux. Her dad came down for thirty seconds, long enough to tell the boy to bring his niece home at a reasonable hour. When she returned two days later, red-eyed and wearing the same dress, dad didn't care.

Madeline would take her check to the teller and get five hundred bucks. Cash that she could keep in the bottom of her shoe. It was more than enough for rent, but rent covered a ceiling and a door and not much else. Not a mattress to put on the floor. Not groceries to stash in the fridge. There were plenty of places to sleep and there were better ways to spend half a grand.

A firefighter would be in a union. He would have a pretty nice bed and a refrigerator stuffed with snacks. Jake was a beanpole, but if he didn't eat much,

Madeline could help him get through his groceries. She liked food, food cost money, and the man who wrote insults on a check wasn't likely to give her many more. It was time to move on and maybe Jake Wolfe would let her move in.

She looked at the firefighter to see how closely he was admiring the freckled lady's sunblocked skin. His eyes weren't anywhere near her cheeks or her long neck. They glanced down the line of bank tellers.

The pants he wore were thick canvas, professional, covered in pockets made to hold heavy equipment, and maybe not necessary for the quick inspection he seemed to be conducting. His hands kept brushing past one particular pocket. The teller who had brought him behind the counter pointed at electrical sockets while he smiled and watched the back door. Madeline turned to see what had his attention.

On the other side of the bank's glass wall was a parked armored truck. Its guards were average-sized guys in bulky gray uniforms. One held the bank's back entrance open while the other strolled toward it with two heavy bags on his shoulder.

There was a third man too. He walked out from around the building's wall. He must have been standing with his back against the brick, waiting where the guards couldn't see him. A ski mask with a palm tree print was over his face. His stride was long and fast. He wore tightly laced hiking boots and held a black spray can.

If there was a time to leave the bank it would have been thirty seconds earlier. Too late now. Madeline's feet stayed planted on the floor.

The guard holding the door saw the man wearing the ski mask and shouted. It was a quick "Hey!" that got cut off before his fingers could wrap around the butt of his gun. Ski Mask lifted his spray can and hard mist flew at security's faces. It sounded like an asthmatic sucking air into swollen lungs. The guards winced and coughed; Ski Mask kept coming toward them.

In the line where Madeline stood, customers stopped slouching. They looked in different directions. Their necks twisted and their eyes searched. They could hear something but didn't know what it was. Jake yelled and made it clear.

"Hey! I want everybody down!"

Madeline dropped, her elbows out to stop her chin from smashing into carpet.

"Nobody move and nobody's shot!"

Security was on the floor. Ski Mask had dropped his pepper spray and grabbed two revolvers from the guards' belts. His heavy boots broke their noses while Jake yelled instructions.

"Empty the registers. I want every twenty, every five, every bill you got!"

From where she lay, she could see the fake fireman's face bob just above the counter. He held a handgun in the air and raised a white plastic garbage bag. His mouth was open and his teeth were crooked. As he passed bank tellers, they dropped rubber band bound bills into his bag. Their eyes were aimed low. They watched his hands and didn't look at his face. He shook the money as he walked, making the cash-filled plastic into an odd maraca. At each register, he stopped and checked to make sure all the bills had been cleared out. He got to the last teller. Whatever he had, he didn't like it.

"Bullshit!"

Ski Mask responded.

"How much?"

Jake opened the bag wide and guessed.

"I got fuck all. Two grand maybe."

Madeline turned her head. Ski Mask had the bags from the armored truck over his shoulder and one gun pointing down. The guards were crumpled against the door, covering their faces with their arms.

"I told you man, tellers don't have shit. Stick to trucks."

"Fuck it. No more registers."

Beside Madeline, customers lay with their cheeks on the carpet and their eyes closed. She saw a manager across the floor. He was in a white dress shirt and grimacing. Water beaded in the corner of his eye. The room smelled like sweat. She drew herself inward, moving her arms under her chest.

Jake walked out from behind the counter, turned toward the back door, and moved toward her. The dark blue Victorville Fire Department shirt he wore suddenly looked a little more like something he could have made on CustomTshirts.com. The plastic garbage bag was wrapped around his fist. He was leaving.

It was done. The guards were hurt, but she was okay.

At the door, he stopped. Ski Mask waited outside on a motorcycle covered in yellow desert dust. Jake spun around, the bank's glass wall behind him and the sky a blue frame around his forehead. He put the money down and reached into his pockets, bringing out a small aluminum canister and a barbell-shaped can.

He wasn't finished. It wasn't over.

The fake fireman leaned forward and the aluminum canister left his hand. It rolled toward the crowd, spinning over the carpet and spitting gray smoke. As he was about to disappear behind its fog, he threw the barbell-shaped can up at the ceiling. An explosion. A pop that sucked the sound out of her ears.

The sky was dark and clear. Street lamps shined on Ernesto and the entrance he blocked. He checked IDs of people who didn't want to bother with the bigger and more routinely mopped bar on the opposite side of the street. It was pricier to get drunk there. It was easier to get thrown out.

If no power ran through El Vagón's one neon Bud Light sign, if no electricity lit the streetlamp that hung over its parking lot, these drunks would be asleep. They would do what their great-grandparents had done. Lie down not long after sunset and wake up not long before sunrise. But the lights were on and they were here, awake at a late hour, the subjects of a species-wide experiment. It was a stress test to see what human organs could endure, to determine if future generations would be able survive on planets with days entirely different than Earth's 24 hours.

As a bouncer, Ernesto was a first-hand witness to the experiment's results. He observed the drunken madness that gripped people who saw more light bulbs than sunlight, who stayed out until they vomited in the dirt and collapsed in the street. Forced to follow the bar's schedule, he was also prone to fits of insanity. But unlike the men who soberly walked into El Vagón and were unconsciously carried out, he knew the trouble he was in. He could monitor himself. He could make sure he was the only person he hurt.

Sitting on a squeaky stool, with the breeze running through the open door behind him, he ran one finger along the hard line of skin that crossed his throat. His pills were running out. He would take one after work and then how many would be left? Three, maybe four. Refilling the prescription took an entire day of travel. He would have to buy train tickets soon.

The traffic light at the bar's intersection turned red. The speed limit was fifty and the few cars that drove by went sixty. A mile further north and the roads weren't paved. A mile beyond that, dry hills rose up and plant life got

sparse. A pickup truck went through the intersection. Three men in identical green shirts sat in the back, watching the neighborhood's two-bedroom houses fade to black.

Between the street and El Vagón's wall was a narrow dirt path. A girl walked there. Her hair was short and wild; her eyes were up and searching the stars. Maybe she had found some lost galaxy at the other end of the universe. She turned toward the bar and walked across the parking lot.

For a few months, Madeline had come to El Vagón most Fridays, most Saturdays, and most weeknights. She had always arrived with the same born-and-bred Victorville mechanic, a man who had slowly worked his way up from garage dipshit to garage co-owner. It was at least a few weeks since she had been by.

She stopped where no one having a drink inside could see her and leaned against the bar's cinder block wall. Her Adidas were worn out and her jeans had patches that could have been there to look good or could have covered places that needed patching. Her nose was too long and her eyes were too close together to be Hollywood pretty or cheerleader pretty or two beers tipsy pretty. But none of the men at El Vagón ever stopped at two beers and she was at least a decade younger than any of the other women. She waved at Ernesto.

"I know you've got to watch the door, but come over here a little bit."

The stool wasn't the most comfortable place to sit. He stood and went to her.

"Lee in there?"

She pointed toward the El Vagón's door. Ernesto nodded.

"Well then I sure as hell can't stay here, but I've got to talk to you, okay?"

Only a month ago they would have been shivering through a cold evening. Only a month from now and midnight would be only a bit less unbearable than noon. It was one of the few times of year when the 1 am air felt good.

She was in a black tank top with her bare shoulders pressed against the wall and her face up toward Ernesto's. Her voice got quieter.

“Look, I can’t really say what I want here. I mean, if Lee comes out for a cigarette, he’ll put it in my eye. You live across the street, right? In that apartment over there?”

She pointed to a gray building surrounded by a high black fence. No pedestrian crossing led from one side of the road to the other. Anyone not in a car had to step into traffic and hope they wouldn't get hit. Ernesto stuck one finger out at the building, then put his thumb against his chest.

“Cool.” Her voice was still soft. She pushed herself off the cinder blocks and stepped back into the parking lot.

“See you when you’re done with work, okay?”

He didn’t nod and she didn’t look back. The bar where he worked wasn’t bigger than most two-car garages. It was a short and squat rectangle with a short and squat clientele. The place on the opposite side of the intersection had a stage where local rock bands played and norteño groups stopped on Southwestern tours. That bouncer got paid more, but that bouncer probably had things he dreamed of buying and comforts he hoped he could one day afford.

Madeline didn’t wait for green. She dashed into the street with a red light hanging over her head. When she came to the apartment’s gate, she tried to turn its handle. She struggled, pushing hard but failing to force it open. Then, without looking to see who might be watching, she leaped up and pulled herself over, carefully moving her wrists past the gate’s sharp black ends. She tumbled on the grass and rolled onto her back. Her face pointed at the sky.

At 2:30, Ernesto closed the bar and went home. His building manager lived in the apartment facing the intersection. Her window was always half open. Every night, her pet stood with its snout pressed against the screen, barking at anyone who walked by.

The breed used to be popular but had gone out of style. It was a small dog-like thing, the culmination of the process that created Chihuahuas and Shar-Peis, designed by Frankenstein breeders working day and night to invent the least healthy, most miserable pet possible. Long, bat-like wings grew from its weak back, beautiful in the eyes of sad, shut-in women who still cherished their childhood belief in unicorns. They were meant to be carried in purses; their wings had no real function. When untended and uncleaned, the animals ran across carpets and lawns, dragging their soft-skinned appendages behind them. Pets like this one, owned by daydreamers with early onset dementia, had wings with infected and rotten undersides. The animal barked. Ernesto sped up, took his key out, and opened the gate.

Madeline was sleeping on the grass, her hands behind her head and her eyes shut. His courtyard was a thin strip of green surrounded by apartment doors. His neighbors kept their blinds closed. Their rooms were small and an unshuttered window would reveal everything inside. It probably wouldn't be much, TVs tuned to Liga MX coverage, an exotic bird or two, maybe shirtless groping, but even the most average man can preserve the illusion of individuality by maintaining his privacy.

Madeline dreamed with her mouth half-open. Her toes squirmed inside worn-out shoes. If the manager came out and saw this stranger collapsed on the lawn, she would call the cops. He bent down and shook the girl's shoulder. Her eyes opened. She saw him and smiled.

"Hey, guy."

The apartment door next to them deadened the sound of a romantic ranchera. She sat up and squinted.

“Which one of these is yours?”

Ernesto pointed to a window on the second floor. It was at the back of the building. Only the number on its door made it look any different than the other apartments. For three years he had lived in that room and checked IDs at El Vagón. In that time only a few customers had learned his name. They were the talkative ones. The people who didn't mind conversing with someone who couldn't answer back. None of them had ever seen him anywhere but at the bar. This girl, young and always moving, had hollered and cheered whenever she watched him pick someone up and carry them out to the street. She enjoyed standing in the parking lot, smoking, and telling him how goddamn big he was. But half-drunk friendliness didn't explain why she was at his building at 2:30 in the morning. She lept to her feet and he stood still.

“Anybody swing a broken bottle at you tonight?”

He shook his head and she waited for him to walk to the stairs. He didn't move.

“Hey, remember? I can't talk about this just wherever. Let's move, guy.”

She reached up and pushed his chest. He stayed still. Her lips were pursed and her eyebrows were in a no-nonsense scowl. It might not have made sense that she was here, but even if he stood immobile in this courtyard all night long, she wasn't going anywhere else. She turned around and walked toward his apartment. He unfroze and followed. When they got to the door he took out his keys and let her into his room.

“Man, where's your TV?”

His room was a spartan space. One bookshelf, one couch, one box spring, one mattress. The kitchen ran along the right wall. The style was utilitarian; the theme was asceticism.

“Holy fuck you must get bored.”

She threw herself on the couch and he walked into his bathroom. His medicine cabinet was above the sink and behind a mirror. He took out pills and counted how many were left. Out in the living room, she spread herself as wide as she possibly could.

“So I was in this bank today and guess who I saw.”

He had one to take now, then two more after that. That meant two days, then San Diego. Before he swallowed, he looked in the mirror, his eye on his scar.

“This guy I knew from high school. He was pretending he was a fireman.”

She explained the scam. How Jake pretended to be a fireman inspecting the building in order to get behind the teller window. How the main target was probably the armored truck delivery. How it was pulled off using pepper spray and stun grenades.

“I know him pretty well. Like he grew up in my neighborhood. He took my cousin to prom. I mean yeah he seemed hardcore when him and his buddy took their guns out, but without that he’s basically nobody, somebody you could pass in the street and not even notice. I bet his mom forgets his name.”

He came out of the bathroom and took a legal pad and pen from the bookshelf. There was nowhere to sit other than the couch but she took up all of it. He rested on the carpet, placing the paper on the scratched coffee table.

“The way they did that, the way they were talking and everything. I doubt that’s the first time they robbed a place, right? And I doubt it’s the last time. I know where he lives. Or, okay, I remember where he used to live. Because back when he graduated, his aunt got hit by a mail truck, and he got her place. I went to keggers there, I swear, I saw freshmen got wasted there. What are the chances he moved out of a free place? Slim, right? And what I’m saying is, I didn’t tell the police any of it. They don’t know who the robber is.”

Her head was on the armrest. One hand held the couch’s back and the other lay on the floor.

“You don’t have any posters or anything? You must listen to some bands. There must be a movie you like. It’s not hard to decorate at least a little.”

He scribbled on the legal pad and pushed it toward her. "No."

"Well whatever, pretty soon you can afford anything you want. You can hire Picasso to paint these walls."

She waved at the bookcase.

"They make posters for books? Fuck, you can pay someone to make one."

She had seen him take punches from greasy-palmed mechanics. She had watched him get stabbed by men who carried knives because they liked to scare strangers. Other barflies had seen the same thing. Probably, a few of them had thought he might be the ideal tough to have at their side. But if they had come to that conclusion, they had waited. They had watched. They had noticed that, no matter what people did to him, he never did anything to them. Ernesto took beatings, grabbed who needed grabbing, and carried them outside. That was it. He didn't break skulls and he didn't get even. He wasn't the ideal tough because the ideal tough fights back.

"I mean, they're bank robbers. If we rob them? It's probably not even illegal."

On his notepad, he wrote. "Yes it is." The sentence was underlined twice.

"Okay, maybe. But they can't complain to the cops. They'll be out of options. Out of luck."

She built an argument on a foundation of coincidence and optimism. He leaned toward the coffee table and wrote, "Did he see you at the bank?"

She sat up so she could read without stretching her neck.

"No way. The phony fireman, Jake, he didn't look at anybody but those tellers. I can tell you totally honestly he didn't ever know I was in the room."

Ernesto's pen kept moving. "He'll see you when you rob him."

"Yeah, so what? You think I'm going to take his money and stay in Victorville, move back home to Norco? Fuck that. I'll be out of here like ten minutes later, literally. Mexico, Vancouver, I don't know. I'll set up shop, live somewhere I can make my money make more money."

One yellow bulb hung from the center of the ceiling. Madeline reached over the coffee table and took the pen from his hands.

“Come on, let me prove it to you.”

She didn't tell him where they were going. She led him out to the dirt path that ran along the road. In the late hour, in the spring weather, the air felt good. Not filled with dust, not so dry it scratched the back of her throat. But summer was coming soon, and the only way to escape it would be to leave, to get the money that would take her somewhere that wasn't here. Habits devour God-given free will and turn bodies into empty vessels for Satan. Money conquers habits because money bends the world to its will.

She talked and he followed. Her subject wasn't clear; her sentences barely hung together. Her ears focused on the giant's footsteps, making sure their sound never got too far behind. A parking lot was on their left. She walked off the path and into it, heading toward her silver Honda. In the car were two separate things. What she would show him and what he would see. She was a magician and this was her sleight of hand. Her lips kept moving.

“It sounds crazy, yeah. I just happen to know this guy, I just happen to have been to his house, I just happened to watch him rob a bank. This woman's wacko, she's off the wall. I get it. But let me show you.”

She unlocked the passenger side door, her gaze never leaving Ernesto's square face. His watery eyes glanced down and at her backseat. Her sleeping bag was stretched there and her pillow rested on top of it. Anyone who looked inside her car would see it was a home for a homeless woman.

She picked up a yearbook. It was from when she had been a sophomore and Jake had been a senior. The giant's face was still pointed at her sleeping bag. She grabbed one of his fingers and tugged.

“Hey, guy, pay attention. I didn't bring you here to check out my sweet ride.”

Men were protective. They were surprised that society let girls down. They wanted to show themselves that they weren't like all the other cold-hearted bastards. It didn't matter what logic got them there, whether they believed a white woman wouldn't live like this if things were like they used to be, or if they cursed the government for turning its back on the needy and the forgotten. They were two different routes to the same destination. She shoved the corner of the yearbook into Ernesto's rib cage.

"Page 67, second row: Jake Wolfe. With the dumb ass smile and the buzz cut. That's the guy."

The pages were thick and glossy. He flipped through and they fell softly against each other. At page 67, he shrugged and gestured for his pen. She took it out of her pocket and gave it to him. He wrote in the yearbook's margins. "I can't recognize him. I don't know who he is."

"Well okay, yeah. But trust me, it's him. You can act hesitant all you want. You can act like this isn't a great idea, fine. But I know you spent time in jail. Like a lot of time. You might have a full bookcase and no TV, but that doesn't make you the noblest guy in Victorville. You're like me, and I need help. You can help me."

He wrote more, the pen hidden behind his boulder-sized knuckles. His script was gentle and the ballpoint barely brushed the paper. "Do you sleep in the car?"

"I got kicked out of my apartment like two weeks ago. No big deal, just late rent and a dick landlord. And if we do this, I can afford a better place anyway."

He stooped over her yearbook, holding it in one wide palm, focused on each word he wrote. "Where do you park at night?"

There was a horizontal foot of space between her nose and his chest, another vertical foot between her forehead and his chin.

"Here. The lot's big, the police don't come through. If I'm out by dawn, the El Super managers never know I'm here. It's not bad. It's like camping. See the

stars, wake up at dawn. Like you're out in the world, really living. It's almost nicer than being shut up inside. Close to nicer, anyway."

She saw his brow make worried lines. She saw his lips move down. She bounced on her toes. Her magic trick was working.

He wrote, "You're not safe here."

"Yeah, but I can just drive away, right? If things get weird, that's all I have to do. Like, there was this one night, I heard squeaking above my head. I turned to see what it was and bam! There's a dick pressed against the window. I swear to God it was as ugly as the dude attached to it. But I was cool. It was no big deal. I snapped a pic, jumped into the front seat, and left that dick in the dust."

His letters were long and looping. He finished his response and handed her the book. "Don't sleep here tonight. Stay with me. Until you find a place of your own."

She gave it back to him.

"Well, to be real, the backseat's not the coziest place ever. But this isn't some weird sex thing, is it? You're not going to get me home and show me a freezer full of girls' hands?"

He shook his head and showed her a new note. "No. You sleep on the couch."

"Okay. I hoped I would get the bed but yeah. You don't seem like too big a weirdo."

It was early morning. Madeline wore an old white t-shirt she had found in her trunk and the sweatpants she had worn throughout winter. It wasn't quite actual jogging gear, but if she worked up a sweat it would convey the idea.

She walked by a dry irrigation ditch and an unhitched horse trailer. The houses were one story with mailboxes posted out where, in a bigger town, the sidewalk would be. She had grown up in Norco. Last time she had visited was a year and a half before. Nothing had changed.

Down the road was a house with a gray roof. A small terrier with spotty fur and an underbite was tied to one of its fenceposts. His teeth were rotting and the neighborhood called him Yap. Whether that was his original name or just the best word to describe him she didn't know. Yap couldn't have been too many years younger than Madeline. He looked dehydrated and mean.

"Hey, Yap."

Dogs like him weren't loved by anyone. His owners had probably never really wanted an animal, but bought one on an impulse and gotten frustrated when he wouldn't die. The neighborhood kids threw sticks at him; the neighborhood adults used him as one of many examples why this particular house brought their property values down. She approached the dog slowly and with her hands out. When she was a foot away she knelt and let him sniff her fingers. Yap howled.

"Fuck you, dog."

The chain around his neck was metal. His leash was tied to the post in a simple loop. Madeline took it off and walked with it. Yap didn't move. She started to run, pulling him along with her. Her eyes stayed on the road ahead while she waited for Yap to stop resisting and start following. It didn't happen. She looked over her shoulder. The dog was on his side, letting himself be dragged through the dirt. A few extra scrapes wouldn't make any moment of his

dying days less painful. It was better to be drawn and quartered than to run on brittle bones. If this weren't the first time anyone had actually needed the animal, she would have left him alone. But it would be good for him to know what it felt like to be useful. She went back, picked him up, and sprinted forward.

At the end of four blocks she had to have a convincing sweat, so she ran fast. Her feet hit the dirt and Yap stayed tucked beneath her arm.

In the sky, a drone flashed earth-toned colors, reflecting only the natural features of the land below. No intersection gray and no stop sign red. The soft brown of country soil, the green of leaves, and the pink of backyard roses. The machine went on its way, floating with a helicopter buzz. It disappeared behind rooftops, some artist's reminder that the ground was alive.

The neighborhood ended and fields stretched east. Lines of trees marked borders. Beyond them, grassy hills rolled up. On one side of the road were houses, on the other were fields. She kept her pace fast and stayed on the western side, passing windows that looked out on the country. A van was parked in a wide driveway. She jogged to it, going around a palm tree, then past a steel fence. The house had two stories and one black street-side window. Its front door was stained wood.

She dropped the dog and rang the bell. There were no footsteps so she pressed again. This time there was a noise inside. It sounded like someone walking down stairs.

The door opened an inch. Whoever was behind it stayed hidden.

"What do you want?"

"Oh my god, I should never have taken this old dog jogging with me but I did and now I'm afraid he's going to have a heart attack. If he died because I couldn't give him water, I would feel so bad."

Yap growled at her feet. The man inside muttered. "I've got a hose out by the garage."

She stuck her shoulder forward, pressing the door back and meeting the eyes of the man who stood behind it. His eyeballs were deep in their sockets, like stagnant water at the bottom of a cave. It was the bank robber.

“Wow, I can’t believe it’s you, Jake! It must have been forever since we last talked. Do you remember taking my cousin to senior prom?”

She squirmed through the tight space, snapping the dog’s chain and forcing him in. The house was dark; no lights were on. A black expanse and shadows. Wherever its windows were, no sun was getting in.

“I’m sorry but he’s so particular, he wants his water in a dish or he won’t drink anything. You know how these animals are.”

“Madeline?”

Walls didn’t show where they were. It was hard to stay balanced in the lightless room.

“Yeah, it’s me! Madeline.”

“Huh. Why’s your hair so short?”

She looked at him, not able to see his expression. Her eyes adjusted too slowly and she couldn’t read his face. He spoke and she listened to the tone of his voice.

“Doesn’t really matter, I guess. You look good.”

Objects started to appear. A dining room table, three chairs, an oil painting in a gilded frame. The door closed and he took one step toward her. His breath smelled like cheese. His face had changed. It was longer, his chin sharper, his cheeks hollower. His head floated in the room’s gloom. His neck was all spine and Adam’s apple. She searched his face. He leered.

“Well, Jake. This dog needs his water, but I have to say, I saw that van in your driveway and I wondered. Is it yours? Because I was thinking maybe I’m going to buy one like it.”

His dull eyes reflected her body from the neck down.

“Yeah. It’s mine. Why do you need a van?”

She took a long breath.

"I've always wanted to start a catering company, you know? A van like that could hold a whole lot of casserole."

"Sure. You want a catering van, that would do the trick." He paused.
"What's up with you, though?"

She stepped past him, went further into the room. The dog wouldn't follow her. He wasn't thirsty and he wasn't sane.

As she moved, Jake's bony elbow stayed at her side. The smell of cheese grew more pungent, buried in his hair and rising off his shirt. She shuffled to her right and he followed. She bent low and crouched by the dog, petting his balding head.

Jake's teeth caught what little reflected light there was. He put a fingernail between two molars. She stopped petting Yap and the dog snarled.

"Which way's the kitchen?"

He pointed to a doorway and she walked through it, kicking Yap ahead of her. They went into a short hall. Stairs on the left went down to a basement; a closed closet was on the right. A long and heavy shotgun leaned against it. Its barrel pointed to the door's bronze knob.

"So do you work from home? This place is pretty well lived in."

Jake followed her into the kitchen. On the counter was a lamp with a gold shade. It belonged in a study, not over a sink. Its yellow extension cord ran over tiles and onto a table.

"No. I'm a prison guard, actually. That's how I pay rent."

"You inherited this house, right?"

"Yeah, I mean pay the rent metaphorically, not actually. It's how I keep the lights on."

She had seen one light bulb. Jake's electric bill would be cheap.

"What prison do you work at?"

She went to the faucet and Yap's nails clicked on the floor. The sound was echoed by something else, a lighter and fainter tapping. A noise that seemed to come from the place she was going to.

“Here in Norco.”

The rustling was inside the sink. It was full of water, its surface rippling.

“It’s an okay job. I like the prisoners, you know?”

She slowed down, the kitchen’s strange sounds making her cautious. When she was a step away she stopped, peering into the moving water. A mass of gray was there, writhing. Tiny objects floated and swam and dove toward the drain. There were thousands of them, an insect colony living where there would normally be a pile of unwashed dishes. The bugs climbed on one another’s backs and crashed into the sink’s white enamel sides.

“Pretty cool. Right?” Jake walked around her and put his hand in. A few of the bugs inched up his wrist. “They’re called *Podura aquatica*.”

She didn’t respond. His arm left the sink. Water dripped off and the bugs stayed on. There was a hint of blue in their gray. They were so small she couldn’t make out their legs. Each one had a tiny, soft shell. A small extra bump might have been where they kept their heads. He watched them climb his fingers.

“This naturalist, he sailed with James Cook, he wrote about them. Darwin read his journal. *Podura aquatica* are what convinced him to get on the HMS *Beagle*, to visit the Galápagos and see those turtles. If he hadn’t read about these bugs, he never would have left England, never would have figured out evolution. These motherfuckers changed the future.”

He kept his palm an inch away from his face while he talked. The *Podura aquatica* climbed, struggling to reach his fingernails. Yap stared at the lamp’s extension cord. He sniffed at it, then tucked his ears back and growled. Something made him angry. The electric current or the smell of copper.

“Hey. I think your dog’s going to electrocute himself.”

He brushed the gray shells off his hand. They fell into the sink and onto their floating friends.

“You said he only drinks out of a bowl?”

Yap’s lip curled up over brown teeth. His bite might not cut deep, but it would leave an infection. She kicked him away from the wire.

“Yeah, he wants a bowl.”

Wooden cabinets with missing handles hung above the counter. Jake opened one, took out a sturdy beige bowl, and turned on the faucet. The rush of water made the insects scramble.

“So. You’ve got a crazy pet there, huh?”

Madeline stood between a scowling Yap and the electrical cord.

“He’s not in a good mood. And I guess he’s not entirely all there in general.”

A single bug still clung to Jake’s knuckle. He put the bowl down by Yap, then squished the insect between two fingers.

“Thanks for the water.”

“Yeah. No problem.”

The dog watched the water and sneezed. The cough left him dazed. He tilted his head to the side and stared at nothing.

“I like seeing you, Madeline. It’s been since I don’t know when.”

Jake faced her, but she kept her gaze down and watched Yap struggle with drinking. He dipped his entire snout in and sneezed again, spraying the kitchen tiles. A few drops made dark spots on Jake’s leather boots.

“Give me your number. Let’s meet up, hang out. Old times. I want to get to know you again.”

Before answering, Madeline leaned over and picked the dog up. His tongue hung out of his mouth and his stomach vibrated. She held him close.

“Okay. I mean, my phone’s broken. Dropped in the toilet.”

His mouth opened, his chin dropped.

“Shit. I know you can’t start a catering business if you’ve got no phone.”

She focused on his eyebrows.

“Well that’s just it, it’s like I’m, I’m turning a setback into an opportunity. I’ll ditch that garbage phone and buy a new one, with one of those numbers that spells something. 951-CATERING or whatever.”

Jake thought about it, sucking in his cheeks.

“Nope. That’s too many numbers.”

“Well yeah, maybe not exactly that, but that idea more or less.”

Under her arm, Yap breathed fast.

“So, if I want to see you, how do I?”

She took a step back and turned into the hallway. As she moved out of the kitchen, she heard Jake follow her.

“Remember where you picked up my cousin for prom?”

“Sure. Her uncle’s place. On El Paso.”

“That’s where I am. Still living with dad.”

There was a sound on her right. Boots on basement stairs. Someone was coming up, another person was in the house. Madeline glanced at the long gun that leaned against the closet door.

A man walked out of the dark. He had buzz cut, hiking boots, and a short forehead. Everything about him looked Mexican except for the swastika tattoo on his forearm.

“Hey.”

The word wasn’t directed at her or the dog. His voice was high, like he had never hit puberty, and he drew out the length of the single syllable. Jake talked over her head.

“It’s cool, man. I know this chick. She went to my high school, she told me where she lives. Over on El Paso. Close.”

Short Forehead stepped into her path. There was a half-foot between his arm and the wall. She took advantage of the space and dodged through it, smiling at the surprise roommate. He was made of ropy muscle.

“Yeah, Jake’s going to come by and visit. You should come too. We can all meet up and go to Hard Hats.”

His response was another long vowel, a squeaky “huh.” With her eyes adjusted to the house’s light, she could see where the front window was. Beyond the crumb-strewn dining table, to the left of the door where she had walked in, and completely closed. Not with blinds. Not with blackout curtains. With a thick

sheet of metal bolted to the wall. Steel that couldn't be taken off. If sunlight were going to get through, a construction crew would need to solder out an entrance.

"Hard Hats is okay for me. Haven't been there in a while but if that's where you are, I'd check it out."

Jake walked across old and worn-down carpet. It was too threadbare to be anything but what his aunt had left behind.

"My roommate probably won't come. He's anti-social. But that's good. You and me can chill."

She grabbed the doorknob and twisted, but it didn't turn. The door stayed locked. The air smelled like dust and brine. She twisted her wrist again. Maybe the laws of nature had changed and an object at rest had made itself move. Maybe the door would unlatch its own bolt so she could be free. Jake reached around her. His arm passed over her stomach and his fingers landed on a keypad above the knob. He hit numbers until it sounded a shrill beep.

"There you go."

Daylight poured in. The morning was still early, with a low sun shining right at them.

"I'm going to come by El Paso, pick you up. Cool?"

The yard was ahead. Brown grass, the fence, a street, and then a bare field. She dropped Yap on the ground and kicked him out of the house.

"Yeah, yeah. I'll see you."

The dog put its nose up into the air. She passed the white van and went back to the road.

They were on a dirt path. Yap spotted a split-open tennis ball. He bounced, then limped the rest of the way to it. Jake's house was a few blocks behind them. Madeline's car was a few blocks ahead. Yap walked with an unstable gait. His joints were fragile. He snapped at the ball, tried to hold it in his mouth, and only pushed it away. It was too big for his small jaws.

She would leave the dog back where she had found him. Tied to a post in the sun and sitting on an unwatered lawn. The animal felt no emotion other than anger. He had nothing to look forward to but a badly functioning body working worse. His fur was thin and his skin was dry. When school got out that day, he would try to dodge the rocks students threw at him. Maybe one would hit him and maybe that would be it.

She picked up the ball. It was stained and brown and she could see the rubber where it had been cut open. The dog nipped at her heels while a car drove down the road. It was a square minivan with a low chrome bumper. Looking through the windshield, she saw a driver wearing Ray-Bans poke at his cell phone.

“You want the ball?”

Yap growled and raised his head as far as it would go. There was a grayed-out field in the center of his eyes. The van came toward them. Its license plate read IE4EVER and was just as high as the ridge along the dog’s back.

“Go get the ball.”

She threw it. Yap ran to the street.

Okay, so let's remind ourselves. Food is a false freedom.

I hear what you're saying. Everyone remembers their grandma's cooking. Everyone loves handmade tortillas. They're great. They're delicious.

No one likes the premade offender meals. No one likes the fish filet with tomato sauce. Yeah, it's bad. It's got no taste. It's probably not even that healthy. I eat the stuff too. I understand where you're coming from.

But listen. We're forgetting the reason we're here. When we demand the kitchen use better ingredients, when we ask for more interesting recipes, when we start talking about changing the actual quality of the food, we're missing the bigger picture.

Because what is food, really? What does it do?

Let's stop. Let's think about it. Food has two basic purposes. One, it sustains the body. Two, it sustains life.

Like I said, it's a false freedom.

It's no different than the bullshit rehabilitation programs. Did anyone actually enjoy those? No. What did a computer literacy program mean, when we weren't allowed to have computers in our cells, when we weren't allowed to use the Internet without supervision? What was the point of career technical education, when weren't allowed to have careers?

The point of being here, the true reason we stay where we do, is to relinquish control and yield autonomy. Self-determination is a false god, and anyone who says we should have a taco night is a false prophet.

So yeah. I understand. The food sucks. Frozen waffles suck. Nachos would be nice every once in a while. But deal with it. And stop complaining to the kitchen staff.

Outside the bar, Ernesto rested on a stool. He sat there for ten hours a day, seven days a week, and his spine weighed down on itself, slowly bending him forward.

It was late. A few bald men in baseball caps stood and smoked. Some wobbled as they inhaled. Others' balance was improved by heavy drinking. None talked. The red ends of cigarettes, the bitter expressions of a mostly male clientele close to closing time, the company of people who had never been friends. Things Ernesto had seen before and would see again. It seemed like these men always took a little while longer to stomp out their butts. It felt like the younger customers always paused for a few seconds more before taking out their IDs. His ten-hour shift was becoming a 600-minute grind. A few more years and he would be counting seconds.

One of the smokers glanced back through the door. His eyes got a little less dull and a little glassier. He had seen something that livened up his drink-deadened emotions. It had to be one of two things: either a girl had taken off her shirt or a fight had broken out.

Before Ernesto could turn around, he heard a glass shatter and a man shout slurred words. It was the sound of incomprehensibly expressed anger. Ernesto got off his stool and went into El Vagón. Dim lights hung over the mirrors, beer wet the floor, a table of squinting day laborers watched a woman nod to the jukebox's tune. Beyond them was a pool table. By its side, a man held a cue and used both his hands to bring it down on his buddy's neck.

The guy was built. Not tall, not chiseled, but wide, heavy, and strong. He had a white t-shirt with yellow sweat stains under the arms. His boots were covered in splotches of paint. No one came into this bar hoping to impress anyone else - he was here to drink. Chances were his unlucky friend had gotten between him and another beer, maybe by winning one too many low-stakes rounds of pool.

Ernesto took long strides toward the table. There was no fear in the confrontation. He was more sober than anyone who had ever walked inside these four walls. Sometimes rougneys tried to put up a fight, but the only thing that could do real damage to him was the stool outside. It kept him hunched over as he came up on the beating.

The cue went down on the smaller man's back and snapped in two. Its bottom half stayed in the squat man's hands. He raised himself up to his full and unimpressive height and shouted at Ernesto. It sounded like "blargh blargh" and could have meant anything between "fuck you" and "come at me." The giant went at him.

Maybe some bouncers don't mind hurting belligerents. Maybe they respond to violence with equal violence. That would be understandable. Tough jobs call for tough guys. But it wouldn't be moral.

As Ernesto stepped over the beat-up friend, the broken pool cue came down on his forehead. It didn't slow him. He reached over the fighter's shoulders and around his neck, forcing his chest in the direction of the ground, putting him in a headlock. After enough beers, almost everyone fell into this position like kittens calming as their mothers grabbed their scruff. The man swung the cue around some more, but was too drunk to hit anything. Ernesto took it out of his hands and walked to the exit.

They went outside like that, the bouncer standing and the drunk leaning forward. They went through the parking lot like that, passing between two pick-up trucks. At the street, he let the fighter go, solving the situation without adding a concussion to the man's medical record, creating peace without resorting to war, cleaning up the bar without leaving blood stains. The man wandered off ungrateful, mumbling more nonsense phrases. That was all the good Ernesto did that night. That was the only kind of good El Vagón allowed.

The bar was closed and he was back in his apartment, on his couch, with a book in his hands. If he stretched, his shoulders would cramp, the muscles in his neck would strain, and he would be stuck where he was for the next few hours. His eyes traveled over words. "Insignificant earthly creature! Though a woman you are uneducated in any doctrine of fleshly teachers in order to read writings with the understanding of the philosophers, nevertheless you are touched by my light. Paltry soul, although you are trampled by the male form because of Eve's transgression, speak nevertheless of the fiery work of salvation."

It was 2:30 am. At 4 pm he would have to be across the street, at work, on the same stool. He turned pages and found paragraphs describing when gemstones grew. His bed was only a few feet away. A window above his mattress was cracked open. One buzzing fly threw itself against the screen.

There was a knock at the door. "Hey, you in there? You better not be asleep and leaving me locked out." Her voice was muffled but the wall was thin and he understood every word. On the coffee table was a small notepad and pen. He shoved them into his pocket and slowly pushed himself up, trying not to bend his back too quickly. Her voice prodded him on.

"Come on, let me in."

He grabbed the knob and pulled it open. She stood with a smile and a black box. It was some kind of machine. She held it against her flannel shirt. The thing was flat and not much longer than her palm.

He looked down into the courtyard. None of the other apartment windows were lit and the building's front gate was closed. He scribbled.

"Don't climb the fence. Buzz me."

She squinted at the paper and shrugged.

"I forgot your apartment number, whatever. Check this out."

Earlier, around noon, when Ernesto rolled out of bed and looked at the couch, Madeline had already disappeared. There was enough food in the refrigerator to feed him, enough books on the shelf to re-read, and as much Colorado River water as California was legally allowed to pump through his faucet. It had been a safe place for a homeless girl to spend the night, but that was about it. Now she was back from a day spent stepping over wind-blown McDonalds bags, in an apartment with bare walls. She walked in and put her device on the coffee table.

“It’s a Flicker Micro GPS, 3.0 or 4.0, something point 0. Stick it anywhere and you see where it goes. You can follow it without even being anywhere nearby.”

He wrote. “I didn’t know you would be back.”

She took the paper out of his hands and then gave it back to him.

“Yeah, I was coming back. I thought you knew. I mean, it’s cool right? I had to see if Jake was still at his aunt’s place. Let me tell you, he has some weird pets there. Oh my god. But the more important thing is he’s got this big white van parked in his driveway, and we both know what he’s doing with that. Not dropping kids off at school. No way.”

She waved her arms while she spoke, touching his shoulder, pointing to her GPS, spreading her fingers out for emphasis. Her voice was slightly louder than it had to be, like there was a conversation she needed to talk over. He gave her another note. “You went to his house? Did he see you?”

“Yeah, he saw me. He gave me a guided tour. He thinks he’s going to take me on a date. I don’t know who lives at my dad’s old place, but they won’t be happy when he’s on their porch with a boner sticking out of his pants.”

He watched the way her uncombed hair mimed her tilting smile. Her lips ran through words like there were a million more she still had to get to. The girl was making plans and jokes, like working her way into a bank robber’s house was a fun prank. His pen was almost out of ink. Its lines were gray and faint.

“Please stop, don’t go back.”

“Oh, you’re worried.” She patted his shoulder. “That’s sweet, but I got this.”

The late hour hadn’t sapped her energy. She skipped fast over syllables. “Anyway, you want dinner? I’m crazy hungry. I got a carnitas bowl at Chipotle, but that was all I ate today and it was at like three.”

She stretched, with her hands clasped over her head. The bottom button of her flannel shirt rose above the top of her jeans. For a moment, she paused in that position and sighed. Her arms came down and she twirled toward the kitchen, pausing at his bookshelf. He fell back into the couch and watched her read titles.

“*Pilgrimage in the Middle Ages, Divine Mercy in My Soul?* Weird library, man. What’s this, *Elizabeth of*, of how do you even pronounce this? All the hard letters on one side and all the Os and Us on the other. Forget it.”

The light above the stove was off. She clicked it on and opened the refrigerator door, looking through what was left of his last trip to the grocery store. Vegetables, chicken, sweet and sour sauce.

“You got any spices?”

He pointed at a cupboard above the stove. She went to work.

While she cooked, she didn’t talk. Her main ingredients were hot sauce and Von’s brand Cajun Seasoning. It smelled slightly burnt but not bad. His kitchen hadn’t had other hands searching its shelves or opening its drawers, but it was well-organized and she found what she needed. When she finished the meal, she walked back to the couch with two plates, setting one on the coffee table.

“Hope you like it.”

He nodded and she pointed to the scar on his neck.

“And I hope it doesn’t fall right out of that thing. You could swallow a whole apple and it would still have space to pop out of there.”

She laughed at her own joke and sat next to him, not pressed against the opposite armrest but on the middle cushion, the plate resting on her lap, her feet up on the table, her elbow digging into the side of his stomach.

“How is it?”

She poked at him until he gave a thumbs up, then cut into her chicken. It was a straightforward combination of hot spices that tasted better than it smelled. While eating, he listened to her talk.

“So Jake just leaves his van out on his driveway. His house is like a prison, all the windows are bolted shut. No joke, literally bolted shut. Even if he wanted to look out and check on his garden, he couldn’t. I can strap the GPS on the bottom of his van, then see where he takes it, how his whole operation works. You don’t want to help me out, okay, that’s your decision. I don’t want to split the money anyway. But I’m going to figure out exactly what they do, exactly when to come at them, then bam! I’m there, I’ve got the cash, I’m gone.”

Her chicken was half-finished. She took big bites and chewed fast. He ate more slowly, but was almost done with his meal. It was his gravity. He had more mass so food fell into him faster. She pointed her knife at his neck.

“You get that scar in prison or what?”

He finished eating and picked up his pen. “Yes.”

“What did they use? Like one of those toothbrushes with a razorblade melted into the end?”

He kept scribbling. “You visited his house. Jake saw you. If he sees you put the GPS on his van, that’s bad.”

She read his note.

“Obviously, yeah. The idea is he won’t see me.”

She took another bite and he scrawled a response. As he wrote, she leaned toward him.

“It’s a bad way to make money. It’s a mistake. Violence is unpredictable.”

“Um yeah, okay.” Her tone was dismissive but her head stayed close to his shoulder. Her eyes didn’t move from his notepad.

“You’ll be hurt. You’re in my home, I can’t let you leave and get hurt.”

He started another word; she put her hand on his wrist and stopped him. She waved at his refrigerator and the bookshelf and the plaster walls.

“Listen. You want to live in this little apartment, be a bouncer, okay, that’s where you’re at. I’ve bagged groceries, I’ve poured coffee, I’ve been fired by managers who make a dime more than minimum wage. I know what options I’ve got and fuck those options. I saw the size of the bags Jake and his buddy took from the armored truck. They had to work hard to carry them. Like lifting weights at the gym hard. I mean, I can’t tell you exactly how much cash was in those things, but it was enough. Unless it was all pennies or something, it was plenty. So now I’ve got another option. I hurt myself, that’s my own fault. I stay in Victorville and make nine bucks an hour, that’s my own fault too. Fuck it, you know? Fuck me if I’m going to keep driving around with guys who get nervous when they’re south of the 210. I did that. Now? I’ve got something else.”

He tried to write. She grabbed his wrist and stopped him again.

“And what did you say last night anyway? You thought Jake saw me when he robbed the bank, but I talked to him today and I was right, he didn’t see me. So what do you know? I’m going to be careful, I’m going to be rich, and you’re not ever going to see me at El Vagón again. Never.”

Two words in ink. “You’re crazy.”

“Yeah, I don’t know. Fuck it.”

He was supposed to be asleep. He was supposed to be alone. His fridge was supposed to have enough food to make three more meals, now it only had two. He had a morning to spend dreaming dreams he wouldn’t be able to remember. He had an evening to feel his spine collapsing under the pressure of his weight. Her hair was unwashed but her eyes were clear and green. His back was supported by the couch and his knee was beside hers. He wrote. “How are you going back to Jake’s house?”

She looked at him and smiled. “Driving my car.”

“When are you leaving?”

“Tomorrow morning.”

They both looked at his notepad. “Don’t put the GPS on Jake’s van. You don’t want him to see you.”

“Yeah, I mean, that’s what I’m doing.”

Their plates shined. Burnt spices floated in vegetable oil. A faint breeze came in through the window. It was one of the last nice nights before summer would turn every hour brutal. Madeline leaned over and put her head on the couch’s armrest. He gave her another note.

“I’ll do it. You drive, you stay in the car. I’ll attach the GPS.”

Her eyes squeezed half closed in doubt.

“Okay. But if you think that’s going to get you any of the money, then be serious. Because tomorrow’s not the hard part.”

He showed her his notepad. “Okay.”

Her response was a short and low “hm.”

There were two pills left in his medicine cabinet. He took one and went to bed.

Before Madeline fell completely asleep, in a dream half-set on the couch where she lay and half-set in a house on the other side of town, she saw a shirtless and round-bellied man load a revolver and point it at her face. She saw his eyes had no white and his bare feet had no toes. At the moment he would have pulled the trigger, she snapped back to consciousness. Her back muscles spasmed and she was in the world.

In real life, just two nights earlier, that fat man hadn't had the chance to load his gun. He had never pointed it at her. But only because she couldn't sleep well when she was in a room with someone else. Another person, no matter how harmless or stupid, would keep her awake all night long. Some might think her paranoid instinct was sad. That it showed a weakness of character or revealed some Freudian trauma. Maybe it did. But it kept her alive.

The fat man hadn't loaded the gun, but she did hear him cleaning it. It was early, the same the morning she had walked into the Bank of America branch carrying his \$500 check. It was hours before the sun rose. As he rolled out of the bed they shared, her eyes opened wide. It was dark and she couldn't see anything, but she knew the drawer where he kept his gun. She heard it slide open and she heard him push wool down the barrel. The fact that she couldn't drift off into REM, that she couldn't happily pirouette her way through dreams, gave her a few seconds to collect herself. It gave her the time she needed to figure out what she was going to say. If she had been woken up in a sleeper's dazed stupor, if she had seen him pointing his gun at her and thought it all might just be a nightmare, she wouldn't have been able to stop him from doing what he knew he had to do. She wouldn't have been able to stay alive.

But she sat up and slowly told the fat man, a man who had completely trusted her until a few hours earlier, that it would be smart to let her walk away. She convinced him that it was his best option, and she made him write a check. It

wasn't her idea to add the words "FUCK" and "YOU" to the memo line, but if she could cash it, she didn't care. Getting the check was the important part. It was something she had learned early. She had given it a name: sucker severance. She always made sure she got it. Enough money to get by for a few weeks, to wander around until she found a better way to live her life. Or until some new mark stumbled into her path. It would have been nice if the clouds had parted and sunlight shone down and illuminated a new way to make money, but the idiots always got to her first. The problem was most suckers didn't actually live too well. Five hundred bucks wasn't rich and famous money, but at her level it was an above average score. If the fat man wanted to insult her on the check's memo line, that was his business.

She stared at Ernesto's ceiling and listened to him sleep. Long and deep breaths, like semi-trucks driving one by one down an almost empty freeway. He was at peace, with a pillow under his head, and comfortable with the woman he had welcomed into his home. For now, those four walls were a fine place to stay, with a refrigerator where she could find food, a bathroom where she could clean the dirt out from under her fingernails, and a bouncer who believed he wanted to keep her safe.

But like all her marks, the potential for violence was there. Barely buried beneath a masculine sense of righteousness. Ready to rise like the dead on doomsday. That was what kept her awake. That was why she never slept well. History proves that prophets are rarely accurate to the hour. The time of the final reckoning can't be predicted. It could happen when the sun was in the sky or it could happen when the stars shined. When it was expected or out of nowhere. Better to always assume it was happening now.

The freeway's high walls hid the city. Houses and businesses crouched where they couldn't be seen. Billboards rose to face commuters, showing photos of lawyers with pinched faces. Madeline and Ernesto drove south.

They left Victorville. The road's cement walls ended as rocky hills sloped down. Long faults and strong earthquakes kept developers from building on the land. There were no trees and no cacti, only grass and stone. The hour was early, the traffic was light, and the road went down.

They twisted around a long half-circle cut between two mountain ranges. Cliffs rose on the right; fields on the left fell at 75-degree angles. They had been driving at sixty for twenty minutes, but the corner between his apartment and El Vagón felt further than twenty miles away. His breath was shallow and he gripped the door handle. A hawk flew through the sky, two crows diving after it. The bigger bird pulled in his wings and barreled toward the center of the valley. The crows flew faster and slammed into his feathers. They kept falling, dropping further, going faster as the ground came up. Ernesto's mouth was dry.

Madeline drove another half hour, making fun of him because he had no license and no car.

"Seriously. Do you ever go anywhere? I mean it's not like Victorville is a pedestrian paradise, there are about two actual sidewalks in the city. If you're always in your apartment, how do you not even have a TV?"

They parked on a residential corner in Norco, beside a light blue house. Its windows showed dark and empty space. A tree spread its branches above the roof. By the road, a mailbox was stuffed full of letters and coupon catalogues.

Morning's low sun cast no shadows. Fenceposts and parked cars and telephone poles radiated light. They couldn't be looked at directly, their size and shape had to be guessed by the way they obscured the things around them.

There was an organization here. A convention written in neighbors' habits, city sanitation, and building codes. An arrangement strengthened by union rules and low-turnout elections. An order so random it felt like freedom.

He had slept for four hours. He felt sweat on his lips. Madeline talked.

"Jake's is three houses up. His driveway is right after those two trees. That's his van there. We've got a pretty good view from here, right?"

He looked at the stuffed mailbox and rolled the window down. Madeline pushed a lever at the side of her seat. Its back dropped.

"Let's do this. Come on. Get that GPS, you ready?"

He stared at Jake's driveway and nodded. A dirt path ran between the street and the lawns. The van's back bumper juttied out over it.

"I've got everything you'll need."

She unbuckled her seatbelt and turned around, reaching over the center console and grabbing things off the back floormat.

"Here's the GPS."

She tossed it into Ernesto's lap.

"It's not made to hook onto the bottom of a stranger's car, obviously. The guy at Best Buy told me he sells it to moms who put it in kids' backpacks. Not exactly what we're doing. So I kind of had to improvise."

Her voice had the same chemical edge as the car vents' Freon breeze. She turned toward the dashboard holding duct tape and superglue.

"What I think is, you should pour the superglue all over the back of the GPS, then stick it on something flat and maybe, if you can, something you can wrap the duct tape all the way around. Very not fancy, yeah. But I'm not the FBI and Best Buy isn't going to sell me straight creeper gear. We've got to make do."

He took it all.

The street was empty. The dirt path was marked with sneaker and horseshoe prints. He checked to see if anyone was on the block, if neighbors were walking out of their homes.

Two thrushes chased each other around a rose bush.

In Jake's yard, he saw nothing that would keep him hidden. There was a single palm tree and unhealthy grass. His back would be on concrete and his body would be exposed.

But no one inside the house would be able to see out. The windows were shuttered. Jake wouldn't be able to pass one, look at his driveway, and spot the stranger beneath his van. The home's second story was further back than its first, with a small deck on the roof. The higher windows were also closed. The front door was shut and its bronze knob reflected sunlight.

Far distances seemed closer than they should be. The thrushes chirped too loud. A world organized chaotically is felt more intensely than a room cleaned and re-cleaned.

The white van had a sliding door on the side and swinging doors at the back. There were about six inches between the chassis and the ground, enough space to roll under quickly and comfortably.

He went to the back license plate and got on the ground.

The underside was all metals, tubes, and rectangles. He needed something flat, something he could wrap duct tape around. He saw it.

There was a black plastic covering in the middle of the van's undercarriage, toward the right side. That side faced Jake's house's front door.

Ernesto took the GPS out of his pocket. He stayed behind the van and smeared glue over it. The superglue had a smooth, synthetic smell. It stuck to his fingers after he had slathered it on. He wore the roll of duct tape around his wrist; he moved to the right side of the van and lay on his back.

It only took a few seconds to put the GPS on. The duct tape wouldn't go all the way around the plastic covering but he tore long strips and got a solid hold. It was where Madeline wanted it. For the first time since they had parked he heard a sound that wasn't her voice or birdsong.

An engine roar. Coming at him.

He rolled out from under the chassis, his elbow scraping the driveway. He got on his feet and glanced at the house. The windows were still depthless and

black. The doorknob still reflected sun. The superglue was in his hand and he moved it to his pocket. He used his thumb to tear the sticky bottle off his fingers. A few trees and a few yards were between him and Madeline. He left the driveway and walked onto the dirt path.

The motorcycle came down the road.

It was covered in dust and it had Nevada plates. Its driver wore a yellow helmet. The visor mirrored the field on its left and Madeline's Honda on its right. No eyes, no face. Long blonde hair fell out from beneath it. He wore a black jacket with stiff shoulders and arms. If he crashed at eighty, his gear would keep him unscuffed and unhurt. The bike moved toward the house, slowing as it came closer. Ernesto saw himself in the helmet's silver visor. The engine went down a decibel, moved behind him, and turned onto the driveway he had just left.

The sky pulsated, falling on him. Nothing was flat. The street's pavement was cracked, fences pointed up, and dust blew over the ground.

He was back in Madeline's car.

"God damn, that was close. Look."

They watched Jake's garage door open. The driver killed his engine and walked the bike inside. As soon as he was out of view, the door went down.

"Okay, I guess you had a good idea. I should not have been the one putting that thing on. I mean holy fuck they didn't see you, but that was close."

Her voice was quick, clipping the ends of words. The car stayed static and felt like it was moving fast.

"Oh shit, check it out."

A man was on Jake's lawn. He was shorter than the biker, walking down a path toward the van. He had a buzz cut and tattooed arms. A heavy duffel bag hung over his shoulder.

"I met that guy when I was at Jake's yesterday. I think he's Mexican or something but he's got Nazi tattoos."

He opened the van's side door, threw in the duffel bag, and then went back to the house. Half a minute later he was back out and carrying another bag. It

also went in the van. He shut the door, testing the handle to make sure it was locked.

“This might be about to go down.”

Ernesto reached into the glovebox, took his pen out, and wrote.

“Leave.”

She glanced at his notepad and pulled back.

“Are you crazy?”

He scribbled. “You can follow where they go on GPS. You can do this far away.”

Would duct tape and superglue hold on the bottom of a hot and moving car? Outside, it had felt like there was no space between objects, just homes and birds and metal all fused together. Back in the car, that urgency was gone.

“No way. You wanted to put the GPS on and thanks, you did. But I can’t just know where Jake goes, I’ve got to see what he does. That GPS gives me distance. It lets me hang back and not get all up in their rearview mirror. That’s it.”

He wrote and she talked louder.

“Okay, you helped me, you saved me, whatever.” Her tone was taunting. “But I’ve been on my own since I got object permanence, so I’m going to stay here and do what I said I would do. You want to head back to Victorville so you can sit outside El Vagón? Okay guy, do it. Get a bus.”

She was serious. They sat and watched nothing happen. No one came out of the house. No one added another motorcycle to the garage.

It had taken an hour to drive from Victorville to Norco. In bus time, that was at least three lines and forty stops. He could ask for her phone and look up the route, but even if he left now, he wouldn’t arrive at work anything close to on time.

The GPS wouldn’t stay attached to the bottom of the van. It couldn’t. Superglue and duct tape fix things that stay stationary. Not engines that heat up

and vans that speed through yellow lights. It would fall off. Her plan wouldn't work.

Dark sky and white stars were above the field. He tried to roll a window down but she told him not to. The car radio was tuned to a station low on the dial. Ernesto listened.

"I'm sympathetic to their struggle. People who work at non-profits honestly want to do good, they want to help. But you know and I know that's not enough."

A reporter joined in.

"His philosophy was that disruption shouldn't only apply to Silicon Valley start-ups. It was a strategy that could also change the philanthropic world."

Then back to the entrepreneur.

"We're not the first people to build a social enterprise. It's an approach idealists repeat because it works. Profit is sustainability."

The speaker was confident in his narrative. He made it sound like an unconventional idea that, once properly understood, would look like common sense.

"So many non-profits set goals they can't achieve. Year after year after year. We took a holistic approach, analyzing an entire system, looking for unexpected connections. Things that didn't seem to be related but that, linked together, could change everything. We asked a lot of questions, tried to find answers that fit like puzzle pieces. How many Americans worry about global warming? Most of them, but cows are still the nation's number two polluter. How many political scientists worry about overpopulation? Again, most of them, and they predict Earth will exceed its maximum sustainable population by 2112. In India, the average mother has seven children. Their situation is so bleak that fathers break their daughters' legs so they'll earn more begging on the street. It's barbaric."

The reporter guided the audience toward the entrepreneur's conclusion.

“Instead of creating a product that was cheaper than other goods, instead of meeting a previously ignored need, they made something that solved two problems at once, joining what had seemed completely separate. The American meat consumer and the impoverished Indian family.”

“Cows pollute, but Americans still eat steak. Indian parents can’t support their children, but they still have sons and daughters. It’s all about that surprising link. Our system is simple. A destitute mother chooses to enroll in our program. She shows up to the plant for processing and we choose the most promising of her children. By the time she’s been packaged, we’ve arranged to pay for that child’s board and education through the age of sixteen. The mother’s sacrifice-slash-investment puts a dent in India’s overpopulation problem, plus Americans consume less factory-farmed meat. Our product is more expensive, but people like to know that what they eat is helping a poor kid get a diploma. We’re turning both the food industry and the charity industry upside-down, and the entire process is relatively cruelty-free.”

Ernesto turned the radio off and took out his pen. His writing matched their waiting, slow and purposeful.

“I have medicine at home. I need it.”

He handed the note to Madeline.

“What, like for allergies or something?”

Her thumb brushed his sentence. He took the notepad back.

“No. A prescription.”

“Huh. How often did the doctor say to take it?”

The neighborhood had no streetlamps. A scurrying animal triggered a porch lights’ motion sensor. “Once a day. Every night.”

“Okay. Well you’ve probably missed a night before, no big deal.”

Two letters. “No.”

Wires hung in the air, suspended by wooden telephone poles. Dark lines against a dark sky.

“What’s the prescription for?”

Ernesto pointed to his throat.

"I thought the only way to cure a cut was stitches."

Her eyes were on his. She leaned back into her seat and he answered. "I've taken them ever since it happened."

Her arm was in the space between them. She glanced between his note and his face.

"In prison, right?"

He didn't write a response.

"How long were you locked up?"

Every hour in the car made its small space smaller. He turned back down to his paper. "Fourteen years."

"Fuck. What did you do, kill somebody?"

Again, no response. The pen stayed in his hand. His back was too wide for his seat. Sitting straight in his chair, his elbow was jammed against the car door and his knees were pressed against the glovebox. She reached out and squeezed the back of his hand.

"Damn, sorry. I didn't think actually."

In the shadows, her eyes were black and gray. She watched him and he watched her. They let the clock take one digital line away from eight and turn it into nine. Her hand moved away from his. His pen went back to his notepad.

"Nineteen years old. DUI. Blood alcohol at point one nine. Cops took my license, took my car, on parole. Six months later, took another car out. Stole the keys from a neighbor. Made a left turn, two of them were right there. She was." He stopped, stared at what he had written. A pick-up rolled by, one yellow headlight on and the other smashed. He crossed out "she was," then wrote more. "Police took me out of the car two miles later. Blood alcohol .25. Both of them were back there, where it happened."

Madeline read each letter as it appeared. She didn't stop him and she didn't urge him on. Her hand moved to his knee. When he finished she turned away and looked at the wheel. They sat together while the stars fell behind rooftops.

“Everything I’ve done, I mean.”

She didn’t finish the thought. Her words drifted away. When the sentence was gone, she started a new one.

“I remember in high school, I had this physics class. It was full of math, homework. I hated it. Our teacher, he was this bald guy, shiny head. And one day, he ignores the worksheets and starts talking. Talking about stuff that was way different than whatever the day’s assignment was supposed to be. Like, saying deep stuff. He tells us there are these scientists and according to them, it’s hard to remember. But they say something like, that time isn’t right. Time doesn’t work like it’s supposed to work. It splits up, starts at the same place then goes in different directions. So, if you’re riding a bike and you can go straight or turn left, then both actually happen. You go straight and you turn left. Time splits.”

She sank into her chair. The wheel rose above her forehead. Her hand moved off Ernesto’s knee and her fingers wrapped around the gear stick.

“It stayed with me. I don’t know. I guess I was thinking, like you, I can remember different things. I don’t want even to say it but, at my baby cousin’s house, he was in this kid-sized outdoor pool and I was a kid too, angry or whatever. I was taking it out on whoever was around. Or even really like you. You know, you wake up with your car keys in your hand, the night before isn’t anything but single pictures, right? Like freeze-frames that don’t connect to anything.”

Ernesto read the license plate number on the car ahead of theirs. Madeline drew her arms to her chest and folded in on herself.

“I mean, if you put it all together. Or if what that teacher said was true. It’s not like I couldn’t have done what you did, with those two people. If you say, okay, everything that could have happened did happen. That’s why I never forgot what that teacher said. Because then everything that almost happened actually did happen.”

She told him she was sure he could skip his pills once. That he would be fine. She told him if he started throwing up or his cut reopened, she would drive back to Victorville. He stayed in the passenger seat. They took turns sleeping.

His dreams were like the days between bleeding on the prison floor and opening his eyes. Long and dark. No feeling, nothing.

Honestly, I'm disappointed. I didn't want to be involved in this. It would have been better if you guys solved it on your own. But you didn't. You haven't solved it. We're regressing.

The bathroom conflict needs to end now. I went to wash my hands this morning, and I couldn't even touch the faucet.

Disgusting, you guys. Really foul.

Hey, I know that cleaning bathrooms isn't the most glamorous job. Most of you would rather be cooks or lab assistants, but guess what? Those positions are taken. The kitchens and the labs are full and the bathrooms are at a crisis point. I mean, I wouldn't walk in there if I was wearing knee-high galoshes.

I've been told that the split is guards against convicts, convicts against guards. That's really upsetting. It upsets me. I mean, I know you guards played a huge role in getting us to the positive place we're at today. You told me yourselves. The only reason the bosses stuck you guys here was to add one more obstacle between the prisoners and the exits.

So why are you backsliding into the bosses' logic?

I hate to even have to identify who was a guard and who was a convict. When we're here, that distinction should never, ever be made. But with the bathroom situation, I've got to be a pragmatist. Idealism isn't working. In this case, we're going to have to go back to the old signifiers.

We'll make an official bathroom clean-up crew. It can be a permanent gig or we can shift week to week, I don't care. You decide. But it will have to be half-guards, half-convicts. Because otherwise I don't think it will get done. And I'd like to sit on a toilet without being worried it's going to bubble into my asshole.

Morning came. Madeline had oranges in a bag. She gave one to Ernesto.

“Got to have breakfast.”

He dug his thumb into the rind. There were too few pedestrians to worry about being conspicuous, so their car windows were down. Fresh air made the wait easier.

“Fourteen years, huh? How old were you when you got out?”

He sucked the orange’s juice off of his thumb, then grabbed his pen.

“34. My sentence was forty but I did fourteen.”

Madeline stuffed her mouth with fruit and talked through it.

“What? You did like, a third of your time? That doesn’t make sense.”

His hands were thicker and less nimble than hers. It took him longer to peel his orange. When he finished, he wrote. “They let me out after my throat was cut.” His letters were dashed off quickly; he was hungry. She leaned over to see what he had written.

“Yeah, that still doesn’t make sense.”

It was early. The car’s clock read 6:07. She turned the radio on, searched the dial, and stopped at a pop station. The choruses were half-battle cry, half-self help. Inspirational anthems aimed at thirteen-year old girls. Major key synthesizer chords became marching band drums became half-rapped verses. It was too energetic for the unmoving landscape in Jake’s yard. Van, fence, palm tree. Six turned to seven turned to eight. At 9:30, the scene changed.

“Finally. Look.”

They watched the garage door swing open. Jake’s roommate, the man with a swastika tattoo on his forearm, pushed the motorcycle out to the driveway. He turned the bike so its front wheel faced the street. The engine hummed and he reached into his leather jacket. Madeline saw what he brought out before Ernesto did.

“Holy shit.”

It was the same palm tree print ski mask that had been worn by the robber who had doused the armed truck’s guards with pepper spray. The brown-skinned Nazi put it on, using one hand to bring it over his face.

Jake was the next one out.

He walked through the yard, his mouth moving, saying something they couldn’t hear.

The low trees in the neighbor’s lawn and a parked and sun-battered Chevrolet kept their car more or less out of sight. If Jake took a long look in their direction, he would have seen Madeline pointing at the motorcycle on his driveway. He didn’t. He put on a red helmet and jumped on the back of the bike.

“Remember that Nevada license plate? They changed it. It’s California.”

Overnight, while it was sitting in the garage, someone had switched one beat-up and dusty plate for another. The only obvious difference was the state name over the blue numbers.

She took her car keys out of the soda-sticky center console.

“Let’s see where this guy’s going.”

Ernesto grabbed her hand before she could start the engine. He wrote fast. “Wait. For the van. Follow the GPS.”

Outside, the bike was moving away from them, traveling south at a slow speed.

“No way. He’s wearing that ski mask, this is happening.”

She put her keys in the ignition but didn’t turn them. While Ernesto scribbled, she watched the bike hang right.

“You drive behind him. He sees you, he calls it off. It won’t happen.”

Her eyes moved to Ernesto’s note and her hand moved off her keys. She grimaced.

“Okay, but this van better fucking go. God damn if it stays here.” She didn’t finish the thought. Her leg was tense and her toes were on the gas pedal.

The combined strength of duct tape and superglue was all that kept her plan alive. The bond broke and it was finished. A third man walked out of the house and into the yard. He was the same height as yesterday's biker, with the same long blonde hair. Though their windshield, they could only see the back of his head. He walked to the driveway and disappeared into the van.

Madeline's voice was a constrained cheer. "Nice. Nice."

Ernesto wrote, "Stay back. Follow the GPS. Let him get a head start."

"Yeah, I get it. I made the plan, remember?"

She reached into her pocket and took out an iPhone. Her fingers slid across its screen and a map appeared. She handed it to him.

"The blue dot is what we follow. I drive, you tell me where to go."

The van backed into the road and followed the motorcycle's path, heading south, then going right. Madeline's wrist turned and the Honda's engine shook. Ernesto watched the map. White lines for roads, gray blocks for buildings, a blue dot for their target.

Madeline gripped the steering wheel, waiting to hit the gas. The van was out of sight, two blocks away, then three.

"Well what the fuck? You can't understand maps or something? Tell me where to drive guy."

He pointed directions and she pulled onto the street. Straight, right, toward the freeway. She was eager. Her eyes were narrow. They started inching closer to the blue dot and he put his hand on her shoulder. She slowed down. It happened again. He made her move back. Then again.

The 15 became the 215. It was 10 am Tuesday and heavy traffic moved fast. Palm trees rose over the road. Car exhaust had turned their green fronds brown.

They passed exits, offramps, and interchanges. Each led to who knew where. Casinos surrounded by parking lots surrounded by deserts, beaches and westward pointing piers, apartments where TVs were always on. Ernesto and Madeline stayed silent.

The GPS didn't fall off. The blue dot kept moving. He wrote, "We don't know where they're going. Maybe they've already taken enough money. Why would they rob again? Why would they need more?"

Madeline glanced at his note. "Yeah, or maybe they want to be rich. Like really rich. I don't know. You don't know. So let's follow them and find out."

On the side of the road, the empty spaces between houses and buildings and mini-malls grew. There were vacant lots and patches of weeds. An overpass blocked the sun and Ernesto gestured to get off the freeway. The van had turned onto side streets. The blue dot moved slowly. He kept his hand on her shoulder, squeezing whenever she sped up. The GPS led them exactly where she wanted to go.

A Chevron was on one side of the road and a Walgreens was on the other. According to the map, the van had stopped beside a long and wandering plot of green, a golf course that cut through a residential neighborhood.

The distance got shorter. They were two blocks away. Ernesto pointed at the curb and Madeline pulled over.

"Okay."

She killed the engine and checked the phone's map.

"You stay here."

He didn't take his hand off her shoulder.

"What?"

Her short hair stuck up, pointing in different directions. Ernesto let her go and grabbed his pen. "Same as before. When I put the GPS on. Jake knows you. You show up, he sees you, trouble."

Her response was a low "huh." Her lips went down. She watched the paper without looking up at him.

"Okay, so you've got a plan?"

"I go out. I look. Maybe the van's parked, maybe the GPS fell off."

She jabbed one finger into his ribs. Her red flannel shirt hung loosely over her arm.

“If that thing is lying in the middle of the road I swear,” she poked him again. “You’re walking back home, guy. You put it on, so if it fell off, that’s on you.”

He went to the golf course. The houses he passed had wide lawns. There weren’t many trees in the neighborhood. The sky was big and blue; the sidewalk was smooth and unfamiliar. The horizon ended at places he hadn’t been.

To the left was the street where the GPS had stopped. He turned onto it and looked down the center of the road, searching, looking for a black box and half-melted duct tape. They had been driving for 45 minutes. It couldn’t have held on any longer than that.

God doesn’t speak. Not in signs or tea leaves or coded messages. But that didn’t mean Ernesto should have ignored what His world revealed.

The van was parked in front of a white house with a running sprinkler. He stood and watched and saw himself in its rearview mirror.

He moved back and stood close to the corner, peering at the van’s bumper from a safe distance.

A car rolled past the corner’s stop sign. The window was down and a way too-tan woman clutched an e-cigarette with two fat fingers. She cruised slowly down the road. From the opposite direction, the motorcycle drove up.

Two helmets. One hid Jake and the other hid his roommate.

They swung past the too-tan lady’s red car, coming at the van fast, not slowing down.

The bike’s sound vibrated through Ernesto’s back, loosening the muscles that always stayed sore, unbending his spine, shooting a tremor through his arms.

There was a single small chain that ran down the edge of the golf course’s grass, separating the street from the eighteen holes, marking boundaries written in triplicate and filed at the city clerk’s office.

The bike shrieked.

The two men on it leaned forward.

Black rubber marked where the driver hit brakes.

It stopped and they jumped off. The motorcycle fell onto the pavement. Plastic panels crunched.

Their helmets covered their faces. It was impossible to see where they looked. If they surveyed the street or if they saw the man on the corner.

Jake's roommate had two heavy bags and a utility belt loaded with stun grenades. Jake had a shotgun. Their boots hit pavement and their legs lunged forward.

From above the neighborhood's low rooftops, cutting through the empty air, came the sound of sirens.

A sensation like water ran over Ernesto's head, falling down his neck. It dissipated in his shoulders, then filled his chest. He choked.

Jake came to the van's side door. With his free hand, he reached out. He didn't have a key. He ripped the door open. The two men got in.

They brought the shotgun in with them. They brought the heavy bags in with them. A hard sound and the door shut, then the van was in the street and moving.

The sirens got louder. Ernesto turned around.

"So?"

Madeline threw his notepad at him. He was back in her passenger seat. The rush of blood that had filled his lungs was gone, but he couldn't feel the pen in his hand. His fingers were numb.

"I saw everything."

A blur of black and white as a police car sped by, hitting speed bumps at sixty.

"You saw it? What happened?"

While she asked questions, he kept writing. She leaned toward him, pressing her arm into his, her eyes searching for his next word. The curbs and corners were waiting for what would happen next. A second police car turned onto the street and drove faster than the first.

“We can do it. It’s simple.”

She reached out and tore the paper away from him. Her index finger went to two letters.

“‘We?’ Like you and me? We do this together, like a team?”

Her high voice hit pronouns like a hammer. Her finger jabbed the paper.

Ernesto nodded.

A circular cement table, a pile of French fries, and two burgers. Vines wrapped around a trellis above their heads. Car grills were aimed at their backs. They ate in the small oasis of a drive-by spot. Men in suits drank sodas and kids in Dodgers caps swore in two languages. Someone might have been listening to Ernesto and Madeline talk, but if they were they didn't care. The goal was to eat a burger and leave, not snitch or save lives.

"So you said they had guns?"

Ernesto raised one finger.

"Then we need guns."

He put his burger down and wrote in his notepad. "No bullets."

The giant might not need a loaded gun. Like a grizzly, he could probably take some buckshot and keep charging. An increase the peace attitude was sweet, but it was easy for an invincible man to be a pacifist.

"Yeah guy. Bullets."

He composed a response. Her eyes wandered to a Ford Mustang painted the same neon green as ooze in a kiddie cartoon. Its rims were tricked out in spinning chrome. Sitting behind the wheel, holding a large milkshake, was a guy about five years too old to drive a look-at-me car. He probably had a broke girlfriend who made him feel young. If the arc of the moral universe really did bend toward justice, the girlfriend would eventually take the Mustang, look better in it, and leave him feeling sad. But MLK got shot so who the fuck knew. Maybe this prick would screw dim bitches till he died happy.

Ernesto's note was short. "I'll only help if we can't hurt anyone. If it's impossible."

"Whatever. Anyone who tries to hurt you would be an idiot, obviously. I mean if you bounced back from that," she waved her half-eaten burger at his neck, "then there's not much chance anything's going to stop you."

Leaning over his notepad, he wrote more. "I need my pills."

Her iPhone was on the table between them. She slid her finger across its screen to see where the blue dot had traveled.

"Okay. Looks like Jake's heading back to Norco. We'll stop at a CVS on the way there."

The guy in the Mustang finished his meal and backed out of his space, driving too fast through the parking lot. Ernesto filled his notepad with more words. "No. I can only get them in one place."

"What, Walgreens?"

"No. Where they're made. San Diego."

He looked across the table at her, his eyes wide and his chin shaped like a fist.

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

She read his response. "Our prison was run by a private company, their doctors staffed our clinic. Their drugs healed my throat and I still need them. I have two more pills at home, but those will only last two days."

On the ground by her feet, a pigeon swiveled its head, waiting for a French fry. She moved her foot to kick it away, then stopped. Generosity was for suckers and the wealthy. She was neither, but the bird wasn't going to peck her to death. Let it be.

"Listen," she tapped the cell phone. "These guys robbed a truck on Saturday afternoon, then got a second this morning. They could have picked up a third between the two, we don't know. We've only had this GPS for 24 hours, they could have done anything. But we do know they're going hard and I do know I want that money. Me and you, we've got to be fifteen minutes away from that van always. More than that and we'll miss the whole thing. Your apartment's an hour drive, San Diego's farther than that. We can't go there."

The creases on Ernesto's square forehead got deeper, his expression more worried. She waited but he didn't write anything.

"Okay, okay. You said you've never missed a day of these pills, right?"

His eyes stayed on her, large and wide. He nodded.

“Well, listen. You got your throat cut three years ago. People miss their meds all the time. Know what I think’s going to happen if you skip a few days? Nothing. Nothing but you’ll wind up with a big bag of cash to spend on whatever bizarre medical bills you’ve got.”

The pigeon was still beneath the table. It was ugly. Its white feathers had mole-brown splotches. Her burger was close to finished and she dropped what was left on the ground. Practice for when she could afford generosity.

“And that doesn’t even really matter, because what we need right now is to find a gun. Fast. I’ve still got cousins around Norco, they haven’t ever been like the least crazy people you could meet.”

Ernesto turned his notebook back a page and tapped his pen against “No bullets.” She nodded. “Got it. Safety first.”

At the next table over, a neck-bearded kid threw his leftovers at a garbage can and missed.

It hadn’t been too long since she had seen her cousin Billy. He was still young and accident-prone, plus his number was saved on her phone. She picked it up and hit his name.

“Hey, Billy? It’s Madeline.”

Before she got the guns, she would make something up. Tell Ernesto her cousin was paranoid and that only she could go into his house. That he had to stay out in the car.

“Who was that dude with you?”

Her cousin was in his gas station uniform. He was a hard worker, kind of. Once he had told her a story about being at his Shell late, when the pumps were deserted and no one was in the store. A guy came in with a Halloween mask, put a shotgun in his face, and took the register’s cash. The problem was the mask couldn’t hide that he was a friend Billy saw every weekend. They hadn’t arranged the thing together, so her cousin wasn’t getting a cut of the score. The friend might have actually believed his 99-cent costume would make him unrecognizable. But when the police came by the store to interview Billy, he gave them as few identifying details as possible. The robber was a cool guy. He had a nice crash pad. He was generous with beers and leftover Chinese delivery. Billy wasn’t going to snitch on a buddy.

Madeline answered his question. “I know him from Victorville, he’s helping me out with a few things.”

“Like the same things you need these guns for?”

She shrugged. “Or whatever. He’s nice. Chill.”

Billy shared a house with whatever desperate Craigslistster was willing to pay the majority of the rent. His roommates never stayed long. Within a month or two he would usually like the person enough to let it slip that he was ripping them off. Madeline sat on his bed and looked at Led Zeppelin posters.

“So why do you need these?”

“I don’t know. Are they registered in your name?”

In the corner was a terrarium. It was filled with rocks, plastic plants, and water. Two turtles bobbed. Billy tore lettuce and dropped it in piece by piece.

“No way. I got them from my man Beezo. Serial numbers have been gone for a long time.”

“Then why do you need to know what I’m using use them for?”

The turtles saw the falling food and swam to the rock where it landed.

“Sure. True. You don’t want to tell me, cool.”

The last strip of lettuce went down. The bigger turtle made it to the rock and boxed the smaller one off. Billy went to a safe the size of a shoebox. It looked like it was one step more secure than a Fisher Price toy. He twisted its knob and she talked.

“Do you remember that guy who took your sister to prom? Jake?”

He looked back over his shoulder.

“Jake Wolfe?”

“Yeah.”

“He’s why you want these?”

“I’m just asking. You ever see him around?”

The safe clicked open. Inside were three handguns and three extra clips. He took out two guns and turned around. Before he responded, he gave her a long look. His chubby face was quizzical.

“Not too much. The guy’s not the most friendly, you know what I mean? I hear things, though.”

“Like what?”

His forearms tensed; he felt the guns’ weight.

“Some story. Beezo, the same guy who got me these, told me some nonsense.”

“What nonsense?”

He put the gun down and glanced at the ceiling, remembering details.

“Things. You know. No one likes Jake that much and people say shit about people they don’t like. Beezo’s just like anybody. He talks trash, he makes shit up. But some of the things he says are true. Fuck if I know. What he told me was he was out at Butterfield Park, counting constellations and getting high, and he saw Jake across a field. He kind of stopped, spied on him. Watched what he was doing. He said Jake had this canvas bag. It was dripping water and shit. Like it had water in it, but it wasn’t waterproof. Supposedly, he sits down, he opens the

bag, and he takes out a fish. A big sea bass kind of a fish, a feed a family, take a fisherman's picture type of a fish. He raises it up, then drops it. Sits there and stares at it while it flops to death. Like he was looking for a sign or something. Like he was a witch. Or a warlock I guess, because he's a dude."

"So he's an idiot."

Her cousin gave her a gun.

"I don't know. That might be true or it might be Beezo being Beezo."

She felt the grip and looked at the muzzle.

"But if it is true, he's superstitious. A dummy. A junior Scientologist or whatever."

"I guess."

He took the clip out of the second handgun.

"You said you wanted one that wasn't loaded?"

She nodded.

"Then you don't mind if I keep the bullets?"

"No, no problem."

That was everything she had come for. She had her guns and she knew her prey was probably an e-meter reading, group sex having, Flavor Aid drinking believer. Keeping one weapon unloaded was stupid, but the idiot it would be aimed at wasn't any smarter.

From the car, Ernesto looked at the house that had closed around Madeline. It was painted a too-dark brown, like someone had wanted it to give the rustic impression of a cabin but had gone too far and made it look like a factory. Even for a one-story home, the building looked low, like it wouldn't let anyone tall through the door. Only those who lived closer to the ground would be allowed in.

For the second time that day, his perception of space had changed. Earlier, fenceposts and trees had seemed unusually close together. When he had looked

at them he saw a connection. It kept him from walking in the gaps between objects. Instead, he had had to force his way through.

He had read a book that said, because there is emptiness that separates every atom from every other atom, there is an impossibly small probability that a man can put his hand through a table and find his fingers sticking through the other side, without having broken either his fingers or the table's surface. A chance that couldn't be brought down to zero that all of the atoms in the man's hand and all the atoms in the table's wood would pass each other by.

Waiting alone in the car, it was as though he had achieved that state. The world had opened up to let him pass through. He could see gaps where there should have been none. A divine vision.

There will be no arts and crafts classes!

It's come to my attention that there has been an underground ring of painters, collagers, and scrapbookers. I'm not sure when this happens or where it happens. I don't know if you guys are drawing at night or in janitorial closets or in that weird empty room behind the gym. Frankly, I don't care.

If you're crafting, stop. If you're teaching crafting classes, stop.

Obviously, there used to be arts and crafts classes. I know that. I don't understand why anyone would think the fact that we used to have arts and crafts classes is a logical reason that we should still have arts and crafts classes.

There used to be a lot of things. Solitary confinement. GED programs. Strip searches. But we don't have those anymore. And no one would argue that because we used to have them, we should bring them back. So please, stop telling me, "We used to watercolor!" Yeah. Used to. Past tense.

Remember, you're the ones who chose to get rid of all that. We did this ourselves. You were the ones who told me, I mean I didn't make it up, that drawing pictures of mountains and skylines and the Eiffel Tower was a way to offer an escape that wasn't real. You told me that you didn't want to look over our walls. You didn't want to draw pictures of places you couldn't go.

So what's up with getting together to draw rural landscapes and cows and roosters and whatever? That's not who we are. Stop.

Anyway, if you have art materials, if you've got scissors, paints, or whatever, turn them in. We're not confiscating them. We're starting a new project. Honestly, I think you'll like it. It's a good one.

They were back on Jake's block. Parked beside the stuffed and overflowing mailbox, with two handguns under the spare tire in Madeline's trunk. The moon rose above the field to their left and lights were off in the houses to their right. She sat behind the wheel; he sat in the passenger seat.

The radio was on with the volume low. Madeline's big friendly giant tapped his knee to a Taylor Swift song. There were worse places to be and she had met some of the men who called those places home.

"But you're right, guy, it is simple."

Ernesto gave her a thumbs up and a crooked smile.

"If you saw Jake just open the van's side door, without keys or anything, that means they leave it unlocked. All we have to do is follow it, wait until it's parked, then walk right in and scare the shit out of the driver. We get him to give up, we stay there until the bikes come back. Jake and his buddy open the door, we point our guns at their helmets. Take what isn't theirs and make it ours."

Synths popped a staccato rhythm. Ernesto nodded.

"Could be tomorrow, could be the next day. Whatever. How these guys are acting, it'll be soon."

The song ended, the Honda's clock read 12:15.

"You want to watch the house first or should I?"

He jabbed his thumb into his chest.

"Cool. I'm tired. I don't even think I could keep myself awake anyway."

Her seat wasn't as comfortable as a bed or a couch, but it felt okay when she pushed the lever down and leaned all the way back. Ernesto turned off the radio and she closed her eyes. His wide shoulders took up more than their share of the car. She burrowed into what space she had.

She woke up later than she should have. The sky was mostly dark with a touch of red on the horizon. Her eyes darted from the east to Jake's driveway. His van was still there, parked in the same spot where it had been before she had drifted off. The clock was at 5:28.

"Why didn't you wake me up? I can do my time, you should take a rest."

The giant's eyes were closed. In the dark, it looked like they shined a faint light, like something beneath them glowed. She blinked and saw sweat roll down his forehead. His mouth hung half-open. His tongue was thick and his cheeks were gray. The car stunk, like a load of gym laundry, like a bathroom after a blackout.

His lips trembled. They were dry, searching for water.

She grabbed his shoulder and shook.

"Ernesto, hey! Wake up."

He was heavy and she was small. She shook harder and his back bobbed against his seat. His forehead pointed toward the car's low ceiling. His mouth opened wide.

"Snap out of it, come on. Look at me, guy."

Her voice went up, climbed a register, got loud. She went from shaking him to pushing him hard.

"Ernesto!"

His eyelids parted, separating slowly, a thick mucous holding them together. He looked down and stretched his fingers, staring at his palms like he could read what was there. She didn't let go of his shoulder and she felt him shivering.

"What's up? What's wrong?"

His notebook was in the center console. He took it, moving with a stroke victim's pained and deliberate speed, writing letters in a script less neat, less careful than what she had seen before.

It was an address.

1139 North Pines Road. San Diego.

“Okay, guy. I’ve got it. You’re cool.”

She plugged the numbers into her phone. Directions flashed on the screen.
She grabbed the wheel and followed them.

The receptionist knew who he was. Her desk was a wide wood circle behind fifteen yards of smooth stone floor and Ernesto's hobbling gait was hard to miss. She rolled back, stood up, and took short, efficient steps. Her hand grasped Ernesto's arm and she led him away from Madeline.

They disappeared into an elevator. Madeline went to a leather couch and looked at the pamphlets on the table in front of her: "Welcome to J. Smyrna Transfection Lab and Corrections Management."

All of the office buildings she had visited were governmental and administrative. They had dull orange '70s vibes, even if they were built in the 2000s. Their bathrooms were always slightly wet and their windows were made so that rioters couldn't climb in and suicide cases couldn't jump out. This building had an entirely different architecture; its purpose was performative. The front wall was glass, giving the lobby the majestic feel of an opera house. The ceilings were as high as an aviary. A mosaic ran along the top of the marble walls, featuring sharks and octopuses and glittering forms that maybe represented plankton or bacteria. Instead of music, whale songs were piped through hidden speakers. The table in front of Madeline's couch was low and wide and covered in reading material.

She took a pamphlet. The cover also had an ocean theme, showing a picture of a fish in a tank. The photographer and his camera were reflected in the tank's glass. Its thick and glossy paper was filled with information. She turned to the first page.

"Welcome to the J. Smyrna Transfection Lab and Corrections Management, a company that breaks down walls," was written in bold across the inside flap. The words that came after were in smaller type.

"Ours is an era of specialization. Whether in academia, business, or the arts, interests stay isolated, divisions stay separated, genres stay rule-bound.

“We’re here to challenge these divisions. We understand that people, philosophies, and objects aren’t as disconnected as we’re taught to believe.”

There was a long line in the center. A section break before diving into the details of the story.

“‘Laboratory work and prison reform? How does one have anything to do with the other?’ Trust us, it’s a question we’re asked a lot. The answer isn’t simple, but it is revelatory. And it might just change your perspective.

“Our story starts in the lab, where our CEO, Alexandra Zend, has built an incredible team. Our work is pushing boundaries and using the tools of cutting-edge science to break bedrock philosophical dogmatics.

“For all of recorded history, our species has accepted a seemingly incontrovertible truth: That some innate spirit separates our bodies, made of simple cells but containing the thing we call ‘life,’ from rocks or walls. We believe those ‘inanimate’ objects are entirely lifeless, yet they’re made from the same ingredients as our skin, our skeletons, and our brains.

“Deep thinkers have occasionally asked an important question: ‘Where’s the difference? What separates the living and the inanimate? It all works according to the same chemistry. It’s all bound by the same physics.’ For millennia, these thinkers have been dismissed. There’s been no real way to prove that they might be right – until now.

“Synthetic Biochemical Life: It’s a mouthful, but it will transform humanity’s understanding of the natural universe. Right now, J. Smyrna Transfection Lab and Corrections Management is working toward adding life to the lifeless, building a living being from the same inanimate cells found in a rock or a wall, and we’re almost there.

“So where do prisons come in? That’s the easy part. Alexandra Zend’s great philosophical leap has allowed us to understand a crucial point: There’s no real difference between the wall that surrounds a prison and the people behind it. They’re all made with the same ingredients – cells, physics, and chemistry.

“If we can build a better wall, what’s stopping us from going behind that wall and building a better person? Most for-profit prisons focus on holding criminals until their sentences have been completed. They construct more watchtowers, install more alarms, and add more bars. We do that too, but we put the same amount of work into the people who call our facilities home. Together, we can build a better world. It’s science.”

Madeline flipped through the rest of the pamphlet. There were interviews with people in lab coats and maps showing different California prison locations. A lot of sentences in bold ended in question marks. A lot of underlined sentences ended in exclamation points. She tossed it back with the other pamphlets, leaned into the couch, and put her feet up. Her scuffed sneakers looked out of place on top of the table’s straight lines and sharp corners.

A security guard stood at the lobby desk. He turned, saw her, and stared at her shoes. It wasn’t hard to guess that one of his responsibilities was keeping this place professional. She watched him watch her and didn’t move her feet.

After a half-minute wait, he came over, his arms swinging slowly. At first glance, he had looked like an asshole, but maybe that was just the uniform. When he came to the table, his voice was friendly.

“If I don’t tell you to take your feet off, they’re going to bust my ass. You know how it is. Bosses want things the way they want them.”

He had at least a decade or two on her. His hair was starting to go gray and his eyes were a glittering light brown. Beneath the buttons on his blue shirt was a small belly. His belt hung loose and low.

“No problem, it’s cool.”

She put her feet down, sat a little more upright, and tried to look like she belonged.

“So what are you doing here? You came in with Ernesto?”

“Yeah, I’m his ride. You know him?”

The guard shrugged.

“Enough to wave hello. He comes by every six weeks or so, has a standing appointment with our doctors. I walk him through usually.”

The whale soundtrack ended and a gentle sound of crashing waves replaced it. The guard pointed at the pamphlets.

“You reading those?”

“I took a look. Pretty wild. This Alexandra Zend lady sounds like she’s off her meds.”

He laughed. “She’s alright. Knows what she wants, always focused on what’s up next. Pretty typical CEO stuff as far as I can tell.”

An elevator opened and the secretary walked out. Her hair was blonde and her blouse was red. Madeline asked about Ms. Zend.

“Do you know her?”

“A little bit. I’ve held doors open for her. Said hello. The CEO before her, I knew him pretty well.”

“Oh yeah? Who was that?”

“Young guy, Joe Smyrna. Nice enough. Knew my kids’ names.”

She read the black letters on his plastic nametag – Ignacio.

“Why’d he leave?”

“Got kicked out.”

“Why?”

He shrugged, “More than I’m paid to know.”

He kept standing and she stayed on the couch. The ocean noises coming from the speakers were calming. Some kind of pre-programmed evolutionary response, safe as long as there’s water nearby and fish to catch.

“Weird company you work for.”

He smiled.

“Sure is. We do security at rock concerts, too.”

Ernesto’s doctor’s office was on the third floor. The space was more office than doctor, with a desk and a printer and a framed picture of kids. Not an antiseptic

room where patients sat beside jars of tongue depressors and read posters of health tips in English and Spanish. This doctor kept all his check-up tools close by, so he could quickly poke into his patient's ears, listen to his heart, and take keg-sized blood samples.

Ernesto sat by the wall and his doctor talked on the phone. The conversation was Latin words and medical devices and an urgent tone. He wore a striped tie. His jacket was draped over the back of his chair.

"Tell Zend. She'll want to know."

The doctor put down the phone, opened the desk's bottom drawer, and brought out a thermometer. Behind him, a window looked across a road, over a golf course, and into the Pacific. Sand caught sun. A line of white was drawn where waves crested. Pelicans stretched their wings to catch the breeze.

Ernesto opened his mouth and the doctor shoved the thermometer in.

"Why did you wait so long? You should have come sooner."

He took a short steel bar out of his pocket and shined a light in Ernesto's eye.

A drip was in his arm. He sat in a bigger office. The doctor was at the side of the room, having a whispered conference with two men wearing expensive shoes and lab coats. Ernesto faced a woman who held the edge of the desk behind her, leaning against it while keeping her back straight. Where she stood was the exact center of the office. Everything around her was perfectly symmetrical. Two high floor lamps on either side of the desk and two identically sized canvases on either wall.

The fluid in the plastic drip was filled with tiny gray dots. One by one, they fell down the long tube, pushed themselves into the needle's point, and ran through Ernesto's veins.

"We've never had to talk before. And that's good. The less you know, the more objective this whole thing is. My people learn and they get better at keeping you healthy. Everything John has said about you," the woman waved at

the doctor, “has made me believe you’re an ideal patient. But now? Not so much. You skip your pills and we have to meet. I have to get you back on track.”

His notepad and pen were still in Madeline’s car. Alexandra Zend waited for him to answer her question, as though his throat hadn’t been cut open, as though all he had to do to talk was move his tongue. Her hair was black and shoulder-length; she looked down at him while he sat mute in his chair.

“I think there are two things you should know about me and the job I do. The first is good for you.” She paused. “Unambiguously, completely good for you. The second,” another pause while she raised her eyebrows and lowered her head an inch. She got closer to him, like a teacher making sure she had a child’s attention, “it’s less good for you. But you need to remember that both number one and number two keep you alive. I’m going to tell you this, and it’s going to make my scientists’ research less objective and less effective. But you put me in a situation where I don’t have much of a choice.”

She shifted her weight back to the top of the desk, dangling her feet above the carpet. Her skirt was black and her legs were lean.

“So this part’s not a threat. It’s my carrot. I’m an innovator. My job is to move all of us forward – this company, our society, and you, as fast as I can. I create breakthrough technologies and I work to perfect them.”

The doctor moved away from his conversation, came to Ernesto, put two fingers on his wrist, and counted his pulse. The CEO ignored him.

“Let me give you an example. I’m going to reveal a positive development your doctor hasn’t told you about. You’ll like it. Like I said, there are other things you’ll like less, but this one is good. Right now, I have a team working on your vocal folds. They’re going to fix whatever’s keeping you from speaking. Why haven’t I been able to do this before? Because it’s the classic problem that innovators face at early stages of a breakthrough. Maybe some part of my team’s original procedure wasn’t recorded, maybe there’s something unique about your body or about your chemistry. We don’t know. But you do what I tell you to do,

you follow the instructions your doctor gives you, and we'll make your life better. That's the benefit. That's the carrot."

The more she talked the faster her words came out. She was caught up in her own narrative. Her palms were against her desk. She leaned back and looked up at the ceiling. The doctor took his hand off Ernesto's wrist and went to the men in lab coats.

"Here's the less positive part. The part that's harsher. I'm not only an innovator, I'm also an investor. I make bets and I work to make sure those bets pay off. If something is getting in the way of my progress, I cut that obstacle down."

It felt like she was practicing, putting together ideas she had mulled over during quiet moments, imagining a stage beneath her feet and an audience of awed investors waiting for her billion-dollar conclusion.

"Ernesto, I've invested a lot of money in you. The legal fees alone would keep you in debt longer than you'll be alive. How hard do you think it was to take you out of prison? Because it was hard. But I didn't have a choice. What, was I going to keep you in your cell and let the one real proof of my progress get stabbed a second time? No. I made an investent and I doubled down. You're not going to screw it up now. You're not going stop taking your pills, Ernesto."

Her legs swung back and forth, one shoe was balanced carefully on the tip of her toe.

"And let me make one thing clear. All of this goes beyond you. It started way before you were in the picture. There were years of expenses before you got here. There's a Supreme Court case, *Association for Molecular Pathology vs. Myriad Genetics*, 2013. The justices ruled that human genes couldn't be patented, but that cDNA could be. You're the economic outcome of a legal decision based on science that the judges didn't understand. When the state of California told us we had to put you back in prison until you completed your sentence, we threatened to sue. According to constitutional law, we owned you. You were our property, not the state's. And I repeat this because nothing's changed. You're still our

property, Ernesto. The reason you're talking to me is because you, every single cell in your body, belongs to J. Smyrna Transfection Lab and Corrections Management."

Her faint smile turned into a real one. White teeth out and eyes gleaming. She scooted off the table and took three slow steps toward him. Her hand went to his shoulder, her voice was warm, her eyes were cold blue.

"Don't miss an appointment, don't not take your medicine."

The doctor joined her at Ernesto's side and gave him a full prescription. Marble-sized pills in an unmarked childproof container. Enough for another six weeks. Ernesto put them in his pocket, beside his keys, flip phone, and state ID. His arm tingled where the drip was pressed into it. Alexandra Zend leaned toward his ear.

"Keep the pills on you. Don't ever skip a day, ever. It's stupid. It's a waste of time and money. I won't kill you, I would never do that. You'll just die."

He was in the car with Madeline, with his notebook on his lap. She drove north.

“You look totally cured. Your skin is all back to its regular color and everything. They can fix you up pretty quick, huh?”

She read what he wrote while passing a semi on her left. “They told me I have to take my pills.”

A line of trees ran down the meridian; on the other side of the road was a high wire fence. Further ahead, a small plane drove through a hangar door.

“Seriously. You looked horrible this morning. Like already dead horrible.”

She moved into the left lane and the dashboard shook.

“Hey, listen.”

Her voice was hesitant, drawing out gaps between words. The car’s air conditioning didn’t work unless it was on full blast. Its roar filled her pauses.

“I know it’s my fault. You told me to take you back to the apartment and I didn’t. I made you sick.”

She kept her arms stiff and the car between the lane’s white lines.

“Okay. Okay. Without you, I can’t get Jake’s money. It’s gone without you. I guess, you know. I was wrong. I was thinking more about the money part of it. I hurt you.”

The car’s speedometer went up and the wheel in her hands stopped shaking.

“But I mean, what we’re doing, with what we’re going to get, mistakes will be something I can afford. Like, I can be wrong about something without almost killing you. I won’t have to spend my nights sitting outside some rando’s house and wondering if I’m going to get shot. You know that thing people always say? That mistakes are learning experiences? That you can’t succeed without making them, how they help you grow and mature or whatever? That always sounded like bullshit to me. I didn’t believe it. But now I’m thinking, okay, maybe. Maybe

it's different when you're rich. Maybe then you can make as many mistakes as you want and it's cool. You're fine."

Ernesto had been holding her phone, opening and closing apps. He took his pen and wrote. Without slowing down, she turned to see what was there. "The blue dot. It's moving."

Her eyes left the road entirely. The freeway went right and she guessed how much she should turn the wheel. The map was bright on the screen. The dot moved, heading south, coming toward them. Ernesto scribbled.

"They're doing it again. It's happening now."

It was trash pick-up day on Elbrook Drive. Blue recycling bins and their less eco-friendly brothers lined the curb. The road was small and the houses were too. Squat trees cast shadows over the sidewalk, keeping Madeline and Ernesto cool as they walked toward the white van. It was half a block ahead.

She had given Ernesto her cousin's handgun and he had checked the cartridge to make sure it wasn't loaded. It was nice to know a nice guy. He even trusted her enough to not look at her gun.

A wide bush exploded over a fence, its pink petals pointing up and leaning down. In a driveway, three kids wore big sneakers and stood around a truck, drinking from bottles wrapped in paper bags. Ernesto and Madeline walked by. There were four houses between them and the van. Then there were two houses between them and the van. It was straight ahead and coming up quick.

She had left her Honda in a Ralphs lot three blocks back, parked between Subarus.

Their plan was what it always had been. Open the van door, surprise the driver, wait for the bikers, take the money. Take the van back to Ralphs, get in her car, go. And, according to her kindly cutthroat, don't hurt anyone. Fingers crossed on that last part.

The van's scratched back bumper was a yard and a half away. A California license plate and two back doors. Ernesto had seen the bikers go in through the side. That was the entrance that would be unlocked.

"You first or me?"

He put his thumb to his chest and stepped off the sidewalk.

According to her GPS, the van had been parked here for about ten minutes. They had one loaded handgun and exactly who the fuck knew how many more minutes before the motorcycle rolled up and Jake and his buddy jumped off. They would be holding a shotgun and stun grenades; the driver would have fill-

in-the-blank. The trees' shade didn't extend out to the street. Madeline followed Ernesto into the sun.

His hand went to the van's side door. It slid open and he climbed in.

She couldn't see what was inside. His billboard-sized back blocked her view. She watched his shoulders move slowly. His gun barrel was hidden beneath his gorilla fingers. She heard a SoCal sounding "Hey mother" with the last two syllables violently cut off. By the time she stepped into the van's black space, by the time she was inside, the longhaired blonde behind the wheel had his hands in the air and blood running down his chin.

There was a gun in his lap. Not too different from hers. Small enough to carry, big enough to kill. Ernesto took it away and emptied its clip. Beneath the bottom of the passenger seat was a rag, covered with oil and dirt. It was caught on something. Ernesto tugged at it and tugged again harder. It came free. He handed it to Blondie and mimed mopping the blood off his face. The driver put the rag under his nose without taking his eyes off the giant.

"When are your buddies getting here?"

She said the words and then heard them, a delay between air leaving her lungs and space filling with sound. She got no answer. Ernesto turned back to her and his face got longer. His finger jabbed at the air behind her back.

She spun.

Her gun pointed at the street.

She saw sunlight.

No one was there. No bike. No shotgun. Just suburban homes and the earthy smell of watered grass. Ernesto's palm went square into her shoulder, hitting hard. The door. The van's door was still open.

Half a minute in and she had already fucked up.

She grabbed the handle and slid it closed. Without turning back around, watching the door Jake would re-open, she asked her question a second time.

"When are they getting here?"

Again, no answer.

“Hey man, I know you.”

The driver’s voice matched his hair, somewhere between Disneyland and coastal Orange County, resonant and relaxed. There was no anger in his voice, only awed surprise.

“Dude, do you remember me? CDCR, Norco. I was three cells down. The pickpocket.”

She turned her head and saw both of the driver’s hands on one armrest. Blood still dripped out of his nose but he didn’t wipe it away. Red over his lips, he stared at Ernesto.

“I used to do card tricks and stuff. Remember? Nobody would let me in on a game, they thought I would rip them off. Me and you, we used to talk, we were cool.”

The van’s only windows were in the front. The rest of it was a dark box, leaving her no way to see what might be outside.

“I was in line behind you, I had potatoes on my tray when the Sureños did you.”

She looked back again, saw one of the driver’s hands gesturing at Ernesto’s neck and the other at an odd middle point in the air. Her partner was close to him, with half of his wide body squeezed between the front seats. Inches separated the men.

“When you came back, I was there then too. I had that lab job, that was my vocational training gig. We heard banging in the refrigerator, we opened it up, rolled you out, and dude. There you were. Eyes open and looking right the fuck at us. Like Biblical shit, like Lazarus, man.”

Her palm was sweaty around the gun’s grip. She listened for street sounds and heard no barking dogs, no singing birds, no roaring motorcycle.

When she turned to the conversation, she saw the driver’s hands had moved again. One hovered above Ernesto’s leg, the other bobbed in front of his face, moving like a hypnotist’s watch. Blondie had his eyes on Ernesto’s expression, watching as he reacted.

“Did anybody tell you? Do you even know? The second we got you out, the doctors were there. They pushed us out of that room fast as fuck. But we didn’t forget. No way you we could forget that, man. You were dead. Not like no oxygen to the brain for thirty seconds dead, like dead dead. Like three days in the fridge dead.”

She interrupted.

“Hey fucko, raise your arms up. Keep your fingers on the ceiling. Don’t let him move so much, Ernie.”

Her big friendly giant was a real-life Frankenstein. It seemed unlikely but so did the lobby of weird fishes and weirder pamphlets. She let go of the handgun and wiped her wet palm against her shirt. They had one man surprised. There were two more to go. Everything else was shit that had shit to do with now.

The driver talked more, keeping Ernesto distracted with his prison fairytale. His surfer drawl stayed buoyant, never sinking into any tone that reflected his beat-up and bloody-nosed condition.

“Straight up, you’re why I’m out of prison right now. You’re why I’m driving this van, doing this whole thing. It’s not like I could watch a guy get resurrected and pretend that everything was still the same. After you, it couldn’t be. You’re the source, man. You changed our lives, swear to God.”

Madeline took another look back. Both ex-cons were quiet, maintaining intense eye contact. The van smelled like the inside of paper grocery bags. One of Blondie’s hands was off the ceiling and down near Ernesto’s pocket. Pointing her gun at the wandering fingers, Madeline swore. “Dipshit, shut the fuck up and keep your fingers on the roof.”

His eyes moved off Ernesto, landed on her and got narrower. He did as he had been told, putting his hands up. His hair fell over his shoulders, gleaming yellow. His tongue darted out and he licked blood off his lips.

“We should have brought rope to tie you up, asshole.”

Then the driver yelled. His mouth was a wide circle. He screamed noise, no words.

A sound was coming toward them. A motorcycle engine at a high gear. It couldn't be more than three blocks away. Blondie didn't breathe; his voice was one long note.

"Ernesto, plug him up!"

Hanging off the armrest was the grimey and grease-stained rag. Ernesto grabbed, held it, and hesitated. His eyes reflected the tortured lines of the driver's face and his body froze as Blondie turned away.

The engine was louder, coming up behind the van, on their street or very close to it. Time is never on anyone's side, but the quick lose less often. Four of Ernesto's knuckles made their way to Blondie's nose. Blood splattered, drops on the wheel, drops on the floor. The yell became a pained howl. A quick movement of Ernesto's arms and the sound was stopped by the bloody rag. Old oil and stained cloth held the driver's tongue down.

"They're coming!"

Any sight of the bikers was blocked by the van's vinyl sheeting. If dogs barked or birds tweeted, the sound was drowned out by the motorcycle. Madeline felt Ernesto shove her out of the way as his broad frame took her place at the door. Walking bent over, so her head didn't hit the low ceiling, she went to Blondie. Her gunbarrel pressed against his temple.

"Don't fucking do anything."

They waited.

Ernesto's shoulders rose as he breathed deeply.

She turned her head back and forth between the driver and the passenger side window.

She still couldn't see shit.

The bike's engine got quieter. Its brakes got louder.

Plastic cracked against cement and boots hit the road.

The van window showed a quiet neighborhood. Pretty flowers in gardens and weeds in sidewalk cracks.

Suddenly, she felt no pressure against her gun. She looked over and saw the driver had pulled his head away. He banged his shoulder against the door and grabbed at the rag in his mouth.

He was too late.

Daylight poured in. Two men in helmets looked at one man with an aimed and unloaded handgun.

Ernesto lunged.

He grabbed Jake's wrist, twisting and pulling, forcing the biker's body toward the van, stopping him from raising his shotgun. Jake's shins smashed into the van's running board. He was lighter and weaker than Ernesto. Forced off-balance, he fell forward. His chest hit the floor; he was inside. His shotgun was out of his hands and on the street.

The second biker had no weapon to point, but he did have more time to react.

The bags of cash were on his shoulders. The stun grenades were on his belt. He saw the giant grab Jake and he took a step back. He saw Jake fall and he spun around. The money weighed him down. He ran with short steps. His rubber soles hit the opposite sidewalk, his bike helmet still on. He passed yards and windows where curious neighbors watched.

A lot of noise draws a lot of attention.

He had Madeline's money. The bags bounced every time he threw a leg forward.

Jake lay in the van, his feet dangling out. Ernesto had dug his knee into Jake's spine; they were stuck together. The robber squirmed, the giant pushed, seconds passed and neither understood their position. Only one of them had a gun. The biker's single option was to give up and play nice. More seconds passed and they still didn't get it.

But Madeline's money did get further away.

There was a small space between the edge of the door and Ernesto's shoulder. It wasn't big, but it was enough. With a still-sweaty palm on her handgun, she squeezed through. Above her head, the sun was at noon. Neighbors opened their doors and walked into yards, faces showing more annoyance than alarm, probably thinking noisy teens had ditched school and posted up on their street.

A siren pierced the air.

Madeline aimed. Between the barrel and the biker's back was nothing but a barely felt breeze. A straight line and a clean shot.

A second siren joined the first, its highs and lows coming at different times, harmonizing in an off-key duet.

Ernesto was right behind her, watching everything she did.

She aimed the barrel lower.

Squeezed the trigger four times.

And watched the biker fall.

Someone screamed. Someone else waited for a split second and then screamed louder. Neighbors that had walked onto their porches ran back into their homes.

The money was on the ground and the biker writhed.

She jogged, both hands around her gun, keeping it pointed directly ahead. As she moved, her target took off his helmet.

It was Jake's roommate, the dark-skinned guy with Nazi tattoos. His teeth were out in a tight grimace and his eyes were squeezed half-shut.

As she came to him he cursed.

"Bitch, why'd you have to make me do this now?"

She ignored him. "I've got to take these." Two bags, two straps, she leaned down and tore them off his shoulder. He winced as she kicked his ribs, moving him over so she could pry the money loose.

"I wanted to wait. I wanted to do it the right way. With everyone with me. With Joe there. So I could come back."

One or maybe two of her bullets had hit the back of his left leg. He held it out straight, blood pouring into dirt. It wasn't clear if he was talking to her, to himself, or to the neighborhood around them both. His words sounded memorized, like something he had read in a street preacher's pamphlet.

"Escape instincts. Deny the body. Choose the blocked path. Break the gate and go free."

It made about as much sense as any halfwit's credo. Somewhere between little and none. His hand went to his belt and landed on a stun grenade. She had the money over her shoulders. She backed away with her gun pointed at his chest.

"Don't throw that thing, you fucking fucker."

He didn't.

It went into his mouth. His lips wrapped around the metal, his fingers wrapped around the pin.

He squeezed.

It was quick. She turned, but not fast enough.

No smoke, no explosion. A pop and his skull slammed into the ground. So fast it seemed like a second had disappeared, like there was time missing between his head being up in one piece and down and shattered. It looked less like falling and more like something had reached up from beneath the ground and pulled him down.

She saw her feet move. She saw the van get closer. She saw Ernesto in the door. His eyes were wide, his jaw was down, and his throat was red.

I want to be clear – there is definitely, without a doubt, a long list of things that need to get done around here. I'm not denying that.

The gym roof is leaking. That sucks, but at least we're in Southern California, right? The kitchen's primary freezer is, for whatever reason, not quite as cold as it should be. It's making life difficult for our cooks. I've been told that we're out of light bulbs. So if your cell goes dark, it might stay dark for a little while. Sorry.

But you understand. There's a bigger picture here.

Yes, money is an issue. I hear you. A few of you have told me, "Hey, we're bringing cash in. Let's spend it on new lights." I get it.

Let's not forget what we're doing, though. Let's not forget what the lab needs. Do you think keeping your friends frozen is easy? It's not. Do you think it's cheap? No way. We don't want these guys to start rotting. That would ruin everything we've worked so hard to achieve. And, if we're going to get this done, we've got to buy the equipment to get it done right. Our lab has to have it.

So, yeah. We're bringing in money. No doubt. But that money is going toward bigger things right now. I know you want to ask, "When are we going to get more toilet paper? When are we going to buy more soap?" I wish I could tell you. I would love to name a date and say, "Alright, once February 5th rolls around, we won't have any more corpses to freeze, we can finally re-up the commissary." I wish I could, but that's just not how science works. It takes time. Results don't happen on schedule.

If your cell's bulb goes out, we do have candles. Toilet paper might be on ration, but there are newspapers.

We're working toward a goal here, guys. Sacrifices must be made.

They drove by houses and windows and the people who peeked out. Gunshots had made homeowners pull up their blinds. They had probably expected to see fireworks. A man with scorched black lips lay splayed out on their neighbor's grass.

Madeline hung a left and the block disappeared. No cars followed them. Ernesto checked the side mirror and saw an empty road.

Jake and Blondie were in the back of the van, sitting on the floor. Ernesto looked back and saw Jake take his helmet off. His wrist was red and bruising fast. He glared at the pickpocket who he had expected to see behind the wheel.

"Yo, I definitely fucked up," Blondie's voice was quiet. "But dude, it's not even important right now. You remember what you said? About the prophecy you read in the flopping fish?" There was a pause. It didn't sound like Jake cared. "You read it right, man. Exactly right. That's the guy. The living dead man."

They leaned toward each other and Blondie's voice got quieter. Ernesto heard the occasional hard consonant but nothing more. He turned back to the road ahead. Faint whispers and blaring sirens.

The Ralphs where Madeline had left her Honda was two blocks away. There were no patrol cars between the van and the grocery store lot. The sirens were coming from somewhere, but they weren't on this road. Long lines of bushes. A preschool's playground. Nothing carrying police officers or handcuffs. Madeline drove fast but not conspicuously, going forty past a speed limit sign that read 35. It was impossible to tell how many squad cars were out looking for them; their electronic howling seemed to come from inside the van.

At an intersection, Madeline hit the brakes and they came to a full stop. Her gun was between her legs. She picked it up, pointing it at the two men in back.

"Get out." Silence. No movement. "Go, bye."

Blondie scooted to the door and slid it open. Neither of the crooks glanced at her gun. They jumped out and moved away, not shutting the door behind them.

The sirens moved from street to street. Eventually one would find its way to the one where they drove.

“Fuck. Fuck it.”

She hit the gas, going to Ralphs with the door sliding on its runners. Ernesto’s eyes went to the side mirror. The two men stopped and huddled. Blondie brought something out of his pocket. The van was too far away to tell exactly what it might be, but it seemed small, cylindrical, and orange.

A bottle of pills.

He checked his pocket. The place he kept his keys, his phone, his ID. The pocket where he had put the pills his doctor had given him. On the left, his cell phone was still there. His keys were still there. On the right, his wallet and pills were gone.

A police car sped through the intersection ahead, passing without turning toward them. Its lights flashed red and blue.

They came to the grocery store. Madeline turned, the van bumped over a low storm drain, and they were in the parking lot. So was a police cruiser. On the far side, driving slowly.

“Get out.”

Between the front seats were the two bags of money. As quickly as he could, Ernesto slung them over his shoulder. Madeline swore before he had them completely on.

The cruiser turned toward their van. It was by the grocery store’s front doors. Still on the other side of the lot. But its grill was pointed at them.

He opened the door. She told him what to do next.

“Take my car to the shipping entrance.”

Her keys landed on his lap and he got out of the van.

A plastic shopping bag blew over the ground until it twisted under a car's tire. Pushing a cart, a woman briskly walked out of the store. It wasn't a busy time of day, but it wasn't a slow time of day.

The white van and the police cruiser faced each other in the same wide lane. An amplified voice came through its speakers.

"Stop."

Madeline's Honda was a few yards off. Ernesto ran toward it. The van drove forward, accelerating toward the cruiser's front bumper.

Being impulsive has major downsides. Repeating depressingly similar mistakes, never saying no, not getting enough sleep. But it also has one clear advantage. In a conflict, whether psychological or physical, the impulsive person lands the first punch.

Police are trained to be cautious. So they don't shoot unarmed black boys. So they don't grope good-looking girls at DUI checkpoints. Their training doesn't always stick - cops are assholes. But the two officers by the Ralphs were conscientious and and by-the-book. They thought before they acted, they stayed calm and careful, and they were about to get fucked.

Madeline had the drop on them.

It was a big suburban parking lot. Land was cheap and business owners wanted to give their customers room. Between lines of parked cars, there was enough space for two vehicles to pass one another.

The police cruiser was on the right, hugging its side of the road.

At the edge of the lot were the grocery store's wide automatic doors. Big enough so multiple soda-stuffed shopping carts could go through together. Big enough so an unattended child could stand there and not obstruct the flow of traffic. Big enough so a van could barrel its way through.

The police megaphone cracked.

"Stay where you are."

Madeline drove.

Her hands spun the wheel, she went toward the empty pavement the patrol car had left open.

The van hit 25 and that was good enough. The space was tight and she gripped the wheel with her knuckles popping out like cherries. Her sweat-soaked flannel got sweeter.

The moment the van's hood passed the cruiser's bumper, the grocery store's doors automatically opened, making room for an old man to shuffle out.

Madeline pressed the horn.

Her van was on the other side of the police car, only a white-striped pedestrian crosswalk between it and the grocery store's front entrance. She could have hit the brakes but she didn't. Her speed was steady at 25.

The geezer shuffled right so fast he probably re-broke a hip.

The automatic doors started to close.

Her two front wheels hit the yellow rubber ground that stopped shopping carts from rolling into traffic, the van vibrated, and her bumper bent the doors backwards. The hood was entirely inside the Ralphs.

Above her head, the windshield shattered. The top of the doorframe slammed into it.

Her feet found the brake.

She hit it hard.

The gun was still pressed between her thighs.

And the van jolted to a stop. Its engine was up against the back of a checkout counter. Oranges rolled on the skid-marked floor while a woman with wide upper arms and a Ralphs nametag shrieked.

Did this store have a back loading dock? Madeline had never been before. It might have been like most other grocery stores or it might have been different. She might go to jail or she might not. Having no answers to questions like these was impulsivity's downside.

With her gun pointed up, she leaped out of the van. She pulled the trigger twice, two firecracker pops. More people joined in the general screaming and a cheap piece of ceiling tile fell on her head.

The room was spilled groceries and crying babies. People ran everywhere.

The gun fell from her grip and onto the floor. She put her hands in the air, screamed as scared-sounding as she could manage, and ran to the back.

The Ralphs was built up against a hill. Above was an empty plot of land, uneven and filled with yellow-flowered shrubs. Beyond that were scattered houses. A thick cement wall, protecting the store from erosion and mudslides, cut off the bottom of the hill. Between the wall and the grocery store was a paved alley. Wide enough so trucks could wind their way through and drop goods off at the loading dock.

That's where Ernesto drove.

He hadn't held a steering wheel since he was nineteen, since he had spent a night in jail knowing he wasn't getting out. Since he had sworn to never drive again.

He accelerated in a Honda with a bloody hand. Made that way by bashing a man's nose in. Twice. So he could steal that man's money.

Ernesto's jaw clenched. He would get the girl and go. Take her to a place where she would be protected from him. Take her to a place where he couldn't give her any bad ideas. He tensed his muscles to control his shaking and only made himself to shake harder.

The loading dock came up and he stopped. He let the engine run; he didn't put the car in park. The deck was as high as the Honda's roof. Men and women leaped off and ran down the alley. Their faces were taut. Their mouths were open but mute. Fear made them sprint, running fast in khakis and spring dresses.

A mother with wild hair came out with a dead-eyed kid trailing behind her. Tears streamed down her face. Her pace was erratic as she tried to move quickly

while keeping her bowl-cut boy by her side. At the edge of the dock she paused, let go of the child, and jumped off. Then she turned back around and spread her arms wide.

“Let mommy catch you.”

Her son watched her, his too-chubby cheeks emotionless. Mom sobbed. He stepped off the dock and into her arms.

She clutched the bobble-headed kid and rushed toward the first thing she saw. The Honda. She tore its back door open

“Drive! Drive! In the name of God, leave this place!”

She bawled each word red-faced, pulling her child into her chest. In the rearview mirror, Ernesto saw the boy squirm. He turned to look at the driver, his mouth a tiny frown. His forehead was an oddly long and oddly blank space.

“If you want us to live, go! Move to the road, drive away!”

Ernesto’s fingers stayed on the wheel, his foot stayed on the brake, and his muscles stayed shaking. The car didn’t go anywhere.

“Please, save my child! There’s a madman in there, he’ll kill us all!”

Another group of people came out onto the loading dock. They were all quiet and quick except for Madeline, who waved her hands in the air. A goofy parody of panic. One by one, they threw themselves down into the alley and ran, with Madeline in the middle of the pack yelling “ah” like a mostly deaf doctor had a tongue depressor in her mouth.

She opened the passenger side door and jumped in.

“Get the fuck out of here.”

With her wet flannel shirt clinging to her skin and her face flushed, she leaned toward the dashboard. Ernesto drove. Madeline was beside him and his shaking got more manageable. He held the wheel steady and the woman in the back seat yelled. “Thank God! Thank God!”

In front of the Ralphs, the police car that had tried to stop their van had its doors open. One officer stood there, radio in hand. The other was missing. A

second cruiser turned off the main road and came into the lot. Ernesto passed it, driving over the storm drain, hitting the street. Nowhere to go but far and fast.

Mom asked questions.

“Were you in there? Did you see what happened?”

Her tone had changed from hysterical to hysterically curious. Now that it was over, she wanted to know what she had been running from. Madeline answered in a flat tone, staring at the road ahead.

“Yeah. Some girl came in, shouting about killing everybody.”

“Oh!”

She was shocked. Amazed she had escaped.

“Did anyone get shot?”

Red and blue lights sped by.

“Nope.”

They drove on and the road got quieter. Fewer cops, fewer sirens, and fewer pedestrians stopping to watch patrol cars break traffic laws.

The woman didn't like these less than detailed answers. Her kid tried to push off her chest and away from her grip, but she kept him squeezed between her arms.

Off one side of the street, the ground sloped down. A library was cut into the earth, its roof as high as the sidewalk beside it. They drove by stucco apartment buildings with patchy green lawns. Mom's next question was quieter, more hesitant.

“Excuse me. Sir?” A long pause between one sentence and then next. “Why were you in the alley waiting for your friend here? You knew she would come out through the back?”

Her kid grunted as she tightened her hold on him, pressing the air out of his little lungs.

The car went north. Ernesto's eyes darted to a sign for the 15. Louder grunts came from the back seat as the bowl cut boy fought against his mother's smothering hug. Madeline turned to her.

“Uh,” she drew out the vowel, “it was a coincidence?” The last half hour had been a dramatic one; Ernesto saw Madeline’s foot rapidly tapping the floor mat. “Yeah, we were lucky I guess.”

“Oh my.”

Her two words were fast and faint. Junior’s eyeballs bulged.

There were no cop cars on the street, only afternoon traffic. Green Jeeps and minivans drove at slow speeds.

“Hey, you probably live close to here, right? I mean, that was your grocery store and we don’t want to take you a million miles away from your house.”

No answer from the back. The woman’s eyes darted between the quiet driver and the sweaty girl beside him.

“Why don’t we drop you off here? I bet this is like your neighborhood or whatever. You can have a nice walk home, decompress.”

A high and short sound escaped the woman’s lips. It might have meant agreement or it might have been an involuntary plea for help. Her son had stopped struggling. His forehead turned a sunset shade of red.

“Yeah. Let her off here. She wants to walk home.”

Ernesto pulled over. Mom pushed the boy out of the Honda and he fell face first onto the sidewalk.

Ernesto thought they should go to the San Diego airport. It was too early for afternoon rush hour, they would make good time, and it would be easy to rent a car when they arrived. Before they hit the freeway, he pulled over and she took the wheel. The minute she was driving, he was scribbling. Pen to paper and passing notes. She glanced at them as she moved into the left lane.

“They took my wallet and pills.”

“What?”

Everything not straight ahead was blurred. The cement meridian rushed by fast. She pushed the car too hard.

“The blonde one is a pickpocket.”

“Damn. So that means they’ve got your ID, they know your address?”

He nodded.

The rest of the ride was quiet. No talking. No writing. She didn’t ask any more questions and he didn’t write any more notes. It was difficult to read exit signs. They displayed random jumbles of letters and numbers; their meaning was a cracked mirror.

The Honda’s speed seemed to go up and down. Sometimes they sprinted toward a finish line and sometimes drove in a school safety zone. But when she checked the speedometer, it was never far off seventy. It stayed where it was while her sense of time changed. The further they traveled from the scene of the crime, the closer it felt. Like the freeway was forcing her gears into reverse. Like she would end up back where she had been. Back where she watched Jake’s friend swallow a stun grenade. Where she saw him die.

The next steps were fast. Focused on the present. Focused on doing what needed doing. They parked a half-mile away from an Avis, then walked to the rental

company. They took the rental back to grab the heavy money bags from the Honda's trunk. It was impossible to open them. Both were locked.

At a gas station, they stopped and grabbed dinner. She bought white cheddar popcorn, candy bars, and a two-liter diet Coke. He bought bruised fruit. Factory-made junk food and factory-farmed health food. At a motel, they got a room with two beds, took out their meal, and shared.

It was night. Their pulses got slower and their heartbeats sounded quieter. Outside, the dark sky seemed higher than the day's blue had been. As though, with its back turned to the sun, the Earth could reach further out into space. Like the planet had more room to breathe. To be on its own.

The table where they had dinner was fake wood grain plastic. They sat across from each other and looked at what they were eating. It would have been nicer to stay silent, but Madeline started talking right before she bit into a 3 Musketeers, like she had hoped a mouthful of food would shut her up.

"What was all that the driver told you?" She asked the question and stared at the Diet Coke's gray label. "Calling you Lazarus, saying you were in a freezer for three days. What was that about?"

If she hadn't been sitting directly ahead of him, he wouldn't have recognized her voice. Usually she talked at a dramatic volume, ending every sentence with a loud last word. Slouched over in a plastic chair, her sentences came out slowly. She smelled bad and he did too. The day's adrenaline rush had coated their skin in a fine yellow film. A banana was in his hand. He finished eating it.

"You going to answer me or what?"

He dropped the peel and grabbed his pen. "He wanted to distract us. The story was a trick. To make us scared."

Madeline's back straightened and her eyes went to the Diet Coke's cap.

"Okay, but he said you knew him, that you spent time in the same prison. So what about that? Did you know the guy?"

She was a little more strident, a little more forceful. Her expression was still tired. Her lips and eyebrows awkwardly pointed down, like the muscles behind her face had no more strength.

He wrote, "I knew him."

"And what," she cut herself off and slouched again. The table supported her elbows and most of her weight. The room had one light, the lamp between their beds. The blinds were pulled shut. The air conditioner was off so they could listen to cars come and go. So they could hear who walked outside their door. Anonymous noises, all the same. No engine's roar was different than any other. The sound of steps didn't reveal a person's face or intent. She found her way back to questions.

"What about the guy who put the stun grenade in his mouth? How does that make sense? So the police were going to find him, big deal. That's no reason to," she stopped, her hand going from a closed fist to fingers extended, miming what had happened to the back of his skull. She didn't watch her gesture. Her gaze stayed on the soda bottle. Her eyes were dry, like blinking would scratch her pupils and leave her blind. Her palm stayed open, with the back of her hand pressed against the table. "I thought I would stop him from running. That's all."

He reached over the table and squeezed her hand, trying to undo the gesture she had made. They stayed like that. Headlights flashed behind blinds, the outside world shifted behind a thin plaster wall.

Ernesto wrote. "It's my fault. Mine. I checked my gun but not yours. I should have looked, I shouldn't have let you do it."

Her hair was stiff with dried sweat and her flannel was stained and ugly. More ink on paper. "You can still get away, you can escape. Take the money and spend it slowly. Live peacefully."

He passed his notepad over to her. She read it with her head hanging down.

Before they settled into bed, they turned on the TV. The wild-haired mother was in front of a microphone, with her dead-eyed boy beside her. She bleated sounds the news anchor had to interpret. "After escaping the scene of the crime, they took Jennifer Mac and her three-year old son hostage, speeding through Fallbrook's intersections. In a final dash for freedom, they pushed their prisoners out of the car and drove away. The two suspects are still at large."

Madeline hit the remote. The TV went mute. She took Ernesto's wrist and held it in a tight grip.

"Every other place I got money, I got it and it was finished. It was done. Like, the guy tells me that he stole from his boss. That he's got a wife in Reno. Whatever. He did some bad shit. He tells me that and then I kind of tell him that maybe I'm not actually all that nice. That maybe I'm not all that honest. Maybe I can call this or that person and maybe that won't be too great for him. He knows his situation is bad. He understands. His easiest way out is to give me whatever's in his checking account. A few hundred bucks. A hassle, but not that much in the long term. When I've got that, I'm out. He wants me to be gone and I'm gone. As long as I keep myself that way, he doesn't care. He doesn't hunt me down. I don't come back and he doesn't do shit to me." Ernesto sat on the edge of his bed. She gripped his wrist tighter. "This is different. This isn't like any of those other times. Those guys we saw today, they're not like any of those other guys. They knew you. It's not done. They'll find you."

He couldn't sleep. The motel's thin blankets felt heavy on his chest, so he kicked them off. They bunched at the bottom of the bed, covering his feet. He slid his legs out and put them on top of stiff sheets. Under his head, the pillow was too hard, a brick-like rectangle that raised his neck and gave no comfort. He pushed it onto the floor and lay flat on the mattress. It sank toward the middle. He shoved himself into its bottommost point.

His Victorville address was known by men who knew to look for him there. That didn't matter. There were other apartments like it in every city. Empty and safe, with locks to keep people out, with window shades he could close.

Outside the motel, he heard electricity droning. Ice machines or the "Vacancy" light or both. A sound that never changed but somehow seemed to hide short and sharp staccato bursts behind a lower, louder octave.

He stretched his arms so that he could hold both sides of the mattress and wrap his fingers around its edges. In the past, he had woken out of empty dreams and believed his bed had put itself on the ceiling. That he faced the ground, supported by solidified air. If that happened again, he didn't want to fall. He would have a good grip where he was. Cars' headlights found narrow gaps in the blinds and drew lines of light across the wall.

One day, Madeline would forget where the money had come from. She would just have it. It would be there for her to lend, to spend, to give.

Ernesto waited until dawn and rolled out of bed. The room was still dark. Madeline lay with her eyes closed, arms spread, and mouth open. If an earthquake pushed their state into the Pacific, she wouldn't have noticed. Her foot kicked up the blanket in a violent dream.

He went to the edge of the window and moved the blinds a half inch. The lot was empty except for parked cars. The sky was purple in the center and blue around the edges. The hour was too late to keep celebrations going, too early to start a new day of work, and quiet except for chattering birds.

The motel door opened silently, no half-stuck bolt or squeaking hinges. He went out to the lot, passing one vending machine that held different flavors of Cheetos and a second that held different brands of bottled water.

The bags they had stolen were in the Honda's trunk. Before he took them out, his head swiveled from car to car, window to window. No one hid behind glass. The street waited for cars to roll over its pavement.

Each bag probably weighed about forty pounds. Minus the weight of the locked and secured bags themselves, that was at least seventy pounds of cash. Ernesto didn't know what denominations armed trucks brought to banks, but even if it was mostly ones, seventy pounds would be plenty. He needed enough to find another job and put down a few months rent. Any more would be wasted on him.

A few fast steps and he was back in their room, with the door shut and locked. He put the money on his bed.

They had chosen a motel in the San Diego suburbs. Not out in the country where they would be conspicuous and not close to the airport where the police would be looking for people carrying two bags of cash. It would take about half an hour to drive from their motel to J. Smyrna Transfection Lab and Corrections Management. It was dumb to go back, but he needed his pills.

His flip phone was on the bedside table, beside Madeline's wallet and iPhone. He grabbed it, then took two of her twenties. When they figured out how to open the bags, he would repay her the forty plus a few hundred thousand in interest.

Her pupils rolled beneath her eyelids. He leaned over and shook her. In that initial moment of wakefulness, she looked at him like she had expected him to be there, like she had known he would be the first thing she would see.

"What are you doing?"

He stuck his thumb over his shoulder and at the door. She sat up, pillows between the headboard and her back.

"Is somebody here?"

He shook his head and she stretched. The air conditioning had been off all night. The windows had been shut. The smell of old guests wafted off the badly washed sheets and the barely vacuumed carpet. It was a reminder that the space wasn't theirs. That it hadn't welcomed them and that it wouldn't protect them.

Ernesto mimed taking a pill.

"What? You're going back to that office building?" She moved her legs out from under the blankets and put her feet on the floor. "No way, Ernie. Bad idea. Blondie was in their prison. He knows you and they know you. Go back there and you're screwed."

His notepad came out of his pocket. "Blondie's an ex-con, J. Smyrna are government contractors. He won't go there."

She scanned what he had written. "Okay, maybe. But buy your pills somewhere else. Right now, taking a chance on maybe is a crap plan."

She sat on the bed, the top of her head not much higher than his belt buckle. He shrugged.

"So you're going there? Back where we went before?"

His pen hit paper. "No choice."

All the lights in the room were off. It was too early for any sunshine to force its way through the blinds. He was a big gray shape and she was a small black one.

"I guess I can't let you go half-dead again."

She peered into the corners of his face.

"Okay, Ernie. Let's do it."

Her lips got thin and her eyes got determined. He shook his head, pointed at her chest, then pushed his palm out at her. A motion that said, "Stop."

"What, you want me to stay here?"

He nodded and she glared. His pen moved. "You guard the money."

Her eyes went from his note to the two bags resting on his mattress. Short lines scrunched the center of her forehead.

"Why'd you even bring that in?"

She stood up, but he pushed her down. She landed back on the bed and angry. The only way to make any fight between them fair would be to break two of his legs and both of his arms.

"So let me just say what's happening. Okay? You say you're going to drive to that J. Smyrna company. You say it's no big deal. There's no way Blondie might put two and two together, there's no way he's connected to their business. Okay. Maybe. But you also take the cash out of the trunk. And you also tell me I've got to stay here. What the fuck, Ernesto? You think I'm stupid? Because I'll tell you something, I'm not Mensa but I'm a shit-ton smarter than you, motherfucker."

He wrote, "I have to."

"Okay, then I'm coming."

Silence. Her face was mean. "The only time you've driven in the last fifteen years was for like two seconds yesterday. You don't even have a license. I'm coming. I'm driving."

She stood up again. He pushed her down again.

"You asshole."

Her hands were balled up and pressed into the mattress. Her eyebrows were down and furious. He grabbed her iPhone off the bedside table and tried to give it to her. She wouldn't take it. Her back was arrow straight and aimed forward. The muscles in her arms were tight and tense. He put the phone on the bed beside her, grabbed a key to the motel room's door, and walked out.

The drive was mostly freeways, then a wide road that cut between office parks and a beachfront golf course. He clutched the wheel and kept plenty of space between his hood and back bumpers. Every turn he took slowly. Every stop sign he watched the speedometer fall to zero. His hands never left two and ten.

When he pulled into J. Smyrna's parking lot, he scanned the pavement and saw no problems. When he walked into the building's entrance, he scanned the lobby and saw no problems. No Jake, no Blondie, just Ignacio the security guard. It was early but Ernesto didn't need much. All he wanted was his supply of pills and a quick exit. Ignacio helped him get both.

His doctor wasn't in yet. That didn't slow them down. Ernesto had stopped by the day before, so no one wanted to give him a full physical. When Ignacio brought him down to the building's lower levels, they found a staffer, a tie and nametag necklace looped around his neck, sitting behind a desk and facing the elevators. He didn't look up from his computer. He typed while the security guard explained what they needed. He only stopped when it was clear that the only way to make them leave was to get what they wanted. The hallway's floor, wall, and ceiling were all different shades of white. There were no decorations to make the space feel friendly. The underling's nametag and tie bounced furiously as he walked down the corridor. He disappeared behind a corner, then quickly came back holding a bottle of pills. Without saying a word, he gave it to Ignacio and went back to typing. Ignacio handed the bottle to Ernesto, they got on the elevator, went to the lobby, and waved a relaxed goodbye.

That was it. The pills were in Ernesto's pocket. No one followed him as he walked to his rental car. Everything had gone well. It had been easy. He twisted

the keys, the engine shook, and he backed out of his space. It wasn't even 9 am. He drove through the lot fast, one hand on the wheel and one on his bottle of pills, feeling them tucked next to his cell phone. As he turned and accelerated out onto the street, he didn't even bother to check his rearview mirror.

Okay, so I asked you guys to turn in your arts and crafts supplies, and a ton of you did. Thanks. Seriously. It's awesome that, even when we have disagreements, we can come back together in such an amazing way. It's inspiring.

I said we would use your arts and crafts stuff to start a new project. And I want to say to the people who've worked on this, you've done a great job.

To everybody else: If you have any experience in clothes-making or costume-making, if you have even the smallest interest in stage design, or if you've ever painted a mural, we need you.

You know that I'm not the first guy to circle up for your dances. I don't really like watching what you do to roosters. When your chants get going, I have no idea who you're supposed to be yelling at.

Still, I'm impressed with the artistry of it all. I think my favorite part is the mask design. I mean, some of you guys have really made them look amazing. I don't even understand how you put them together with old sheets and bed springs and whatever else you find lying around.

Honestly, sometimes when you're wearing them, it kind of freaks me out. They're pretty intense. But it's cool, too. I think we've even kind of developed our own aesthetic.

Whatever. I'm rambling. The point is, we're going to make everything you're doing official. I guess it's kind of official already, but anyway, I haven't included myself much. That's changing. I get it now. I understand the way this contributes. I appreciate what you've done.

And we need all hands on deck. Because, I mean I don't want to promise anything. It's not set in stone. But there's a good chance that we're going to see a friendly face soon. A face you guys have seriously missed.

The lights were off and the hotel room was still dark. Madeline heard cars moving on the road. She sat on her bed, her feet on the carpet, where Ernesto had left her. Moving from that spot seemed impossible. She could have leaned back onto the sheets or walked over to turn on the TV, but she did neither. She stayed where she was.

She had slept well that night. It was possible she had even slept well for the last few nights in a row. She couldn't quite remember. Eight straight hours and solid REM had crept up on her. It had come back home without her quite realizing it was there.

The last time she had slept through the night in a room she shared with another person was back when she was a kid. When she was still little and didn't know to be cautious. It definitely hadn't been recently. For sure it hadn't happened any other night she had spent outside of her kiddie home.

She was used to waking up and looking around. Checking to see that the shadows were all in the same places. Doing it over and over again. Coming to consciousness every hour or half-hour. She liked that. It wasn't uncomfortable. It was safe. She kept the night at bay with a watchful eye.

What didn't feel right was sleep's dark hold. It was too empty. It was giving up and letting another consciousness take over her mind. Because her dreams, no matter what any shrink said, weren't her. She couldn't control them. Sleep forced her to go places she didn't want to go.

She sat beside the night. Morning was outside the door but she wouldn't let it come in. She had felt a black dream with Ernesto there, laying one bed over. And it hadn't been that bad. She had let it come and she hadn't forced herself awake. She let that other mind carry her away. It had taken her to its own place. She could do it again. She would do it again.

The car was on the freeway. Ernesto watched cement stretch east.

He and Madeline had two bags and two problems. Both bags were obviously locked, but where the locks were even located was beyond what they could figure out. Brute strength wasn't enough to open them. Puzzlemaster ingenuity wasn't enough to open them. One thing they could do was travel along the border, stop in local locksmith shops, and chat with the owners. About how business was going that month. About the cost of rent. About whether that particular shop's rent was overdue on that particular month. When they found a place where their conversation went in the right direction, they could offer the locksmith a job. Suggest a price that would change his life in a small but substantial way. Enough to demagnetize his moral compass for a day or two. It wasn't a genius plan, but Ernesto wasn't a genius criminal. Like Madeline had said, she was the brains of their Bonnie and Clyde.

When he got back to the hotel, they would discuss it. He would write and she would talk. The money was hers. All he wanted was a small apartment in a small town, close to a bar where he could make money checking IDs. Maybe in Calexico or maybe in a prettier desert town.

He drove a little faster, staying a good five-miles-an-hour above the speed limit. As he left the freeway and got back on the suburbs' wide roads, he rolled through a stop sign, his brake lights flashing red but his car not losing much forward momentum. He went through an intersection, passing people on their way to work. A driver across the road sipped from a Starbucks cup and waited for her light to turn green.

There was a strip mall and a burrito joint. The letters of its sign were a blocky approximation of Mayan glyphs. Beyond that was a Shell. Ernesto's car needed gas.

Turning into the station, he checked his rearview mirror to make sure he wouldn't cut anyone off. A silver Ford followed him across the road. It was another car that needed fuel. He hadn't been looking over his shoulder and he hadn't double or triple checked to see who might have been on his tail since he left the J. Smyrna building.

He stopped at gas pump number three. The Ford parked at number four.

With Madeline's forty dollars in his pocket, he walked into the station's convenience store. Twenty ounce Cokes were behind glass refrigerator doors, Fritos were on racks, and ice cream was stuffed into a freezer. He grabbed a cranberry juice and got in line. Standing there, holding the Ocean Spray bottle's cold plastic, he saw two things. Both were bad.

The first was a TV bolted to the ceiling above the register. The station was news and the screen showed a police sketch.

Two people. One was a girl. The other was a man.

The girl could have been any white twenty-something with short hair. Her features were vague. They could belong to an angry drug addict or a cute college senior.

The man wasn't much more distinctly drawn. Except for one striking detail. A thick scar straight across his neck.

The second thing Ernesto saw was behind the cashier's back, outside the convenience store window, and standing by the silver Ford. Two men. Facing each other, with their faces in profile.

Jake and Blondie.

The weather was warm but they wore heavy coats. Zippers open and their hands hidden. Clutching objects stuffed in their inside pockets. No guesses as to what those objects might have been.

In line directly ahead of Ernesto, a ballcapped customer got his change. He took beef jerky and left, a bell ringing above his head as he walked out. No one stood between Ernesto and the cashier. An empty counter and packs of gum in pastel packages. He stayed where he was, with his eyes on the men outside.

“Let me ring you up, dude.”

White plaster covered Blondie’s nose. One of his eyes was black. He wasn’t talking and he kept his face away from the station’s cameras.

“Hey man, there are people behind you.”

The cashier wore a shirt with a printed stripe of hot dogs and french fries; a design that was strangely nauseating. His hair was wavy and his eyes were green. He wanted Ernesto to move up.

The cranberry juice went down on the counter. The notepad and pen came out of his pocket. He wrote. “Help me.” Then hesitated.

His two-word note stayed gripped in his palm as he watched the men outside. There was no way out where they wouldn’t see him.

He put the paper down for the cashier to read and his eyes went back to the news. It had cut away from the police sketch. Now, the fearful mother and blank-faced child were being interviewed. Mom talked. Her lips moved but no words came out. The TV was on mute.

“What’s up? Is the Freeze machine broken again?”

The cashier watched Ernesto’s face, saw the giant’s lips in a nervous line, sweat bead on his forehead, and his eyes move rapidly around the store.

“Yo man, do you need help like for real? Do you need like a medic? 911?”

Ernesto didn’t answer. The woman standing behind him got antsy.

“Excuse me!”

The police would come and they would see his scarred neck. They would find the car he had driven. A car that had been rented using Madeline’s name and ID. An identity much more specific than her cookie-cutter facial composite.

The woman’s finger jabbed his back. “Hurry up!”

Beyond the cashier, beyond the convenience store window, two men in two heavy coats waited for him.

A third was missing.

A man with a short forehead. A roommate with a swastika tattoo. Not there. Not where he would have been if he wasn't in a morgue, if his lips weren't burnt black.

The customer behind Ernesto growled. Her patience was short. The freezer at the side of the register held ice cream and hummed, waiting for the middle school students who would finger Maxim magazines and take crumpled dollar bills out of their backpacks. The Shell station was an arrangement of people and objects that would change the moment Ernesto took himself out of it. A woman who would take his place in line and a minimum wage employee who would continue his shift.

Ernesto's fingers wrapped around his flip phone. His thick thumb hit buttons. The woman walked around him and took a pack of spearmint gum. The cashier stopped staring at the giant and rang her up. His text was to Madeline.

"They found me. I'm done. I'm fine. Take the money. Hide."

There was nothing more to do.

He walked out of the store, the bell above his head chiming its one note. It was spring in the San Diego suburbs, a pleasant season to be in a pleasant city. A stray cat sat next to a cement garbage can and lazily licked its paw. No one was in a rush, not even the rush hour traffic that slowly wound its way to work. Not even Jake and Blondie, slowly walking toward Ernesto. Hands beneath their coats, necks stiff, lips parted and teeth exposed.

“Let’s go to your car, alright?”

Blondie gave instructions. His jacket was polyester and puffy, like he expected snow to fall. Ernesto stood just outside the convenience store door while Blondie and Jake watched him from an arm’s length away, their hands still concealed.

“You go first. We’ll be behind you.”

He walked between the two men and toward the Avis rental. There was no need to hurry and no reason to stall. What would happen would happen. Soccer moms wouldn’t hit the ground in a gas station shoot-out. Half-rate henchmen wouldn’t get murdered because of fear and greed. His arms stayed at his sides and he made a direct line to gas pump number three. While he walked, Blondie patted him on the back in an overly friendly gesture, his slaps moving from his belt to his pockets to his legs. Jake stayed a cautious distance behind.

At the car, Blondie gave commands.

“Okay, get in. Passenger seat.”

There was nothing cruel in his voice, nothing emotional or vindictive. He spoke like a motorcycle cop writing a speeding ticket, in measured tones, slowly pronouncing every word.

The faint presence of gas. The quiet shuffle of commuters swiping credit cards. No one glanced at Ernesto. No one watched Blondie slide behind the wheel.

“Don’t close your door.”

As he settled into his chair, Jake leaned over him, his winter coat hanging open. The black butt of a handgun stuck out of his inside pocket. Bodies crowded the car, each bent into its own space, muscles tense, ready for a rush of movement that didn’t happen.

Jake pushed Ernesto's back forward until his forehead was pressed against the dashboard. Handcuffs slipped out of some hidden part of Jake's jacket and snapped around Ernesto's wrists.

He couldn't move. He felt Jake's hand reach in his pocket, gripping his cell phone and keys.

Jake brought them up with something else. Not the forty dollars, not the bottle of pills.

It's impossible to predict every outcome of even the smallest, least important decisions. All Ernesto had wanted was a way back into the motel room. There were other options he could have taken. He could have knocked on the door. Even if Madeline had been in the shower or at breakfast, he could have waited outside. It's easy to take a shortcut without plotting the consequences, without realizing there could be consequences. Motel room keys aren't what they once were, metal and exactly like everything else on a keychain. They're plastic. They're made to slip into wallets and rest beside Visas and AAA cards. They're branded with the name of the parent company, an inviting color scheme, and the corporate logo. It could belong to any of the chain's addresses, but any reasonable person would guess it came from the closest one.

The flip phone didn't matter. Jake held the motel key. The car was small and cramped. Everyone in it knew where he would go next.

On one side of the road, apartment buildings and cactus gardens. On the other, chic stores with puns for names. Blondie was behind the wheel and Ernesto was at his side. The rental car led the way while Jake's silver Ford followed. It was just as nice of a day as it had been a few minutes earlier. The clouds were cotton candy soft and sugar cube white. But there were more crows in the sky.

Blondie took off his jacket and threw it in the back. His gun was in his hand, held low. Now that they were driving, the no-nonsense tone had left his voice. He wasn't delivering cool and careful orders. Instead, he talked to Ernesto like a friend, like they were two teens, side by side in mom's basement and

jamming the buttons of Playstation controllers. The only suggestion of a threat was the gun barrel he had pointed at the giant's belly.

"Hell man, it's awesome to have you back. Even with everything that went wrong and got fucked up, it's worth it."

Blondie was relaxed, leaning back into his chair, watching the passing sights.

"You might think I'm crazy, but let me tell you, man. You're going to love it. There's more freedom inside than outside, I swear to God. You can't even imagine, the place is totally transformed. How could it not be? After we watched you come back to life? All you've got to do is look at me, check this out."

He lifted up his shirt and showed Ernesto his stomach. Inked in bold were the letters S, U, and R, followed by the number thirteen.

"You think those la raza locos would have let me get a Sureño tat before you got reanimated? No way. But that's not the way it is anymore. Peace reigns, dude. Prison guards have Black Guerrilla Family 276s on their arms. Conscious brothers have swastikas on their backs. It's share and share alike."

The light ahead was red. Their car came to a stop. Ernesto watched Jake in the rearview mirror. Madeline had her phone. The text he had sent had been clear.

"Our ideas have evolved. We jumped from Cro-Mag to modern man. Like how I thought about my situation before you, back when I first got locked up, now I understand I was all wrong. I was depressed when they gave me my number. I felt like those digits replaced who I was, who my parents made me, changed my name into a serial code."

The light turned green and Blondie accelerated slowly. Madeline would have had time to read the message, take the money, and go. She was smart. She knew to move quickly.

"But Joe changed our perspectives. Told us deep truths, man. Said our names were never ours. Not even on the day we were born. They're labels, like a thing we have to be, every day, every night. Names are the state's first prison,

they keep us on birth certificates, on social security cards, they're a verbal spell that locks us in chains. He says our prison numbers are a deeper freedom, they represent something beyond our first, middle, last. And he took it even further, he took it way out man. Told us not to answer to our family names, told us to forget our numbers, to break away from all that. He taught us that when we were nameless, we were free to be our true selves, not locked up by a noun given to us by any authority. He showed us identity wasn't something we should keep. We can forever be new, change ourselves in every moment."

Maybe Madeline couldn't carry both bags, but she would be able to leave with at least one. That was 35 pounds of cash, more than she needed. There was Mexico. There were small towns in Northern California. She would find a taxi and a road out of San Diego.

"It's not like money's all that different, but you know how it is. We've got to play along, we've got to follow the rules of the game. If Joe hadn't convinced us that you were more than a miracle, we wouldn't even need cash. He's going to make what happened to you happen again, he's knows what's up. What we've got to get him are the chemicals, the equipment. And you know that shit is expensive."

They weren't far away. A minute or two more and they would arrive.

"Obviously, there's more to it than just supplies. And a downside of all this inter-gang peace is it's gotten way more difficult for Joe to get test subjects. No one's winning arguments with knives anymore, you know what I mean?" He laughed.

Around the next corner was the motel. Before Blondie could move into the left lane, he pulled over to the curb and stopped at a parking meter. The silver Ford pulled into the spot directly behind them. A store window displayed new jeans and old records. A white-haired woman walked past their car. She had a cane, a puppy, and a wobbly stride. The little dog strained against its leash and she tried to keep up.

Overhead, a shadow covered the sun. It was a plane flying to the coast. There were a million ways out of this city.

The back door opened and Jake got in. He still wore his heavy jacket and his hand was still hidden beneath it. Blondie turned to him.

“You all set?”

Jake nodded.

“It’s on. Let’s do this.”

Blondie left the metered space and re-passed the old woman. Her dog had found an orange cone. She smiled as her pet peed on it.

He spun the wheel. Went into the left turn lane, cut through the intersection, and started down a new street. Their destination was twenty yards ahead.

No girl carried heavy locked bags down the sidewalk. No police cars turned onto the road.

The motel’s sign was a pink that would match the sunset. Glowing neon tubes spelled VACANCY, drawing eyes away from a darkened NO.

They went in. It was a small motel, a one-story building where every door opened out onto the lot.

No girl with short hair and a flannel shirt stood waiting. From the back seat, Jake talked.

“Park there.”

Blondie drove to the lot’s one empty spot. The space Ernesto had pulled out of earlier that morning. The space directly in front of the door to his room. The blinds were shut. There was no “Do Not Disturb” sign on the knob.

Three doors down, a girl with saucer eyes and a pigtail pointed at the Jeep parked beside theirs. Her father carried the family luggage and her mouth moved.

No sign of the cash. No sign of the girl.

Blondie’s gun was still in his grip, still below the window. He turned to the back seat.

“You want to stay here and keep an eye on our guy?”

Jake nodded. His handgun’s muzzle dug into Ernesto’s ribs.

“Cool. I’ll scope the place out.”

A parking lot, a vacationing family, three men in an Avis, and a motel room with a broken window. A window that hadn’t been broken at dawn.

Blondie’s hand went to the door. His foot went to the pavement. He got out and stood between the rental and the Jeep. His eyes moved from room to room.

And he fell.

Face first, bandaged nose down onto the curb.

So quick he didn’t make a sound.

Until the little girl with big eyes shrieked. Laying on cement and bleeding, Blondie shrieked louder.

Madeline had waited, crouched outside her hotel room, until she saw Ernesto's car pull into the lot and drive toward the empty space. She had dived under the Jeep, with her cheek raised an inch above the ground and her hair pressed against flat metal. She reached out from beneath the car and shoved the piece of broken window back into Blondie's leg. The glass cut through his jeans.

The car was poorly maintained and dripping oil. It stained her sleeve in black splotches. She had been wearing the flannel for four days and it was at a level of grossness that couldn't be washed off. The air was cool. The beach wasn't too many miles away. A late breakfast at a low-key diner would have been a nice way to kick off the morning. Instead she was on her stomach, beneath a gas-guzzler, stabbing some bozo bank robber. It was his fault she had missed breakfast; it was his fault the piece of window had slid across her palm and sliced it open. The cut stung like hell and the bozo in the nose bandage screamed. Good. Her morning was all fucked up, like hell his would be any better.

She raised the glass up and brought it down one more time, careful to aim for the meat of Blondie's leg. It went in. She pressed her fingers on the flat sides of the weapon, so she could push down without cutting her palm again. The dummy shouted and squirmed while the glass stayed where it was. It would slow him down and she would move quickly.

On the Avis rental side of the Jeep, Blondie's writhing body blocked her exit. Her only way out was to the left. She pushed the rubber soles of her sneakers against the cement and pulled herself over with her elbows. The plan she had put together was simple. Stab an asshole before he knew she was there. It had been a success; the one step had worked. She moved out into the sun and made a new plan. Again, only one step. Figure out what the fuck was happening.

As she stood up, the vacationing dad grabbed his daughter's arm and pulled. The girl's ponytail made a straight line in the air as she disappeared

behind a shut door. On the other side of the Jeep, Madeline couldn't see shit. The vehicle was tall with tinted windows and she was short without x-ray vision. Blondie's screams turned into moans.

She ran around the Jeep's headlights, over the curb, and toward the Avis. She looked through the rental's front windshield. Her giant was in the passenger seat.

And not moving.

His eyes were on hers but his shoulders stayed still. As she darted past the rental's Arizona license plate, she yelled.

"Ernie, let's go!"

The mute stayed where he was. Seatbelt over his chest and hands behind his back.

Her one weapon was stuck in an OC bro's lower leg; her hands were fingers in and knuckles out. With blood and oil on her shirt, with one leg thrust forward and her heel on the ground, she came to a dead stop on the passenger's side of the Avis.

Jake was waiting.

Gun in his hand and crouched low. Hidden so she didn't see him until she was in his line of sight, until his handgun was aimed straight at her. His finger around its trigger.

"Stop."

He said the word firmly. His pupils were a small dot of black. She stood where her heel had hit the ground and unclenched her fists. Her cut nerves hit the open air. They sang sharp notes.

All Ernesto had to do was open the door. Then the line between Jake's gun barrel and her chest would be broken. Then they would have a chance.

His door stayed shut. His arms stayed behind his back. His seatbelt stayed pulled over his chest. The man couldn't move.

She looked down into the car. In the time it had taken her to run over, Blondie had crawled back inside. His chest was on the driver's seat and his stabbed leg was on the cement. He had his gun aimed at Ernesto.

They were screwed. But the morning wasn't any less pleasant than it had been before. The weather hadn't changed. It hadn't made itself a metaphor for their shitty situation. Breezy, early enough that the day could be taken slowly, each hour gently rolling into the next. Above the motel's sign, there were no birds, no bad omens, nothing but blue. A color that stood for empty space, a shade that showed nothing was there. Blood ran down her fingers.

"Get in."

Jake opened the back door and stepped to the side. So she had enough space to squeeze by. So she could sit where he told her to.

She got in the car.

Her stomach rumbled.

Breakfast was a lost cause.

But the sad truth was that diners always ended up serving her hash browns, even if she was sure she hadn't ordered anything that included the world's worst side dish. Who liked hash browns, anyway? Even drowned in hot sauce they tasted like stale bread. She had missed her meal, okay, big deal. At least a blonde OC prick would have trouble surfing for a few months. Stick that bloody stump in the water and watch sharks line up.

She glanced at the rearview mirror and saw Ernesto looking back at her.

The stabbed goon pulled himself all the way into his seat, pushing with his arms, going slowly and shaking. Jake stepped onto the curb and slid a key into a motel room door. It didn't open. He tried a second and it also stayed shut. The third door he tried was his lucky one. The key went in and the handle turned. His back fell into the room's shadows.

Blondie had his gun in Ernesto's stomach.

"Yo, I really don't want you to die again, but move one time and I'll put you back in your freezer."

Jake walked back out into parking lot, carrying two heavy bags, walking toward the car. He jumped in, throwing the bags next to her and giving orders.

“Get us back to the Ford. Fast.”

In the back seat, Madeline put her palm to her lips and tasted salt.

What's the difference between a name and a prison number? You guys know the answer. There's zero difference. Nothing.

So what's the difference between a name and a nickname? Again. Nothing.

Come on. This shouldn't be too hard to figure out. But still. You guys are doing it. Nicknames are creeping back. I hear them in the lab. I hear them in the yard. Lefty. Duck. Cheese Fries. Burger King. I don't even understand that last one. Somebody got a sponsorship?

It's not easy, for sure. Communicating without names, I mean it almost feels like we have to invent an entirely new language. If you're in the laundry, loading with a three-person team, how do you make it clear that you're talking to one guy and not the other guy? It's annoying. It can definitely lead to mistakes and fuck-ups. I heard the name thing was at least part of the reason the frozen waffles were burnt at Tuesday's breakfast. Seems like that should be impossible, but when we're struggling with a new way to talk, weird things happen. Frozen waffles get burnt.

Just remember. Remember how much we hated their numbers. Remember the deep bullshit of that system. When they tried to take your name away, what did they do? They replaced it with a number that had the exact same function as the name that was gone. They weren't even willing to commit to their own ideology.

We rejected that. We did to their numbers what they did to our names.

A name still owns you. We've changed a lot, but that truth remains. Even if it's not what your mother called you. Even if it's not what the state called you. Even if it's a nickname. Even if it's something as stupid as Burger King. We change and names don't. We evolve and names stay static.

We've committed to something here. Let's not fuck it up.

From the Avis rental to the white Ford. From suburban roads to the freeway. From San Diego to the Inland Empire. No one talked. Madeline and Blondie held bleeding limbs; Jake stared out the window and read billboards.

A wooden wine rack held zero bottles of wine. Ernesto sat on a cot beside it, his feet manacled. He was in a small wine cellar in a Norco basement. He rested there, with his elbows on his knees and his face buried in his arms. Everything he could see he had seen. The spider in the corner. The one incandescent bulb's glowing thread.

The chains on his legs weren't locked to the wall or to the wine rack's wooden beams. Instead, they were drawn tight around his ankles. He would have been able to stand up, but he wouldn't have been able to take a step forward. Moving would mean hopping. The basement ceiling was low, shorter than his height. Everything in it was old except for the door. That was new. It was steel, shut, and locked.

In the corner opposite the spider was a camera. It watched him.

He closed his eyes and listened. No voices. No sound.

Until there were steps on the basement stairs. Coming down.

A few seconds later and the steel door beeped, its bolt clicking open. It swung back. Jake stood with his hand on the knob and looked down at the giant. His casual clothes were gone; he was dressed in uniform. Dark green shirt, a wide belt worn high, and a California Department of Corrections badge. His hair was wet from a shower but he still smelled like cheese. He patted his belt.

"I want you to know. Right now, things aren't great between you and me," he waved at Ernesto's manacles, "but everything's going to get sorted out and cleared up and we're going to be fine. We're going to be okay."

A closed messenger bag was draped over his shoulder. He put it beside the cot.

“You’ve done this before. It’s nothing much, just the standard CDCR medical screening. Same thing you got last time you went in. You know. I’ve got to give it to everyone. Inmate health is the first priority.”

Jake sat on the ground and crossed his legs. He took medical supplies out of the bag. Syringes, needles, and a case of cotton swabs. His cheeks were thin. His face looked like a skull.

“You need the TB test, and I have to check your blood for HIV. That’s all. I’ll skip the psychological stuff, we can deal with that once you’re back inside.”

There was a small box of disposable latex gloves in the bag. Jake took two out and snapped them on. He lined up two syringes and two plastic-wrapped inch-long needles on the floor. As he rolled the gloves down his wrists, he talked.

“You definitely shouldn’t have gone to J. Smyrna. Big mistake. Those men have dishonest hearts.”

His gloves were on.

“Ready. Let’s do the TB test first.”

He took one needle and unwrapped it. Without taking his eyes off the needle’s point, he attached it to a syringe. It was a simple process, but he completed it slowly, nervously tapping the completed product when he was finished, testing to see if it would break. The second needle stayed on the floor, an arm’s length away from Ernesto’s cot.

“I gave J. Smyrna’s pills to Joe, that bottle we took from you, and he figured out where you would go next. There was nothing to it, really. He tested them and saw exactly how low his company could go. You never should have trusted them. Know what they put in your pills? Poison, more or less.”

Jake took Ernesto’s hand and stretched out his arm, looking down while he rubbed an alcohol-soaked cotton swab over his skin.

“That’s it. Those pills weren’t going to kill you, but they definitely weren’t making you any healthier. Joe told me what they did. Nothing, unless you

stopped taking them. Then they kicked in. Simulated heroin withdrawal. He figured J. Smyrna gave them to you. That's why I knew I would find you at their building. He told me they probably prescribed them so you would keep coming back."

The needle went through Ernesto's skin. Jake pushed the syringe down and Ernesto held his breath.

"I bet the guys at that company told you they're who saved you, right? Bullshit. Joe was the brains behind your whole procedure. They probably only started feeding you the pills after they fired him, after they realized you were a one-off, that he hadn't solved the entire problem. Fuckers."

The first test was finished. It was time to take a blood sample. Jake put the TB shot on the ground and picked up the second needle. He went through the same precise process, slowly unwrapping its package, carefully attaching it to the second syringe, holding it gently and making sure it was properly snapped together.

The needle went into Ernesto's other arm. Jake drew blood.

"They might have used you to try and figure it out, but Joe's still with us, doing it the same way he did the first time around. Experimenting and shit. And we've got his back. My first day on the job, it was maybe a week or two after you left. By then, everyone was already lined up behind him. They got right. It feels like a long time ago, but we gave him what he needed, we drew lots. And now we've got all this money to bring him, so we can finally get what he's missing. The right lab equipment and the right chemicals. Bulk science shit. And one of us is going to draw the next lot and this time he'll do it. It'll happen. This time he'll bring them back."

They sat in the basement, Jake on the floor and Ernesto on his cot. The light bulb shone dimly. Cobwebs cast shadows.

Madeline was upstairs and in handcuffs. The room where they had thrown her was bare except for an old desk full of locked drawers. Above it, a window-sized sheet of metal was bolted to the wall. She lay back on a cot and glared at the camera. Her ankles were manacled. The space was unventilated and hot. She sweat through her oil-stained shirt.

An hour passed, the roof soaked up sunlight, and the temperature rose. She kept her eyes open and her teeth clenched. Her jaw got sore.

They had taken their stolen cash back from her. Okay, fair. They could have shot her when they did it. It would have been a crap way to go but it wouldn't have been uncalled for. This, though. This was different. Tossing her into a locked room and making her bore herself to death. It wasn't fair; it was too far. She gave the camera the finger and its black eye didn't flinch.

The door beeped, the bolt clicked, and Jake walked in. A messenger bag was over his shoulder and his CDCR uniform was buttoned up. His boots' thick soles hit the hardwood floor. It was a weight that carried no threat, just clumsiness. She stayed where she was and put her handcuffed wrists behind her head.

"Hey. Get up. Did I tell you it was naptime?"

She kept her back stretched out and her expression relaxed.

"Where's Ernesto?"

The messenger bag went to the floor. "Let me ask you a question. How do you get a hair cut? Stick your head in a blender? You look like shit."

At least she wasn't trying to look good. The idiot standing over her was clean-shaven, showered, and still looked one wild weekend away from gaining a meth habit and losing his teeth. White trash doesn't wash off.

"Basic insults won't make me think you're smart. Where'd you put Ernie?"

Jake sat in front of her, crossing his legs and talking while he rummaged through his bag.

“Don’t worry about my buddy Ernesto. I like him. You, though. I don’t like you much.”

“He came in the house with me. I haven’t heard anybody leave or anything. So he’s still here, right? Locked up in some room or somewhere?”

She watched Jake’s face, searching for a reaction. All she got was a caveman brow and a too-close look at greasy pores.

“Sit up or I’ll taze you. Alright?”

She stayed where she was, he reached out, grabbed the cot’s metal frame, and gave it two hard yanks.

“Do you really think I would rather treat you nice? Nah. I’ll make you convulse like a fish on land. That’d be funny to me.”

Jake pulled medical supplies out of the bag. A box of latex gloves, cotton swabs, two sets of syringes and needles. He put it all in a careful order on the floor, not too far from her cot.

Both of the needles were packaged in thin plastic. They were sharp and they were short. She sat up and rested her handcuffs on her knees.

“Yeah. If you don’t want to get a needle in the wrong place you better do what I say.”

Gloves went over his fingers. Madeline changed her tone of voice.

“Okay.” Meek, submissive, and eyes down. She faced the man who sat in front of her.

He picked up one needle up and peeled the packaging off. With his other hand, he reached out and grabbed a syringe. The tip of his tongue was stuck between his lips. He focused on attaching the two pieces together and almost went cross-eyed.

There was a foot and a half of empty space between his spot on the floor and her spot on the cot. Dust motes and stale air.

She wanted the needle on the floor.

The cuffs kept her from moving her hands far apart from each other, so she opened her palms wide and pushed them together. While Jake tapped his syringe, she moved her arms to the left, then swung hard to the right. She felt his needle prick her skin and she saw the syringe fly out of his fingers. It went through the open door and landed in the hallway.

His eyes followed the needle as it flew. It hit the ground and he turned to her, shaking his head. His words were high-pitched.

“Damn. I don’t see any point in that. If the needle’s broken, I’m using it anyway.”

His thick eyebrows framed a hollow scowl. He stood up and left the room. Madeline breathed in and dry air scraped her tongue.

If Ernesto was still in this house, she would find him.

The other needle was there, in its packaging, on hardwood, and close to her cot. She leaned over and reached for it. Jake was out in the hall; she couldn’t see him. She heard him step, stop, and turn back.

There was no time to tear off the plastic. She picked it up and closed her fist over it.

Holding the syringe close to his eyes, he walked back in. The dummy watched medical equipment like it might bite him.

“Shit. My needle’s broken, you broke it. Don’t blame me when this hurts. I do things by the book. I follow the rules. Correctly. The reason you’ll feel pain is you.”

She kept her fists closed.

The steel door stayed open.

Jake sat, crossing his legs and putting the broken needle down.

There was a plastic bottle in his messenger bag. He twisted it open. The harsh smell of alcohol forced its way up her nose. He held a small cotton square against the bottle’s mouth and flipped it over.

“You can’t do whatever you want. It’s stupid. There’s no point to it. What I’m going to do is what I’m going to do, whether you’re psychotic or not.”

Her eyes stayed on his face. He never looked away from his bottle or turned to see what was in her right hand.

“Alright. Give me your arm.”

She put out the soft side of her left arm, moving her shoulders so her right side twisted away from him. Pressing the swab down with two fingers, he leaned over her handcuffed wrists, eyes pointed down, and slowly rubbed the alcohol on her skin.

The needle hidden in her fist came out.

She stuck it between her index and middle finger, tip up.

Still wrapped in its plastic plackage.

With his face pointed toward the floor, she couldn't see his eyes, just the straight brow and the top end of his protruding nose.

He saw her hand when it came at him. With enough time to jolt back a half-centimeter. But not any more than that.

Her fist went below his eyebrow. The edge of the plastic packaging bent back, the needle forced its way through, broke out, and cut his cornea. It went in deep.

His shoulders swung away from her. Her hands were empty and his back hit the floor.

He covered his face with his arms. His palms were open and shaking. He didn't swipe at her. He didn't grab the inch-long piece of metal that made a line between the ceiling and the center of his black pupil.

His eyelids were wide, his lips were bared, and his gums were red.

She watched him long enough to see he wasn't getting up. The sound of air sucking in between teeth. Shuddering, quivering. She looked away.

The guy wouldn't stop shaking and she needed his keys. He twisted and turned without making a sound. The only way to keep him still was to put her knee on his neck and hold it there. His body vibrated as she reached over his chest. She unclipped the key ring from his belt, then, ankles still manacled together, stood up and hopped out of the room. The camera watched her go.

Out in the hall, she pulled the door shut and lost her balance. Her elbow hit the ground. She lay where she had fallen and looked at herself. Same dirty shirt and same old sneakers. Nothing chopped off or bleeding. All in all, okay outcome. On the other side of the wall, she heard muffled fucks and motherfuckers. The cries of a man coming out of shock and feeling what had been done to him.

His voice was low and guttural. She pushed herself away, scooting down the hall, away from his curses.

When she got herself to a point where the sounds had faded to a reasonable level, she pressed her back against a wall, sitting beneath another window-sized sheet of metal. The house smelled like mothballs and mold. Her teeth were pressed into her bottom lip. She opened her mouth and grunted. His keys were in her hands. Two of them would set her free.

She sorted through the ring, testing to see what would fit, and speakers switched on. Static, an irregular rhythm. They weren't in the hallway. Their sound didn't come from the room she had just left. There was a second door, leading into a second room. White noise and radio interference.

With her wrists and ankles locked together, she leaned forward and looked through the noisy doorway. She could only see one small sliver of the room. Screens shined. They showed black and white pictures of a Norco front yard.

A small key looked like it would fit her handcuffs. She twisted her arms to try it out and the lock unlatched. The manacles around her ankles were made of

a heavier metal, but it wasn't any harder to find the key that popped them open. She pushed the bonds over her feet and sat where she was, free from her chains but mentally immobile, listening to the speakers' high frequencies and low buzz. Cracks and drones, ugly harmony.

Everything swam together. The temperature, the sound, the salty and soiled smell of her shirt. Flowing through a tide that moved faster as it pulled her toward a shore she couldn't see. Toward ground she wouldn't feel until it filled her mouth with sand. She floated and the static waved crested. It pulled her up and words broke through the surface.

"Hey. You there. In the flannel."

The voice wasn't Jake's. It was half-hidden under the speaker's pops and buzzes. She looked at her feet and saw her toes move inside her shoes.

"Get over here."

It was hard to hear the man's inflection through the radio interference, but he didn't seem upset. She stood, spread her legs wide and stayed steadily balanced. The televisions inside the room displayed still scenes. The wide front driveway. The narrow path in the yard.

When she stepped into the room, the screens multiplied. A few showed views of the house. A kitchen with a bug-filled sink and a living room with a dining table and a framed portrait. A room where Jake lay tense and still on a hardwood floor, then another room where her giant sat, forehead buried in his hands.

The TVs rested on top of each other and on top of metal boxes with displays of blinking lights. A headset was on a desk in the center of the room, plugged into a wide and flat black box. Resting on the box was an open laptop. A man was on the screen, his face LCD flat. Behind him was a steel bunk bed and a white-painted cinder block wall. He wore an orange jumpsuit. The speakers projected his voice.

"Put the headset on. I can only hear you if you use that mic."

She rolled back the chair by the desk and sat down, putting headphones over her ears and positioning the microphone by her mouth. The volume was too loud. While he talked she turned the laptop's sound down.

"So hey. Are you going to kill Jake or what?"

"What?"

He asked the question too casually. Like calling a co-worker a few floors up to check in before a meeting. She had to repeat his words.

"Am I going to kill Jake?"

The man nodded, "Yeah," then glanced offscreen, looking at something she couldn't see.

"No, no way," she hit all three words with surprise, tilting her head back. "I messed up his eye but that's it. I mean, I think he's okay besides that."

The man seemed to be typing. His eyes were focused somewhere above the camera that recorded him.

"Well, if you do kill Jake, do us a favor, okay? Put his body in the basement freezer. And make sure it's completely shut after you close him in. It would be great if you could do that."

"Wait, what?"

His attention stayed off-screen at whatever else he looked at.

"Listen, we can't make you do anything. But if you would put his body in the fridge, we'd appreciate it, alright? The guys are sick of this lottery, if you kill Jake we can cancel this week's draw. So do what you're going to do. I don't care as long as his corpse gets frozen."

His hand moved up, he pressed something she couldn't see, the speakers switched off and the computer flashed back to its desktop background. The other screens stayed on their images. The living room, the yard, Ernesto.

She went back out to the hallway. There was a third door, she pushed it open and saw a small bathroom. Water marks on the sink's faucet. A brown ring around its drain. A mom and a dad and their kid had probably slept in these rooms. Maybe back in the '70s, with dad listening to washed-up Frank Sinatra

songs and mom laughing at yellow-tinged NBC sitcoms. The kid watching vinyl spin and wishing he had a weed connect. All pretty depressing except compared to the house the way it was now. Dirty as a beachfront bathroom and bolted shut with steel. The air was probably rancid; the carpet probably hid decades of toenail clippings. She went downstairs, walking warily.

In the living room, she tried the front door. Its knob wouldn't twist. When she pressed random buttons on its keypad it didn't make a digital beep. She turned away.

Over the living room table was the gold-framed painting she had noticed before. Now she stopped and took a closer look. It was a poorly drawn portrait. Almost child-like, but its lines weren't made with the chaotic energy of an actual child. Blobs of color and thick brush strokes. The resemblance wasn't obvious, but after spending days beside the man she could tell who it was supposed to be. The faint scar along his neck gave it away. Ernesto. His bulky frame had been oddly forced into the polite pose of a 17th-century duchess. He stared out at the world with a convict's impression of a noble countenance.

She kept going, walking through the small hallway and into the kitchen. To the side of the cabinets was a back door. It probably opened out to the yard, but it also had a keypad over the knob. She tested it anyway, turning her wrist and achieving nothing, poking arbitrary numbers and waiting for an unlatching sound that didn't come.

She opened a drawer. Spoons, but no knives. Not even a fork. She looked on the countertops for a phone. Nothing.

The bugs inside the sink didn't move. She had expected to see the water writhing, to watch the insects roll over one another, floating to the surface and sinking back down. Instead it was flat. A few tiny corpses floated, but that was it. The mass of the animals had fallen to the bottom. They waited for the drain to get unplugged, to get sucked down into pipes.

No exit on the top floor and no exit on the ground floor. The only direction left was down.

Back in the hallway, heading toward the basement stairs, she took a look at the closet. When she had walked through this room a week ago, a she had seen a gun there. It was gone now. She opened the door and looked inside.

There was no hole in the tiles. There was no secret escape route. There was no mop or broom or hanging coats. Just a small space and three walls.

And a small bird, darting in the air. It moved like it had found a way to expand its confined space, like its feathers could feel winds that were kept out by the house's walls. There was no reason for it to be here. There was no reason it shouldn't be dead, wings folded and black eyes rotted brown. It was there, in front of her, treating the closet like a sky. The bird escaped, fluttering over her head.

She spun around and watched it glide down the stairs. It was a wild combination of colors. Black along the tips of its wings, yellow closer to its body, a warm brown around its back, and a circle of red framing its white beak. It was a tiny beast, like a mouse covered in feathers.

She followed, stepping lightly. Toes first and cautious. The house's darkness grew deeper. The shapes around her became more indistinct. She was losing herself, like her senses moved forward and left her body behind, traveling on to where she couldn't go.

The earth rose above her.

Mine shafts don't end at the horizon. They pass coal, they cut through gold, and they stop. In barren patches, where there's no value in going any further.

She looked for the bird and couldn't find it. Somewhere behind the furnace or between stacks of boxes, it fluttered. The room was filled with humming. An electric noise, high and monotone, came from the corner, from a seven-foot long freezer that sat on the ground, connected to an extension cord traveling along the wall. It was closed and loud, keeping its contents cold.

She lifted it open. Looked inside.

Its walls were frosted over, thick with ice crystals that grew on top of each other, like a fuzzy blanket she could pull over herself.

Between the freezer's walls were limbs.

Blue legs and hands were frozen in broken positions. A man's chest without arms attached to it. Rooted through his rib cage, a thick and winding stem rose up. It was the color of dusk and its blooming flower was purple. Its petals were open to her, watching her.

She let the freezer's door fall back down. It slammed shut and the bird reappeared. Its feathers glided an inch above her outstretched fingers, then its wings fluttered and it went to the other side of the room, stopping by a steel door with a keypad over the knob. The bird hovered there, moving through the air in small circles, its red face dim in the basement's dark.

"Ernie?"

Now her steps were loud, she walked quickly and let her heels fall solidly. As she walked to the door, someone knocked on its other side.

The noise was strong and solid. A sound that only could have been made by a monster.

"Ernie, I found you."

Madeline put her cheek against the steel. She felt the small vibrations as he knocked again. Her palm went to the place where the sound had come from; she kept it there.

"There's no way out."

She could feel him, his weight pressed close to her.

"They'll find us here."

No knock in response.

"There aren't any windows or phones. If I had a knife, Ernie, I'd cut these idiots. But I checked in the kitchen. There's nothing."

His feet shuffled. She could hear him sit and lean his shoulders back against the door. She did the same.

"Hey, we had the money, right? Even if it was all locked up it was still ours. And we got on the road. For a little while we were gone."

Fuck it. Her hands were hers and her filthy shirt was hers. That wasn't everything she wanted but she wouldn't get bummed about it. There's not enough time to let reality win. She wouldn't give it a minute. She would stay where she was and kick facts on their asses. What she had was hers. What she wanted was hers.

It wasn't much longer before Jake and Blondie's friends showed up. When she heard them storm through the front door, she was beside her giant. She got to her feet and made fists. The cameras were everywhere. The men would know where to find her.

They crowded noisily into the hallway and she waited for the sound of their steps on the stairs. That didn't happen. A metal canister came down. Hit the basement's cement floor. With a tiny nozzle on one side, spewing gas, a slightly sweet smell.

Idiots never fight fair.

Let's be real. This hasn't been easy. Too often, it hasn't been fun.

There have been doubts.

Some of you come to me. You ask, "When will this be finished? When will we get what we're working for?" I tell you to wait. And I know that's the one thing you don't want to hear. You've waited long enough. I feel that.

Some of you have called me a liar. Even though you saw it with your own eyes. You saw what I did, that I brought a dead man back to life. And you still said I wasn't telling the truth. You said I was a charlatan.

That hurt, but I understood. It's been tough. When we aim high, it's hard to climb to our goal.

He's here. Where he should be. With us. His family.

I want you to take out your masks. I want you to wear them. I want you to welcome him with love and open arms. The time for doubting is done. Ernesto is home.

There's still work to do. The murals are finished, but the stage hasn't been set. We've got to take everything you guys have made and put it up. We've got to get the morgue ready.

You know how this works. When it goes down, it goes down. The freezer has to be open and everyone has to be on point.

Let's be honest about everything that's happened. Let's clear the air. There have been fights, yeah. There have been disagreements, definitely. But when it comes down to it, we're all going to be there tonight. Together. With Ernesto. To support him. The guy who showed us what we can do.

He came to, spitting vomit.

It was the remains of the junk food he had eaten the night before, drained of its chemical flavoring, mealy and tasteless. It dribbled down his chin and onto the orange jumpsuit someone had put him in. A second wave of nausea rose. He leaned and spat into the bucket between his knees. This time a chunk of apple came up with the bile. His head was a siren. A point of pain blared, quietened, then rolled back sharp and loud.

His hands were chained together. His weight was supported by a chair that moved unsteadily. One last long and sour string of spit fell from his mouth. He looked up and saw where he was.

In a passenger van with no other passengers.

He had been put in the far back, with two rows of seats separating him from the driver. He couldn't see the man's face, just his knuckles on the steering wheel and his receding hairline in the rearview mirror. They drove past a mission-style church with stucco walls and clay roof tiles and a thin white cross facing the street. As they went by, a brick wall rose up. Suburban houses were just behind it. On the opposite side of the road, a guard tower rose, a six-foot number eight painted in black beneath its top window.

Figures moved behind the glass. They looked down and tracked the van as it drove toward the front gate.

He shouldn't have been alone. He didn't want to be the only person there. A bitter, acidic taste swirled over his tongue.

He craned his neck forward, peering over the backs of the rows in front of him, searching for a small figure, maybe still unconscious, maybe still laying there and breathing.

No one.

He pushed himself over and fell onto his side, with his elbow pressed into synthetic leather. Looking over the van's carpeted floor, trying to find a bound and gagged girl, rolling back and forth as the van moved forward. There were crumbs, there was an old Cheez-It bag, there was the desert brown dirt that covered everything in Norco.

There was no Madeline.

He pushed himself up and stared into the rearview mirror, watching the driver's forehead and stomping his feet on the ground. No reaction from the front seat. The man didn't look at him. Ernesto's muscles strained. He pulled his handcuffs as far apart as they would go, stretching the chain taut. The prison gate got closer. He opened his lips and dropped his jaw. His tongue flailed. He needed the van to stop. He needed to know where she was. His neck tensed; his mouth made an O. No sound came out. Not a sheep's bleating, not a bubbling sewer, not escaping air. Silence.

They drove beneath barbed wire. Gates closed. The van was on the wrong side of prison walls.

A narrow courtyard ran between a row of buildings and a yard. Men wore orange and walked on water-starved grass. The lawn was mostly brown. The few green patches didn't look like they belonged. The grass would have been more uniform if it were more dead.

The buildings' doors were all dark steel, except for the one closest to where the van was parked. "California Department of Corrections: Norco" was stenciled on glass. Vertical shapes moved on the other side. They might have been people or they might have been something else. The glass was tinted. Whatever was behind it was obscured.

The driver took the keys out of the van's ignition and stepped onto asphalt. The sky was clear and the courtyard looked hot. He leaned against the van's hood, fingering a pack of Newports. The bottom half of its green box stuck halfway out of his pocket. He tapped it with his index finger. The plastic wrapping was still on. The box hadn't been opened. He tapped it harder.

A man on the lawn limped into the courtyard. He had white hair and flinched with every step, but any other distinguishing traits were smothered under baggy orange fabric. Prison garb made him anonymous. He slid the van's door open and sat in the seat ahead of Ernesto.

"Hey, man. Good to see you again." His skin was rough. It had seen too much sun over too many years.

"It feels weird to be back, huh? I know it. Like it's been a decade since you've seen your baby brother and he hasn't changed at all. Same kid clothes. Same shorty height. Same Little League trophies on his bedroom shelf. Things don't change here. People get older," he pressed his palm against his knee, then

picked his leg up and laid it straight on the seat, "I get older. But more young people come. They look pretty much like I did. They keep it like it was.

"I guess I'm saying I understand how you feel because I came back, too. Just like you're doing now. What you're feeling isn't unusual. It's normal. Totally normal.

"No doubt, we're back for different reasons. And we left for different reasons, too. Me, about a year after you did your Lazarus thing, I got parole. We had our freedom, but we still had to play by a few rules. We couldn't let the state know too much. Couldn't show that we took their power away. If the government told me I had to go, I had to go. Went out to the real world, like you did. I wasn't too mad about it." He gestured at the walls. "I was ready to split."

The convict pushed himself off his seat and out of the van. Ernesto followed him, his wrists still handcuffed together.

"You know how it is, though. What it's like out there. You apply to a job, everything's good, they learn you're a felon, everything's not good. You try to get an apartment, same shit. You try to see your nephew, your sister says, 'What if he sees your tattoos? What if he asks what they mean? What if you give him ideas? What if he ends up on the streets, out with those boys he shouldn't be out with?' I swear, I had more friends in here than I ever did out there. Inside, I talked to people all day long. Guys knew my name. Outside, my own family didn't want to see me. Some weeks, the only guy I talked to was the Domino's delivery kid."

They went into the building and passed inmate processing desks. New arrivals stood on rubber floor mats. Uniformed corrections officers entered data into computers. A few guards stopped typing and watched Ernesto walk by. Bars separated the processing room from a long hallway. The gate opened as they approached.

"That wasn't for me. You tried it. It isn't for anybody. It's why I'm back. It's why you're back. I did what I had to do. Knocked the pizza delivery kid's teeth out of his mouth and took every dollar in his car. Domino's had my address and

my name and my phone number and my credit card. I was in cuffs twenty minutes later. That was good for me. It was cool. Only hard part was making sure they put me back here. Didn't want to go to some other shit prison."

A long line of fluorescent lights was attached to the center of the ceiling. They came to a staircase. The convict went down and Ernesto followed.

"Because you haven't even seen it yet, man. When you got it, when you got killed, you showed us truth. But you haven't seen it yourself. Even the guards know it now. Most of them, they had religion. When they learned their bosses were fucking with bodies? When they saw one of those bodies get not dead? That changed shit for them. You changed shit for them. What's the difference between a guard and a convict? We're both on the locked side of these walls."

One level down and the stairs fell into foundation. Ernesto went into another hallway. The walls were gray and the lights were dim. It felt colder, like the season had suddenly changed from summer to fall. His wrists were sore where the handcuffs rubbed against his skin.

"Yeah, I came back because I meant to. You came back because we brought you. For sure. It's not the same. But I'm telling you, it's better this way. You're home here. You're the man here. And we need you. With you, everybody that got dead has a meaning. Everybody with their throats cut can breathe again. You've got to do this. We got to make the dead like you. Not dead."

Ernesto couldn't move smoothly from one step to the next. His foot landed on the ground and his muscles tensed, telling him to go no further. His back foot forced its way ahead and the process repeated. The prisoner came to his side, pointing him in the direction of a room with handwashing stations and steel tables built into its floor. On a counter, there was a scale with a bowl-shaped tray. A poster showed the outline of a human body and the words "Organ Board."

The convict pushed him toward a wall of freezer storage. Square doors were stacked on top of one another. Letters and numbers were written in each upper left corner.

The space between his feet and the freezer got smaller. There was only one place they could be going. There was only one thing that they would see when they arrived. As they went toward the wall, the morgue's light shifted over the freezer's metal doors. Colors moved from metallic blue to shining yellow and inanimate metal looked alive. The convict stopped at door E2, at the very center of the wall. He pulled it open and brought out a table. It hovered over the floor.

Madeline's skin was white and cold. Her eyes were open and marked with a brown line. Her lips were parted. Across her neck was his open scar.

Her bodybag was white. Its zipper had been drawn down to her arm, so the plastic could be pulled back and her face revealed. Ernesto touched the zipper, the tip of his thumb on the flat end of its metal. If he grabbed it and pulled, he would see the rest of her. Maybe there would be a patch of skin where some life was left. A rosy red under her belly button where warm blood flowed. A toe that moved, wiggling to show it wasn't quite dead. He kept the zipper where it was. He didn't pull it down. He pressed it into his finger.

She was in an immaterial space. Her eyes moved up, they peered into corners, and circled back to where they had looked before. They searched for anything other than darkness. They strained and they hunted.

Or her eyes stayed still, with rigormortis' bloody bruise slashed through her pupils. She wasn't in a dark and metaphysical world. She was not here in an absolute sense. She was no longer anywhere.

A third person appeared. He walked into the morgue and came to the table where Ernesto and the convict stood, stopping by Madeline's head. His fingers rested on the table's metal, inches away from her bare shoulders. His hair was in cornrows. He didn't wear a guard's uniform or a prisoner's jumpsuit. His hoodie's drawstrings swung over his chest. He talked. He didn't stop talking. His mouth moved and Madeline stayed cold.

His cornrows made perfectly neat lines on his head. They were ordered like a grid, like a symbolic space representing something other than itself, like an accountant's spreadsheet where numbers were dollars and words were products. Chaos had been taken out of the world and neatly organized on the surface of his skull.

The room changed. More people came in. They wore masks made of torn sheets and bed springs. Curved wire pinched temples. Soft polyester hid foreheads. Orange jumpsuits were embroidered with letters and dragons and

symbols. A black handprint. An eagle eating a snake. A rifle and machete in the shape of a cross. A swastika. They were sewn into chests, into arms, onto the backs of standard-issue prison uniforms. No faces were visible. Pages had been torn from books and taped together to conceal noses and cheekbones and eyebrows. Blue irises shone behind roughly cut holes. Masked men lined the walls. More came in and filled the floor. They were a dense and silent mob. No one talked but the man in cornrows. He stood with his hands too close to Madeline's shoulders and watched Ernesto play with her bodybag's zipper. His lips moved and his tongue hit teeth.

Birds with black and yellow feathers flew into the room. They darted in fast circles over the mens' heads. There was nowhere for them to land. Their wings beat furiously. Their chirps were sharp and panicked.

The men were quiet. The only person who spoke was the one standing beside Ernesto. Everyone else listened and watched. Their eyes searched the giant's body, returning again and again to the scar on his neck.

The crowd shifted. The convicts pushed one man forward. They sucked in their chests and pressed into their neighbors, making space for him to come through. He stopped at the table where Madeline lay.

It was Blondie. He was naked and shivering. His neck was exposed, long and white. Prisoners held his wrists and his legs. Their grip was tight, but he didn't fight to free himself. He held his chin high and pointed the soft skin beneath the Adam's apple at Ernesto.

The man in cornrows kept talking.

Blondie breathed fast and loud.

The universe is large, but it ends. Beyond, there is nothing. Not the vacuum of space, not the absence of color, not God.

A knife slid into Ernesto's fingers. It had a masking tape grip. He raised it.

A half-foot of metal swung down.

Blondie's neck was cut. His body was on the floor.

I'm sorry. It's hard. But I also get it. I know failure, man. I know how it feels.

I was where you are. Where you're at right now. You made yourself rich. You got a way out. You found a bright future. All that. And then, damn, it crumbled. You're not rich. You've got no way out. Your future's dark as fuck.

I'm telling you, dude, I totally feel where you're coming from. Because the same thing happened to me.

I mean, that incredible moment? When everything's golden? For you it was probably when you got the money and got away, right? It was probably when you looked in your rearview mirror and you didn't see any cops or goons chasing you. You had the cash and an empty road.

For me, it was the second I saw you living again. The second you stopped being a corpse.

It feels sweet. Everything you've been working for, everything you've done, everything you thought wasn't going to work out, it all actually works out. It's good. It's a rush.

But then it gets fucked. You got found with your stolen cash. I got fired from my company. It sucked. My CFO, Alexandra Zend, she went to the board and said some basic corporate shit. Told them it was time to stop experimenting. Said scientific expertise wasn't enough. That they needed a businesswoman to transform my theoretical work into real profit. You, well you had these guys rush at you in the gas station, stick you up, find your stash, throw you in their basement. It's not where you wanted to be. It's not where I wanted to be. But I brought you here because I get it. We failed. It's like they say, man. Clichés are clichés because they're true. Fail fast and fail often. That's why I brought you here. Failure equals success.

Sure, you've had a setback. I don't mean to minimize that. I don't want to tell you how you should feel. Your emotions are your own, you know? You've got to let your feelings flow.

But your setback isn't more than a setback. That's what I'm trying to say. It's not permanent. You can come back from this. You can do more. That initial moment of success, when you had that cash, when you got away? That's not even an achievement. That's like nothing compared to where we can get together. You could have been rich. I could have been rich. But you and me, we're going to do something a hell of a lot better than being rich.

I mean out there, outside of this prison? How free were you, man? If you had all the money in the world, it wouldn't mean shit. Hell, I'll give you a few hundred grand and you can leave right now. We'll open those gates and you can walk out of here, as free as an ex-con can ever be. I won't stop you.

But before you do that, think about these guys. These guys get it. When you came back to life, when they turned the guards against my company, when they freed themselves, they understood. They could have left. But they knew what would have happened. The guards would have got locked up in some other prison because they let the prisoners go free. The prisoners would run until they got caught or until they got shot. Out there? Freedom isn't shit. So fuck freedom, right? Let's do something different. Let's do exactly what the cops and the judges and the lawyers want us to do. What they would have told us to do if they weren't cowards. If they weren't afraid to look at their own system. We're suicides, man. We're dead.

Because we're beating them on their own terms, Ernesto. Every time I get a new corpse, I get closer. Every time one of these guys gets his throat slit, I learn. I've almost done it. I swear to God. I've gone through a ton of these dudes, but I only need one, maybe two more. Three max. And then I'll do what I did with you.

I'll keep her frozen, Ernesto. I'll keep her cold. Until the moment we know how to do it again. And I'll bring her back.