

Let's Talk Trojan Bee

Stories

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Table of Contents

THE EATER.....	4
WHITE PEOPLE, WHITE SPANDEX.....	13
INVASION DAY: A VIEWER'S GUIDE	32
THE TICK TOCK KILLER.....	48
LET'S TALK TROJAN BEE.....	62
A SHORT HISTORY OF GUNS IN AMERICA	82
V-BEEB	96
CAPTAIN HONOR.....	109
GEORGIA O'KEEFFE	114
THE JUANSONS	134
COPS SAY THE DARNDDEST THINGS	153
MAGPIES	207
PROPOSITION	232

The Eater

He wakes with a start in the passenger seat of his wheelless Honda Civic. Same dream again. The one in which his mouth is terraced with rows and rows of long, needle-point teeth. They are hungry, the teeth are, but there is nothing to eat. He is trapped in a featureless white room. Walls of cold, impenetrable marble. Eventually the hunger is too much and he starts to gnaw on his own hand. Pain and relief in equal measure. Up to the nub of the shoulder and then the other arm. Then the legs. Curling up in the corner of the blank room he twists and sets upon his own torso until there is only the mouth left.

*

It is an hour past dawn when he opens the passenger side door and gets out. A thick dust storm has kicked up. Everything within a hundred feet is cast in an unreal tangelo glow and everything beyond that is gone. In the lee of the open door, he squats and defecates into a child's beach pail and then he sets to stirring through the mess with a fragment of windshield wiper. Tilting the pail from time to time, looking for sparks of light.

*

Pail in hand, he weaves downhill through the cars. Passing first sedans like his own, and then into boroughs of smaller models: hatchbacks, compacts, subcompacts, superminis, families of four, five or more emerging from Fiats and Coopers like a clown trick. A half-mile from the hole, the line begins. The queuers in front clutch their own pails or dog bowls or frisbees or sawed-off galoshes. One man wide-eyed and whispering cups leaky matter in his hands like an injured bird. Even at this distance from the hole, the hot reek rakes tears from his eyes.

*

At the hole's edge, he tips his pail into a steel deposit chute. A dirt-scoured LED screen above blinks to life and shows a slowly churning circle. From the back of this contraption, rubber industrial piping snakes down into the muck of the hole, which froths lightly from a solution chugged in by yet more piping. To the West, past the orange pall of dust, the plateau into which this hole was wretched slopes down and the leeches liquid gold sludges onward in its canal to further treatment. The hole itself half a mile wide. A dark pupil surrounded by its multi-coloured and rusting iris of the abandoned.

A sibilate whoosh signals that his deposit has been analysed and sent on. He closes his eyes for a moment, unable to bear what might be written on the screen. Murmurs garbled, half-recalled prayers until the person behind taps him hard on the shoulder. Then looks and screams into the wind.

*

Two men have their hands cupped to the backseat window of the Civic. AK-47s hanging by their sides. Strips of neon green cloth around their biceps and bandanas the same colour across their mouths.

—Who are you?

They turn sharply, guns raising and then lowering once they discern the woeful threat level of his beach pail.

—Serpent clan, says one, and they both drop their guns in unison to join the 'c's of their thumbs and index fingers into an elaborate and, to him, backwards 's'.

Not men: boys.

—I thought this was tarantula terrain, he says. I paid them rent yesterday.

—The tarantula clan decided to go scuba diving in shit, says one.

—Rent's due, says the other.

—But I only paid rent yesterday.

—Not to us, you didn't.

*

He walks in the opposite direction from the morning. Now the cars expand instead of contract. A borough of station wagons melds into one of SUVs and then the caravans of the settlement's exclusive outer crust, battered security drones buzzing overhead as he passes. Beyond this, a long straight highway through brown country. Bullet cars slashing by at stomach-churning speed. Along the shoulder, hundreds of people, all of them walking in one direction.

*

Inside the mountainous dome of the Gastronomy District, the temperature is a perfectly equilibrated nothing. Toucans and quetzals in the lush trees. Air minty with cineole. He usually slows his pace as much as possible on the way to work, but today he walks briskly and arrives early. *Langulet's* holographic signage projects a giant man lurching about in an old-fashioned asylum straight-jacket. His gold teeth, each the size of tombstones, snap at him as he passes the gilded entrance doors and goes down an alley to the workers' entrance.

*

Dark throat of a hallway. Portal windows in one wall show a triptych of steam and fire, tall white hats gliding through the chaos like shark fins. He turns left down a flight of concrete stairs and descends into the restaurant's basement, a dank room lit only by a few bare and epileptic bulbs. There is no furniture, save the hundred or so black pipes hanging from the ceiling, each like the lower half of a submarine periscope. He winds his way through them across a steel mesh floor. An armpit heat wafts up to greet him, by-product of the underground hydrothermal liquefaction process that powers the whole district. In the corner he stops at a bathtub full of what looks like thin, transparent mouthguards floating in disinfectant solution. He takes one out, shakes it dry, and carefully places it in his mouth. The dry sensation of the plastic adhering to his tongue and upper palate is like that of a prawn cracker. Then a mild humming as the technology comes to life. He walks over to a pipe with the number eighteen etched into it. His regular number. He waits.

*

The room begins to fill as opening nears. One by one, the others collect their gear and position themselves in front of their allocated pipes. This is all done in total silence. Painted on all four walls in towering, candy-red letters: NO TALKING. His colleagues are surprised when he shuffles up to them, his face pointed away and to the ground, and softly murmurs the question. Most are too terrified to respond. Their eyes flick to the warnings on the walls as they turn their backs. But a few do find the bravery to at least shake their heads. Their meek movements almost imperceptible in the gloom, but enough to confirm his fears: no one has made any money in weeks.

*

He is back in his place by the time a tall man in a dark suit clacks down the stairs and stands in the entrance, counting them. He disappears again and within minutes the pipes begin to send down the sounds of chairs scraping and cutlery plinking. Shreds of ghost laughter echo around the room. Then, after ten minutes or so of this, the pipes begin to flash green. He puts his mouth to the pipe's opening and a chunk of oyster slides into him. He chews slowly and methodically, spreading the juices democratically across his tongue.

—My God, comes a voice from above. Diane, these oysters are to die for.

When the pipe flashes green again, he quickly spits the pulp down through the steel mesh and raises his open mouth for more.

*

Langulet's Bluff oysters come exclusively from the freezing depths of the Foveaux Strait and they are garnished with Gondwana Rainforest Red Finger Lime Pearls and a pinch of Amethyst Bamboo 9x Korean Grey Sea Salt. His first customer eats fifty. Then moves on to a few loaves of Roquefort and Almond Sourdough soaked in 1959 Dom Perignon and slathered in Spring-Sourced Échiré Butter; two dozen thick slices each of Irpinian Caciocavallo Podolico, Siberian Donkey Pule, Leicestershire White Stilton, and Stewart Island Endangered Arapawa Goat Cheese; three plates of Galician Gooseneck Barnacles; half a pound of Jamon Iberico de Bellota, the skin candied in To'ak sourced from a select reserve of 100-year-old Ecuadorian Arriba Cacao Trees and covered in crushed Akbari Pistachios from the fertile Kerman Province of Iran; fifty or so Eyre Peninsula abalones served with a light salad of Sakurajima Radish, Red Amaranth Sprouts, Paso Robles Valle Wasabi Mustard Greens and monk-picked Tibetan

Yartsa Gunbu, all drenched in centuries old Aceto Balsamico Tradizionale di Modena; at least a hundred Guinness-fed, hand-massaged Kobe Beef Meatballs covered in Krug Clos d'Ambonnay Champagne-steam melted Gruyere Cheese and Kopi Luwak BBQ Sauce; twelve bowls of Black Swiftlet nest soup from Malaysia's Gomantong limestone caves; six dozen Matsutake mushrooms glazed in Shikoku Island ten-year-old Soy Sauce; a platter of fried Esmeraldas Woodstar hummingbirds wrapped in Bjurholm-farmed Moose House cheese; a pound of exclusively Lupin-fed ethical Iberian Goose Foie Gras topped with Scrambled Celadon Quail Eggs, Brut d'Escargot Snail Caviar and Rouen Duck Blood; and finally, forty Edible Gold-Wrapped Jiaozi Dumplings filled with Japanese A5 Wagyu Beef, Périgord Black Truffle and Sardinian Cazu Marzu—down below, he swallows all but one of these dumplings—and then it's onto mains.

*

His shift ends ten hours later on the customer's twentieth bowl of Tahitian Vanilla Ice Cream spliced with Gold Leaf and placed on a salad of Densuke Black Watermelon, Tyo no Tamago mangoes, and Lost Garden of Heligan Pineapples. His stomach is pregnant before him as he lines up behind the others and places his mouthpiece back into the bathtub. As always, he dutifully swallowed every gold-incorporating dish—the gold-dipped Sato Nishiki Cherries, the gold-flecked Bronholm Coast Baltic Salmon, the gold-wrapped Ayam Cemani Black Chicken Wings, the gold-brushed Philippian Ube Doughnuts, the gold-powdered Marmoset Brain Frittatas, the gold-leaf stuffed Maine White Lobster Ravioli, etc., etc. Just in case his hunch is wrong.

At the top of staircase, the manager pats him down and pokes a penlight into his mouth. Employees are only allowed to take what they have ingested. The rest belongs to the district.

The manager passes him on, but then turns to watch as he moves awkwardly down the hallway.

—You, he says. Why are you walking like that?

He turns. His legs trembling like a newborn fawn.

—Gout, he says.

—Gout?

—Yeah. Down...there. It's awful.

The manager stares dispassionately at the area between his legs for a moment and then he shakes his head and starts patting the next in line.

*

It's late night in the District. Oriental Bay owls hooting softly up in the shadowy branches, artificial woodsmoke in the air. He shuffles as quickly as he can through the laughing crowds and out the exit. Even at this hour, the heat of the outer world brings immediate sweat. He is two hours from home. There is no way he can wait.

He walks a few hundred feet east of the highway, into dark, undeveloped land slagged with trash. When he is satisfied no one is around, he pulls down his elastic pants, then squats and, with a whimper of pain, reaches down to retract a foul-smelling Edible Gold-Wrapped Jiaozi Dumpling.

*

Despite the lateness of the hour, he walks right past his Civic and down to the hole. The dust has settled, and he can see across to the shantytown bonfires of the hole's downwind side.

Gunshots and screams interchange in the night. He puts the dumpling into the analyser and shuts the chute and then stares at the whirling circle with ferocious attention.

Whoosh.

0%

\$0.00

*

Curled up in the backseat, sleep arrives late and brings with it a curiously extended version of the dream. His lonely mouth in that marble room. The hunger settling slowly back upon him like a freezing mist. Only when he is gone half insane with need does he notice the dark mass of matter clumped in a far corner.

A loud rapping on the window wakes him. Long thin gun barrel. Face half-obscurd by a yellow bandana.

He winds the window down.

—Who are you?

—Scorpion clan. Rent's due.

*

The manager wrinkles his nose as he counts the stations. There is an extra edge to the underground stench today. He ignores it. Who knows what filth these pigs roll in overnight?

Back upstairs and down the hallway into the glittering, chandeliered dining room. He forces a wide smile and opens up the main doors. Madam, sir. Sir, sir, madam.

They have only just brought out the oysters when the unmistakable tone of complaint reaches his ears.

—Excuse me. Excuse me!

He rushes over to seat eighteen.

—Madam?

—I can't taste a thing here.

—Hmm, he says. I am terribly sorry. Would you mind trying once more?

She sighs and spears a wobbly gunk of oyster on her golden fork and then drops it down the chute. Glares at him with shimmering anger.

—Nothing.

He nearly tumbles, so fast is he down the stairs. Rage warming his chest. On smoke breaks, he daydreams of reasons to slit their bulging bellies from sacrum to sternum.

The stench is even worse now. He cups his nose and thunders over to eighteen. Recognizes him instantly.

It's you, he says. Gout. What do you have there?

Something wet and brown glistens in the man's palm. He raises it to his lips. The burning look in his eyes terrifies the manager to his core.

—Here are my demands, he says.

White People, White Spandex

I get off the driverless bus in Harlem and a white guy in white spandex walks into me and knocks me to the ground.

I say, that's my bad, sir.

I try to stand up, but I get a knee to the back of my head and this white woman in white spandex comes tumbling over the top of me yelping.

I don't want any trouble, I try to say, but there's no air in my lungs, so I just sort of gasp like a fish in a boat. My bad knee feels like it's wrapped in barbed wire.

The white guy helps the white woman to her feet. They're looking around confused, like they have no idea how this old black fart came to be sprawled on the sidewalk at their feet.

The white woman rubs her knee and says, spectre?

Spectre, says the white guy. I'm pretty sure I heard a voice.

I'll summon the police, says the white woman. OK, I just summoned the police.

I get up, my bad knee screaming, and I start hobbling away down the street as quick as I can. Two white guys in white spandex bump into me and knock me to the ground.

One of the white guys says, yo border control blunted or what, slut?

Nothin wrong with my borders, ho, says the other white guy. You probably an outdated, leaky son of a bitch.

I crawl away from the two white guys shouting in each other's faces and I get up and I hobble down the block, dodging white people in white spandex. After a while, the Abyssinian comes up on my left. I go inside. In the pews there are white people in white spandex clapping their hands almost in rhythm. On stage there is a group of white people in white spandex singing gospel, if gospel were to be sung by hungry cats.

I sit down on the empty end of a pew and try to catch my breath. I take out my pamphlet. The pamphlet is titled *(Re)adjusting to the Outside*. The front flap of the pamphlet has the

picture of a black man standing on a sidewalk looking confused as people stream past. The people in the picture are not wearing white spandex.

I open the pamphlet on my lap so that I can plug my ears with my fingers. On the right inside flap there is a section that reads: *If you are feeling panicked lost confused helpless subsumed by waves of despair refer yourself to the plan you made before release* and beneath this there is blank space in which we were instructed to write our plan.

I have written: 1. Get a Coke. 2. Jefferson James Jefferson the Third's Race-Obliterating Contact Lenses that Make Everyone's Skin Look No Colour.

*

I leave the Abyssinian and I hobble and dodge up Adam Clayton and cross 141st and I go into the grocery I used to get a coke at. My jail was sponsored by Pepsi and that was all they served. You could kill a man and get away with it but smuggling in a Coke was a lifetime-in-the-box offense. I can't wait to taste the real thing again.

I find no Coke. I find instead a room with nothing in it but a white man and a white woman in white spandex blinking and laughing and wiggling their fingers at each other and the walls.

This is amazing snow, says the white man.

The white woman says, isn't it?

The other white woman says, how much, though?

I go left on 142nd and dodge white people up Frederick and I go into the 7-Eleven I sometimes used to get a Coke at. I find a room with nothing in it but a white man blinking and looking at two white kids in kid-sized white spandex sitting on the ground and wiggling their fingers at each other and at the floor and at the empty walls and at the man.

The white man says, you get one Blastosaur each, and one of the kids says, how about two each, and the other kid says yeah, and the man says, one.

I hobble across 145th, dodging cars driven by white people in white spandex who are asleep, and I go right on 147th and I go into the supermarket I only very occasionally used to get a Coke at. I find a big room empty except for white people in white spandex looking and wiggling their fingers at the empty walls. I go up to these two teenage white boys holding hands and looking at nothing.

One of the white boys says, what do you see in this one?

Chaos, says the other.

I say, you boys know where someone who's been away a while might get a Coke around here?

They sort of look past me sharply and then they look at each other with their eyebrows raised and eventually they seem to decide an old black fart isn't worth a minute of their day and they turn back to their empty wall.

*

I give up on step one of my plan. I just walk around, marvelling. Overhead, there are hundreds of kids' remote-controlled airplanes. One hits me in the back of the head, and I turn around to curse at whichever kid's it is, but I see no kids.

I start to get very hungry. I think about this place that used to do burgers that were pretty good. I go back up 147th and I cross Jackie Robinson Park. I stop to look at the Jackie Robinson monument, but the small bust of Jackie Robinson's head is covered in white spandex. I touch the spandex and it gives me a little electrical shock. I rub my hand and stare at poor Jackie Robinson a while and I start feeling those waves that the pamphlet suggested I might. I think

about how little I know about light spectrums and how much money it might cost to get some scientists to figure it out for me and how much money it might cost to get a factory to make the lens and how much money it might cost to get a lawyer to help me patent it and how much money it might cost to launch a marketing campaign convincing people, including white people, especially white people, that they don't want to know what each other is, and then I think about how I don't even have the competence to find a God damn Coke in the city I was born and raised in and I start tearing up out loud a little.

A white woman in white spandex walks by holding the hand of a white girl in white spandex. The white girl points at Jackie Robinson and says, who is that, Mommy?

It can be anyone you like, says the white woman. Personally speaking? Dolly Parton.

The white girl wiggles her fingers at the monument.

I've made it you, Mommy, she says.

Ah, sweetie, says the white woman, bending down to kiss the girl's hair.

That is goddamn Jackie Robinson and you know it, I say, a little more loudly than I mean.

The white woman quickly stands in front of the white girl. She looks past me and says, motherfucker, we are both electrified, and the police have been summoned.

I hobble as quick as I can across Edgcombe and St Nicholas, and I go into the place that does burgers that are pretty good. A white guy in white spandex is sitting at a small square table eating a white round thing and at another small square table a white woman in white spandex is slurping with a straw from a tall glass of milk. I sit down at a small square table. I watch through the window as white people in white spandex pass and remote-control airplanes buzz overhead and cars driven by sleeping people glide smoothly by and do not ever stop or idle or honk at each other. I take a deep, slow breath. I take another. I take a few more deep,

slow breaths and then I turn in my seat to the white guy eating and say, well what does an old black fart have to do to get a cheeseburger around here?

The white guy sort of jumps in his seat. Fuck me, he says, are you serious?

I'm sorry to interrupt your meal, I say, but I am having a strange day.

The white guy rubs his hands all over his face, and then he throws the white round thing down on the table, and he looks over my shoulder and says, God damn, could my life get any more blunted?

What now, I say.

Just take it, he says. Can you just take it already? I don't have time for the whole sob story.

I look at the white round thing. I am so hungry.

Look, I say, I've been away for a long time in a place where they only served Pepsi, and all I wanted was a Coke, but I couldn't get that, so there went step one of my plan, and then I got hungry, so I thought I'd get a cheeseburger, and God damn it, they still do cheeseburgers here or not?

Oh, I don't mean that anger in my voice. That is a bad, bad thing.

The white guy sort of howls, and then he stands up and walks out the door and disappears.

I turn to the woman drinking milk.

Well, what the hell was that all about, I say.

The white woman does not look at me and she says, if you think you're going to sob story me out of my boysenberry malt, you could not possible be more mistaken. I'm electrified, K motherfucker?

I wave her off. I reach over and pick up the white round thing and take a bite.

It tastes like absolutely nothing.

Maybe it tastes like corn.

It might have a little corn flavour, but boy, just a hint.

A black woman in white spandex walks past the window.

*

I hobble and dodge people up 145th and Amsterdam, struggling to keep her in my sights because she doesn't seem to need to dodge white people like I do. Eventually I lose her because the white spandex everyone is wearing covers everything except the face, which has clear wrap over it, and so therefore everyone looks the same from behind. I panic and I look around wildly and a white guy in white spandex knocks me to the ground and while I'm getting up, I see a flash of her face across the street turning into a store on 147th. I dodge the cars being driven by sleeping people and also sometimes driven by no people and I go into the store and I find a room empty except for the black woman and a white woman in white spandex. They are both blinking and wiggling their fingers at the walls. I go up to the black woman and I say, well just when I thought I was in the wrong Harlem.

The black woman screams and puts her arms over her chest like I just walked in on her naked.

She says, shit! Who's there?

I say, huh?

The white woman comes over with her arms over her chest and says, what's going on?

The black woman looks over my shoulder and says, is your presence fucked or are you just a creep coming in here like that?

I say, who's a creep?

The white woman says, gross, there a spectre in here honey?

The black woman blinks hard twice and says, my-day update: when you just wanted a sports bra for capoeira class and there's a spectre-creep in the changing area.

The white woman says, oh God, you think it's a sexual thing?

The black woman says, well if he touches me, he's a dead thing.

The white woman says, oh God, you think he's choking his chicken at us?

The black woman says, well.

The white woman blinks hard twice and says, my-day update: some spectre in the Sup, Bra? on 147th is strangling his snake, ladies stay clear!

Neither one will look directly at me. I go and sit down in the corner of the room and I start sort of tearing up out loud a little.

The black woman says, shit, is he crying?

The white woman says, that's probably part of how he gets off. Should we summon the police? I just summoned the police.

The black woman says, Well, hang on. You OK dude?

I say, I'm not choking my chicken.

The black woman says, well maybe you could turn your freaking presence on and we could verify that.

I say, I just got out after a long time, and I don't get what is going on here.

The white woman says, got out of where?

I say, Attica.

The white woman does this screaming thing and runs out the room.

The black woman says, Attica, huh. What did you do?

I say, sat around in a small room and got very old.

The black woman laughs. She says, what's your name?

I say, Jefferson James Jefferson the Third.

The black woman says, OK, don't fucking move until I read up on you, and then she starts looking at nothing and whirling her eyes about and blinking like crazy.

Two white guys in white spandex run into the room and say, put your fucking hands up, creep. They point their guns at a corner I am not sitting in.

I put my hands in the air.

I say, what I do?

They turn and point their guns in my general direction.

The black woman is standing behind them putting a single raised finger to her lips.

One of the white guys says, well are your hands the fuck up in the air yet?

The other white guy says, you best be getting your hands the fuck up in the air and you best be starting to slowly explain to us specifically where the fuck up in the air your hands are.

The first white guy says, you best be beginning to guide us as to whether we are getting hotter or colder to your fuck up in the air hands.

The second white guys says, you best be beginning to utilise some sort of grid system, say of squares one foot by one foot which operate on a horizontal plane and use number and letter references, with the far-right corner therefore being square 1-A, and once you have cognitively mapped this you best be starting to inform us of what square your fuck up in the air hands correspond to, or *squares*, I suppose, if they trespass across the boundary of two or more.

The first white guy says, man, Frank. That all sounds extraordinarily complex for the quick-moving dynamics of this situation.

Frank says, shit, you're probably right, Don. Wiggle?

Don says, wiggle.

I don't move or breathe. I press myself into the corner of the room as the two white guys move about, wiggling their hands around in the air in front of them.

Don says, screw this. I'm going raw. All I can see are very sexy bras.

Frank says, no, no, no, don't do that, Don. What if this spectre is black and then you *see* that he is black, and the review panel will accuse you of having knowingly arrested a black person?

Don says, Jesus, thanks Frank. Now if I *don't* go raw, it will be because I am assuming he is black and therefore am deliberately avoiding seeing that he is black, and if we ever find his hands amongst all these God damn sexy bras, guess what, the review panel will accuse me of knowingly arrested a black person.

Frank says, shit Don. I see what I did to you there.

Don says, for the record of the recording currently being recorded, neither of us is making any assumptions about the skin colour of the person who may or may not still be in the room.

The black woman says, he *was* black.

Frank says, I knew it.

Don says, was?

The black woman says, I felt him run past me when you got here.

Frank says, thank Christ.

The two white guys leave. They both turn and look at the woman's butt as they go.

I say, am I dead?

The black woman laughs. She starts waving her arms out in front of her in arcs like she is swimming butterfly, and then she brushes my shoulder, and then she grabs my shoulder, and then she reels herself towards me until she is very, very close to my face, and then she looks right into my eyes and she blinks hard twice and says, my-day update: when you just wanted a sports bra for capoeira class and you end up helping some crying dude who thinks he's dead.

*

The black woman's name is Cherokee, and she says, in theory, you can be seen. Like, I would be able to see you no problem if there wasn't all this crap floating around in front of our faces all the time.

I say, you mean like these kids' airplanes?

Cherokee says, what airplanes? No, I mean like these damn ads, and then she starts laughing, and then she says, although this one *is* pretty funny. That sloth is determined to get those Doritos, no matter how long it takes him to cross the freeway. Actually, truth be told, I could go some Jungle Cheese right about now.

To all this, I say, OK.

We are walking South on Convent. I am finding it hard to hobble after Cherokee because I have to dodge the people she doesn't have to dodge and because of my knee which feels like it is wrapped in barbed wire which is itself wrapped in rose thorns.

I say, hey, Cherokee, how about holding up a minute? She doesn't seem to hear me. She is poking her fingers about in the clear air in front of her and then a kid's remote-controlled airplane starts flying next to her head and it starts using a little arm to put white triangles in her mouth as she walks. I hobble as fast as I can, my knee screaming, and when I get in touching distance, I tap her on her back to get her attention.

My whole body goes tense like I am now a plank of wood and there is this wild pain galloping through my body and then I am on the ground and I believe I have put several teeth right through my tongue.

Cherokee bends down and starts waving her hands around, and she says, shit, shit, shit. God damn, Jefferson, you can't just go around touching women when they're out on the streets where all the creepy spectres might be, and therefore have to be fully electrified just in case.

I try to say, I'm sorry, but my mouth is very full of blood, so all I manage is to make a wet smacking sound and spill some blood onto the sidewalk.

Cherokee says, fuck it, I'm going raw, and she squeezes her eyes shut and she sort of purses her mouth and then she opens her eyes again and she looks right at me, and she says, God damn, Jefferson, you look like you've been tearing chunks out of an antelope with all that blood in your mouth, and after helping me up, she looks arounds and whistles, and says, man there are a lot of white people out today.

*

Cherokee and I dodge white people for a few blocks and then stop in front of this tall building and Cherokee squeezes her eyes and purses her lips again and then she stares at this little black orb a while and then the wall of the building just sort of isn't there anymore. She says, come on in, but try and keep all that blood in your mouth until you get to the sink. I swallow some blood which makes me feel light-headed and also reminds me how hungry I am, and I follow Cherokee down a hallway and into an elevator. Just as the elevator door is shutting behind us this white woman in white spandex comes rushing in and she bumps into me and I accidentally spit blood all over the back of her white spandex.

The white woman looks at Cherokee and says, my apologies.

Cherokee says, no need. Cherokee's face is twitching like she wants to laugh, and mine is doing the same and finally I do giggle a little and some more blood spills out onto this white woman. Cherokee starts laughing very loudly to I think cover my own giggling and the old white woman gives her a strange look and starts scratching at her back and by the time she gets off on her floor her hand is covered in blood. When the door shuts, we both starting laughing like hyenas, and through her laughing, Cherokee says, you didn't get any blood on her did you?

and I say, while spilling even more blood onto the floor of the elevator, I believe she is now in possession of more of my blood than I am, and Cherokee laughs even harder, and as I pass out I think to myself, Jefferson, you have made yourself a friend.

*

When I come to I am lying on a bed and I hear a woman say, but how can you know he didn't? and I hear Cherokee say, did you not absorb the whole article, the police just laid it on him because he was black, and the other woman says, I absorbed it fine, I just don't know if they would do someone like that, and Cherokee says, this was fifty years ago, things were different then, and the other woman says, still, I don't know if it's worth the risk.

I say, I could hear them voting from lock-up. The spot where I bit through my tongue is numb and so the words come out a little lumpy. Cherokee's face appears above me and she says, try that again, Jefferson?

I sit up in the bed and look around. We are in a small, small room. There is a double bed which is just a mattress on the floor and there is a small square table with two chairs and that is it. My cell was double the size.

I say, very slowly, when they had me in lock-up at the precinct, I could hear the police voting in the other room.

A white woman in white spandex is sitting at the table. She looks to my right and says, voting on what? Some sort of civil rights reform law or something?

I say, voting on whether they should just blame that poor girl on me and be done with it.

The white woman says, nuh-uh.

I say, they were voting yay or nay, and I even tried to vote nay from my cell, but someone shouted at me to shut up because N-word nays don't count and so fifty years later, here I am.

The white woman says, and you were how old?

I say, eighteen years and a day.

The white woman says, Jesus. Fucking racism, *hombre*. So glad we don't do *that* shit anymore.

I say, well.

Cherokee says, your tongue OK, Jefferson? It took me a while to get it lasered because I was working blind since I really, really can't afford to go raw twice in one day and plus you kept moving your mouth in your sleep and talking about lenses or something.

I think to myself, tell them. These are good people. Even that white one seems to get it.

I say, but what if the police hadn't even known the colour of my skin?

The white woman says, well, yeah.

I say, what if they had just thought that I, and everyone else, was no colour?

The white woman says, or pink, or green, or magenta, or whatever floats your boat, I guess.

I say, are you familiar with 3-D movies?

The white woman says, those dodgy old things where they made you wear cardboard glasses the whole time?

I say, exactly!

Cherokee says, Jefferson, you sure you're OK? You're talking a little strange, man. Should I summon you a sandwich? I just summoned you a sandwich.

I say, the day I graduated, my Aunt Lily took me to see a 3-D movie and after the movie she gave me fifty dollars and told me to take a cab to the party I was going to because she

didn't want me walking through the park alone, and then as I was walking through the park alone so I could save the fifty bucks for beer, I put those 3-D movie glasses back on just for the hell of it, and I just started looking out through one eye, the blue side.

A little square opens up in the wall and a kid's remote-controlled plane flies in carrying a white round thing. Cherokee takes the white round thing and hands it to me and says, eat, and the plane flies back out and the square closes again.

I take a bite out of the white round thing which tastes like the ghost of corn and I chew fast so I can keep talking, because I am really motoring now, and these thoughts have been penned up as long as I have, and I say, so as I passed people in the park I started to realise that I was having trouble distinguishing whether they were black or white or Latino or Asian or whatever.

Cherokee winks at the white woman, and says, Jefferson, what in the hell are you on about?

I say, it's true! I mean, I *could* tell what they were if I really concentrated, but if I just walked by them not worrying about it, I really didn't know, and I started thinking how nice it would be for no one to know what I was either, and then how nice it would be for no one to know what anyone was, and it was just a silly little idea, the sort of idea that might swoop into your head and then swoop back out like a sparrow looking for crumbs, but when I tripped over that naked girl half lying in a bush and when those three white guys came jogging around the corner and saw me tripped up there and grabbed me and held me until the police came and when the police took me and put me in a cell and decided that they would just take a precinct vote on whether to blame it all on me or not, because, in their words, we have Jerry O'Connell's luau thing tonight to start drinking up for and plus he's black so, and when the single solitary nay was my own and I was told that it would not be included in the official tally as N-word nay's didn't count, and when pretty much a minute later I was in a serious prison with a white

gang that picked on me because they thought I had killed a white girl, even though, to the man, everyone in that white gang was in the prison because they had killed white girls, well after all that had gone down my silly idea didn't seem so silly anymore, in fact it seemed like the only thing I had left to cling to, and my sad, tragic story is living proof of how important, how incredibly vital, my idea is.

The white woman says, *dios mio*. What idea?

I say, Jefferson James Jefferson the Third's Race-Obliterating Contact Lenses that Make Everyone's Skin Look No Colour.

Cherokee and the white woman start laughing hard.

I say, the name probably needs a tweak.

The white woman says, well aren't you quite the character.

Cherokee says, all right, all right, let's get going Jefferson. The quicker we get you up and running, the quicker you can do your retro 3-D glasses thing.

The white woman says, you taking him to get—, and Cherokee says, yep, and the white woman says, and does that mean you'll get the—, and Cherokee says, uh fuck yeah it does, and the white woman says, dope, *chica*.

In the elevator down I say, your roommate seems nice.

Cherokee says, Rodrigo's my boyfriend.

*

We start walking South on St. Nicholas and at first, I am nervous when Cherokee offers me her hand, but she says, don't worry, I'm not electrified, and I take her hand and she says, but tell me if there are any creepy spectres about, K?

It is a warm day in Harlem. Very warm for mid-January and the sun is out and I am walking hand in hand with a good woman.

I say, sure is a sunny day.

Cherokee says, for you, I'm sure it is. When the heck isn't it sunny? Personally speaking, it's snowing. God, I miss snow. Miss it in the sense that I have never experienced it for real. This snow? Not very convincing. Apparently real snow should sort of subtly kiss your skin as it falls on you, but this snow more like rudely pokes you as it falls, which gets a little grating after a while. Everyone is saying that the latest super-expensive upgrade has primo skin-kissing snow and I for one cannot wait for that.

I say, well that sounds fine.

We are crossing Jackie Robinson Park. We pass the Jackie Robinson Monument. I say, and do you know who that is?

Cherokee says, personally speaking? Coco Chanel.

I say, that is Jackie Robinson and shame on you for not knowing it.

Cherokee says, I'm not a big jazz gal, so what?

I say, knowing your own black heritage is important. My Aunt Lily taught me that.

Cherokee says, Jefferson, as you will soon come to realize, no one is really black anymore, K?

In the park, there is an old black man not in white spandex digging in a trashcan. As we pass, he looks up at me and he raises a hand in the air and nods, and I raise a hand back and nod. He goes back to his trashcan and pulls something white out and he starts to eat it.

We turn right up Edgecombe. Cherokee says, now you did come out of there with some money behind you, is that correct?

I pat the front pocket of my Levis, and I say, I told you I did.

Cherokee says, good.

I say, and now just where is it we're going again?

Cherokee says, we're going to go obliterate some race. How's that sound?

I say, well that sounds fine.

We cross 145th and go right on Adam Clayton and we go into the grocery I used to get a Coke at.

*

In one corner of the room there is a white guy in white spandex and a white woman in white spandex looking up at the ceiling and giggling.

The white woman says, they're like little kisses.

Cherokee pulls me over to the other corner where there is a white woman in white spandex standing and smiling. She looks at Cherokee and blinks many times and says, welcome back, Cherokee. How can I help? Are you here to settle your outstanding raw charges?

Cherokee says, well actually I've brought in a new unchipped customer, so I was hoping I could maybe get that deal?

The white woman says, what deal?

Cherokee says, that enrol-a-new-customer-get-the-snow-upgrade-for-free deal?

The white woman says, oh *that* deal! Absolutely you can. Here, check this out. The white woman wiggles her fingers at Cherokee and then Cherokee looks up at the ceiling and she sticks out her tongue and she says, that's it, oh my God that's it, and she smiles, and a little wet diamond appears in the corner of her eye.

The white woman says, and where is? and Cherokee points near me, and the white woman butterflies her arms about and she hits me in the mouth and then she finds my shoulder and she moves her hand on my shoulder and then my neck and then my face and then she puts

two fingers against my temple and she says, hang there one second, dude. A remote-controlled airplane comes flying in and the white woman takes a gun off the back of it and she puts the gun against my temple and before I can put my hands up and say, my money, you can have it, she presses the trigger and there is a pain in my temple like someone stuck a knitting needle in it and the white woman puts the gun back on the airplane and the airplane flies back out and the white woman wiggles her fingers at me and says, all done.

The white woman is looking right at me, but she is not a white woman, she is a blue woman. She has a long neck like a giraffe, and she is not wearing white spandex, she is wearing blue feathers that look very soft. I look at Cherokee. Cherokee is Cherokee except she has a grey sweater and pink leggings on and there are dashes of snow in her hair and the lashes of her eyes. I look out the window. The world is covered in angelic snow and moving through that snow is a rainbow of people. I see black people, I see white people, I see not a few people a luminous lime green. I see people with wings or with spider legs or with pineapple skin. I see people the size of mac trucks, I see people the size of soda cans, I see what I believe to be a man entirely made of tadpoles. I see, looking back at me through the snow scoured glass, no one but Jackie Robinson inappropriately dressed for winter in his short-sleeve Dodgers number forty-two.

The blue bird giraffe says, and how would you like to pay today?

I say, cash, and take out of my pocket a fifty-dollar note, which is all the money I have in the world.

The blue bird giraffe says, hmm. Fifty dollars in not quite going to do, sir.

Cherokee says, Jesus, Jefferson, you don't have anything else?

Outside, a walking fire passes by. I wave at Jackie and he waves back.

I say, well how short am I?

The blue giraffe says, well, what's nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine dollars and ninety-nine cents minus fifty?

I say, you all aren't look for workers, are you?

Cherokee says, I still qualify for the deal, though, right?

The blue giraffe says, what deal?

Cherokee says, the enrol a new customer get the snow-upgrade for free deal?

The blue giraffe says, oh, *that* deal. No, of course not.

The blue giraffe wiggles her fingers at Cherokee and then she wiggles her fingers at me and then she is a white woman in white spandex again.

Cherokee butterflies her arms around and she grabs both my shoulders and she puts her forehead against mine, and she says, whatever, and then Cherokee, my friend, walks out the room.

I go to follow her and the white woman says, whoa, whoa, chip thief, stop, and when I try and go through the door it feels like someone puts a spear through one temple and out the other and I fall to the floor screaming a bit.

The white woman appears over me, like an angel.

She says, I'm going to summon the police. I've summoned the police.

Invasion Day: A Viewer's Guide

Horror masterpieces, racist screeds, award-winning documentaries, and *that* orgy: the *Invasion Day* series is undoubtedly Australia's wildest ever film franchise. It can be hard to know exactly where to start wading in to all this mayhem, so with the franchise finally looking like it's run out of steam, we've put together this handy viewer's guide.

Australia Day

What is it? A straight-to-streaming horror(ish) film that in no way predicted the monumental cultural phenomenon it would birth. This likely would have sunk without a trace, were it not for a Netflix algorithm error that recommended it to fans of Garry Marshall's treacly 'holiday anthology' movies (*Valentine's Day*, *Mother's Day*, etc.). Amazingly, it is somehow *worse* than those films.

Plot? In some parallel universe, mass protests over the date of Australia Day have led to the Greens-led (!) government granting Indigenous Australians 'control' over the national holiday. Cut to midnight in the White family residence, and patriarch Steve White (played like human-cardboard by director, Reece Seabutt) is woken up by a knock at the door. This begins a night/day of terror(ish) as his family is held captive by a mysterious posse dressed in James Cook masks and cartoonish colonial garb (think tricorne hats, white breeches, etc). Turns out, that government deal gave Indigenous Australians the right to do *anything* they wanted on Australia Day, effectively setting up twenty-four hours of annual retribution for the country's past sins, although the worst this particular group gets up to is eating the White family's goldfish and then torturing them with hours of increasingly tedious monologues.

Any good? Nerp. Despite an intriguing horror-premise (which would later be used to *much* greater effect—see below), and some initial tension as the house invaders first take control of the White residence, the whole thing looks like it was directed by a first-year film student on Xanax. Scenes go nowhere, the actors look lost, and the dialogue (my God the dialogue) reads like an interminable series of semi-coherent political Facebook comments from your Rightest-Wingiest uncle. Aside from just being a horrendous piece of inept filmmaking, it is also impossible to watch this without getting the ickies, due to what we now know about the political ambitions of its director, Reece Seabuttie, and his uber-racist No Regrets party.

Key Line: ‘We’re here to take back what’s rightfully ours, by which we mean this house, this land, this country, because you took it from us all those years ago, although to be fair, we were living pretty rudimentary lives at the time, and it was actually the English that did the hard work of developing this place into the beacon of civilization we’re now lucky to call home, but, hey, we’re going to ignore these hard truths because we are ungrateful and lazy and need to blame our ills upon some other source besides our own poor life decisions. Now gimme that goldfish, bitch.’

Best Death: Considering how bloody the series was to become, it’s somewhat of a surprise that no one dies here, although RIP the brain cells of whoever is misfortunate enough to witness that ten-minute speech about why *Terra nullius* is legally justifiable.

Did You Know? Those Indigenous invaders pretending to be English invaders? Not actually Indigenous! Apparently, no Indigenous actors turned up to audition, which, given how few

opportunities that community is provided in this country's film industry, says a lot about how offensive the whole project really is.

Watch it if: You're an *ID* completist. Or if you like the sound of the general premise, but competent production values, human-sounding dialogue, and ethics aren't really your thing.

Bonus Drinking Game: Take a shot every time a boom mic moseys into frame. Prepare to be drunk.

Invasion Day

What is it? Simply the greatest Australian horror film of all time. Hot-on-the-heels of her critically acclaimed *Razorback* remake (which ingeniously told the story entirely from the pig's perspective), young Indigenous director Alexis Scott extracts Seabutt's original premise like a gold tooth from a bloated carcass, and melds it into a brutally effective satire on White Australia's inability to offer even token remorse for the sins of its past.

Plot? Basically pretending that the first film doesn't exist (we should all be so lucky), the early scenes use faux-news footage to recap *Australia Day's* premise, with Scott even taking pains to explain *how* the Greens came to be in charge (climate change, obv's), before the faux-colonisers again arrive on the White's doorstep. After suffering some *Funny Games*-style torture for the film's first half, the family escapes into the rampant chaos of their once-serene suburb, only to be picked off one by one, either murdered or, in the case of Steve's daughter

Lilly (shown applying bronzer in the opening scene), ‘adopted’ by a kindly Indigenous family promising to ‘breed the white out of her’.

Any good? So good. A reaction to the nation’s continued disinterest in changing the date of a holiday basically celebrating genocide, *Invasion Day* ironically shows White Australia what *true* restitution might look like, thus making the ongoing squabbles appear all the pettier. The film also reminds us how viscerally *scary* being invaded would have been, with the faux-colonisers spine-chillingly played by a plethora of fine Indigenous actors all absolutely hamming it up in their petticoats, breeches, and kooky/creepy cartoon-British accents. Although the film well and truly earns its R-rating, with unflinching shots of castration, bayoneted wombs, and child decapitation, Scott’s genius is to never allow the violence to extend beyond that which was historically perpetuated by the original invaders, a crucial irony sadly lost on many (Anglo) viewers.

Key Line: ‘Arright, Guv’nor. Fifty quid says I can clear the fence with ‘er.’

Best Death: It’s hard to go past the infamous baby decapitation scene, where little Sally White is buried in the dirt before getting her noggin’ lopped off by jackbooted colonisers for ‘sport’. Not only is this one of the most stomach-churning sequences to ever be put to film, it also inspired a tidal wave of Google searches asking, ‘did the English really...’ Spoiler alert: they did.

Did You Know? Up-and-coming Aussie-horror production company *Appleyard Noose* paid the (basically broke) Seabattle the whopping sum of \$1000 and 5% of future revenue for the creative rights to his film. The franchise has since gone on to make over a billion dollars.

Watch it if: You have eyes. (Although you'll probably be covering them half the time.)

Bonus Drinking Game: Drink every time you think race relations in Australia are totally fine.

Sober? *Good.*

Invasion Day 2: Blood of Botany Bay

What is it? With Scott deciding that she'd said all there was to say, the inevitable sequel was handed over to Mister Bombastic himself, Michael Bay, who proceeded to do Michael Bay things to the film's new location of Sydney, where a handful of high-rise apartment residents try to survive an Invasion Day attack on the harbour.

Plot? BOOM. CRASH. WALLOP.

Any good? Meh. As satirical commentary, it's dead in the water, lacking as it does any of the irony or historical symbolism of its predecessor. As popcorn spectacle, however, it's as effective as a barrage of ballistic missiles (which, as the Harbour Bridge learns, is very effective indeed), and despite the bluster, the film does still deliver some indelible images, such as a shot of the words *Terra Fullius* scrawled across the Opera House in blood.

Key Line: 'Crikey, they're lighting the fireworks over the bridge early this year.'

Best Death: Ever wondered whether the tip of the Sydney Tower was sharp enough to impale someone? Wonder no more.

Did You Know? Botany Bay, where the colonialists first landed in 1770, is *not* in Sydney. It's 14 kilometres north, and the location doesn't feature in the film at all, which is pretty representative of this movie's approach to historical accuracy in general. Guess Blood of Darling Harbour didn't have quite the same ring to it.

Watch it if: You like your retribution with a side of a commandeered Lockheed Martins.

Bonus Drinking Game: Take a shot every time there's an explosion. Prepare to be *extremely* drunk.

They'll Take it All (By Which I Mean our Country and Way of Life)

What is it? A bizarre vanity project/racist manifesto from the original *Australia Day* director, Reece Seabutt, which was bankrolled by his portion of the record-setting *Blood of Botany Bay* money. Deemed unsuitable for theatrical release, *TTIA(BWIMOCAWOF)* was released on Seabutt's *noregrets.com.au*, where it received a disturbing number of hits, boosted mainly by acclaim from Aussie far-right groups like Soldiers of Odin and True Blue Crew. Yerk.

Plot? Are you high? Go get high. We'll wait. *waits* OK, so: member of parliament Reece Seabutt, played by, you guessed it, soon-to-be member of parliament Reece Seabutt, suspects something fishy is going on between the newly elected Greens and Indigenous leaders,

and he sets off to investigate, whilst also taking time to give a number of interminable Third Reichesque speeches in parliament about Indigenous subterfuge, as well as bedding not one, not two, but three different Arian-looking and supremely disinterested women. This bizarre mish-mash peaks when Seabuttler gets a tip-off about a secret meeting between the two groups in an abandoned warehouse, only to find them engaged in a mass S & M orgy (!!!). Our erstwhile hero locks the doors and burns the warehouse down, cue uplifting music and a final shot of Seabuttler being sworn in as Prime Minister (which, you know, *seemed* crazy at the time).

Any good? This could have qualified as a classic ‘so bad it’s good’ midnight film, in the manner of Tommy ‘Oh hi Mark’ Wiseau’s *The Room*, were it not for the constant stream of White Supremist dribble and the scary fact that Seabuttler’s wacko paranoia had an audience ready to believe. File this one under ‘regrettable historical document’.

Key Line: ‘Spank me, Richard, I’ve been a naughty, naughty Affairs Minister’.

Best Death: Sure, it’s pretty offensive, but Seabuttler’s technique of torturing, and eventually murdering, a Greens captive by forcing them to put recyclables in the red bin *is* kind of funny.

Did You Know? Unsurprisingly, Seabuttler’s request to film the ‘speech scenes’ in the actual Australian parliament was resoundingly rejected, so he had to make do with a Townsville boxing ring surrounded by fold-up chairs painted the mint-green of the House of Representatives. And the award for set design goes to...

Watch it if: If you simply adored 1915’s *The Birth of a Nation*. Or if you’re high.

Bonus Drinking Game: Drink from the opening second to the last. It's the only way this works.

Invasion Day 3: Blackout

What is it? Outraged by both Bay's anti-intellectual approach and Seabattle's rising celebrity, Alexis Scott took back the reins to the franchise, before mysterious creative differences between her and Appleyard Noose resulted in hotshot American horror director Tom Anthony (*The Postwoman Only Screams Twice, Some Like it Hurt*) finishing the film. The result was a tonally erratic experience whose true power would only be revealed years later when Scott's original cut was released.

Plot? *Invasion Day* goes 'meta', opening with a shot of protagonist Heath Airscuttle (lol) sinking beers whilst watching the second *ID* film. Tension soon arrives when the Airscuttles' new neighbours, a young Indigenous family, invite them over for an Australian Day BBQ, where Heath goes through beers like a white Aussie male goes through beers, and begins to drunkenly suspect that his host's surface pleasantries hides a dark ulterior motive. At this point, the tension splatters into a collage of eye-bleeding gore, as it turns out (twist!) the host's *do* have a dark ulterior motive, namely to spike the Airscuttles' drinks so that they can dole out historical retribution one excruciating torture-porn-Down-Under sequence at a time.

Any good? The film is essentially two different creatures grafted together (also a key scene), so it's hard to properly adjudicate it as a whole. With the far-superior director's cut now out,

there's no real reason to recommend this unless you have a particular penchant for orifices and Red-Backs. Hey, each to their own.

Key Line: 'What are you going to do with those Echidna quills?'

Best Death: 'Best' probably isn't the right description, but poor Sarah Airbuttle's rape/murder via didgeridoo and brown snake is certainly...something.

Did You Know? To get the required sound effect for a particular scene, Tom Anthony had to train a koala to gouge an overripe rock melon.

Watch it if: You're reading this in the past, and the much better director's cut hasn't been released yet. And if you *are* reading this in past, there's a certain right-wing politician/director that could do with being strangled in the crib. Ta.

Bonus Drinking Game: Drink a beer every time Heath drinks a beer, and then try to keep all that beer down when Heath's mouth gets stitched around a kangaroo's, er, *wangaroo*.

Invasion Day 4: Boomerang Bullet

What is it? High-profile Danish director Magnum Strongsson, known for his mega-buck *Mass Retrieval* series, took over the fourth film and turned it into a jaw-crunching, Adderalled revenge flick whose controversy set off a chain of events we're still suffering under today.

Plot? Conveniently ignoring that the third film(s) ever took place, the action picks up the day *after* the events of the original *Invasion Day*, with the castrated and presumed dead Steve White waking up in hospital but wasting no time in tracking down the faux-colonisers who murdered his family. Steve's near-incomprehensible journey through the Outback and beyond leaves a trail of mutilated bodies in its wake, culminating in a CGI demolition of Uluru that, astonishingly, isn't even the most offense bit of this rancid mess.

Any good? It would be bad enough if this was just another soulless, sheeny, shoot-em-up revenge flick, but the tone-deaf decision to shoot a particularly high-casualty scene at Myall Creek, *where an actual Indigenous massacre took place*, elevates this to pile-the-reels-up-and-burn-them territory. Happily, ticket sales plummeted due to nationwide protests outside cinemas, hitting *Appleyard Noose* where it hurts.

Key Line: 'I don't need a dick to fuck you up.'

Best Death: Two weeks after the film's release, the studio pulled the plug on it, thus handing a victory to protestors and Euthanasia activists alike.

Did You Know? Reece Seabattle would later use footage from the Melbourne protests in his campaign/propaganda ads, not so subtly suggesting that the *Invasion Day* scenario was closer in the rear-view than it appeared. But surely no one could be dumb enough to fall for that, right? *Right?*

Watch it if: You're a film-coroner trying to determine how this virulent strain of affliction can be stopped from spreading.

Bonus Drinking Game: Poor one out for the 300 million dollars that constituted *Boomerang Bullet's* budget.

Invasion Day 3: Blackout (Director's Cut)

What is it? In a bid to recoup their disastrous losses over *Boomerang Bullet*, Appleyard Noose released the director's cut to *Blackout* (whose title makes a *lot* more sense now), proving that it is very much the classic many had rumoured it to be. Although very different from her first film, Scott's second foray into the franchise is again a scathing satire, this time on both White Australia's deliberate amnesia, as well as the growing pool of irony-deficient idiots viewing the *Invasion Day* series as a genuine warning against granting the Indigenous community more power.

Plot? The film's events are the same until about halfway through, when instead of blacking out because of his neighbour's nefarious plans, it is actually Heath's own copious drinking that draws the curtains, only for him to wake up in a jail cell and be told he murdered his (totally innocent) neighbours in a paranoiac rage. Despite being besieged by horrific flashbacks (the most brutal use of quick cuts since *The Exorcist's* pale-faced devil), he continues to cling to theories of a bizarre and ever more complex 'red-flag' conspiracy, to the extent that his madness leaves him unfit for trial and he is committed to an asylum, leading to the film's iconic final shot of Heath shivering in the middle of a padded cell whose walls have begun to slowly drip dark blood.

Any good? Despite being almost completely devoid of violence, Scott's second masterpiece is every bit as terrifying as her first, with the finely wrought tension (that spluttered out of the original cut like a floppy Whoopee Cushion) keeping its stranglehold on the viewer from first shot to the last. It's not hard to see why the studio panicked about this, however, because Scott completely negates the entire franchise with her meta-commentary, whilst simultaneously skewering large portions of its fanbase. Not that said fans accepted, or even understood, said skewering, with a whole phalanx of keyboard detectives instead quickly 'finding' the 'clues' that prove Heath *is* the victim of a conspiracy, and then drawing noxious parallels between his plight and that most sympathetic of creatures, the Great White Persecuted Male.

Key Line: 'Don't you see? I'm just the scapegoat, just the excuse. Don't let them change the date! Don't let them change the date!'

Best Death: The most impactful death in the film is actually the lack of it, with all the horror taking place off-screen, a deliberate nod to the way that the Australian education system avoids the darkest parts of our founding (seriously: my high-school teacher told us that the Indigenous ceded Tasmania because they lost a *footy match*).

Did You Know? Anonymous reddit user u/50quidguvner came up with a conspiracy theory that drove certain swampy sections of the internet wild, namely that Alexis Scott is not an actual person, but Reece Seabutt in drag and blackface. u/50quidguvner, wherever you are, there's a bleeding padded cell with your name on it.

Watch it if: a) You want to experience an all-time Aussie classic, and b) when it's pouring rain and someone says, 'great weather', you don't reply: 'Are you crazy? It's raining!'

Bonus Drinking Game: Drink a beer every time Heath drinks a beer. Blackout. Wake up and have a hard look at yourself and this country's unacknowledged history in the mirror. (Sorry, these can't all be fun!)

Invasion Day 5: No Regrets

What is it? In a final attempt to stop her work from being misused by the rapidly rising far-right, Alexis Scott's third and final *Invasion Day* is a horror/comedy/Punk'd mashup that mocks the films of Reece Seabutt, and stars...Reece Seabutt. Truly one of the most singular experiences in film history, this sadly also became the hand-grenade that blew us all up.

Plot? When Member of Parliament Reece Seabutt is asked by his constituents to look into Heath Airbutt's arrest after the events of *Blackout*, he discovers that Indigenous Australians are in fact Extra-Terrestrials (!) who have 'time-doctored' history to first gain sympathy, and then power, from human Australia. After a series of increasingly bizarre events, including a shot-for-shot remake of the orgy from *They'll Take it All...*, a sequence in which Reece dresses up in drag and blackface, and then eats too many goldfish to count, the film ends when our hero realizes that the Indigenous/Alien's Achilles' heel is 'truth', and he bursts their heads by shouting 'White Genocide is the only genocide' ad nauseum.

Any good? As a film, it's brilliant: propelled by an irresistible gonzo-energy and a dark, bitterly ironic sense of humour that raises a laugh and then lodges it in your craw like a goldfish spine. As an attempt at knee-capping Seabutt's brand of pungent historical gaslighting, however,

No Regrets may have...well, regrets, with Scott once again underestimating her audience's ability (or inclination) to sniff out even the faintest trace of irony, meaning many adjudged her hero-villain to be hero-hero. As a result, what was meant to be Seabuttler's noose became his platform, and we all took a dive off it.

Key Line: 'We come from the Planet El-Tub-Aes, and we will not stop until your entire populace has been guilted into making us your leaders. Now gimme that goldfish, bitch.'

Best Death: Blink and you'll miss it, but the King Alien's head goo splatters on the wall in the exact shape of Mulgrave, the electoral district for which Reece Seabuttler was a candidate at the time.

Did You Know? The scenes at Seabuttler's home are shot in and around his *real* home, an act of accidental doxing that would come to have serious consequences when a group of Indigenous youth, recognizing the address and hoping to give Seabuttler a scare, showed up on his doorstep at midnight in white masks. Sadly, the actor/director was away at the time, and the door was answered by his elderly mother, who suffered a fatal heart attack.

Watch it if: You either want a good laugh, or a good cry.

Bonus Drinking Game: Take a shot for every Seabuttler 'truth' you've heard word for word from that one obnoxious, proudly un-PC, just-saying-it-like-it-is work colleague. Yeah, I'm looking at you, *Carl*.

The Invader

What is it? Academy Award winning documentary that tracks the rise of both the *Invasion Day* franchise and its original creator, Reece Seabutt, and attempts to answer the question on everyone's lips: WTF?

Plot? After introducing us to the young Seabutt (fatherless, movie-obsessed, and frequently bullied by a pair of Indigenous high-school peers), the film tracks his rise via the *Invasion Day* films, as well as the tragic death of his mother that played so neatly into his campaign's apocalyptic message and boosted the No Regrets party to the tune of four seats in the election. This would have been catastrophic enough, had it not coincided with the remarkable rise of the Green party, themselves 'boosted' by the rapid acceleration of climate change-related disasters (just as Scott had predicted all those years ago). With no party able to form a majority government, the desperate Liberals made a deal with the devil, bringing No Regret's four seats into their Coalition in exchange for making Reece Seabutt the prime minister.

Any good? An astounding documentary that uses a brilliant blend of archival footage and fresh interviews to elucidate exactly how a no-name D-grade director came to be the most powerful person in the country. Director Robin Birch includes a number of important Indigenous voices, whose grief over the country's backwards lurch is palpable. Sadly, Alexis Scott herself was unavailable for comment: the director stepped away from filmmaking after the shocking election and is now a recluse.

Key Line: 'I, R.S., do swear that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Second, Her heirs and successors according to law. So help me, God.'

Best Death: Baby decapitation? Mild. Echidna quill eye-ball skewers? Yawn. Sorry but the most terrifying death by far is that of our democracy immolating itself samurai-style.

Did You Know? Director Robin Birch was the first Indigenous Australian to win an Oscar. Clouds, silver linings, etc.

Watch it if: You've ever said, 'it's only art'.

Bonus Drinking Game: Don't drink, God damn it. Vote.

The Tick Tock Killer

We open with a *close shot* of Detective Inez Rodriguez looking so nervous she can barely get her coffee down. The arms of her lover, Roberta Rosario, appear around her neck.

Rodriguez twisting away, smiling: You *would* make me late on my first day.

Rosario, huskily: Relax. The show can't start without its newest star, right?

Rodriguez, groaning: Stop it.

Extreme close shot of hands furrowing tablecloth.

*

Rodriguez's face in a long mirror, bright lights softening her features. A thick make-up brush shuffles at her cheek.

Voice of Make-up Girl, off-screen: Nervous?

Rodriguez, smiling shyly: Sure. A little. This is not how I'm used to doing my job.

Make-up Girl: You think you'll find something wild like that Cool Whip Killer they had on NYPDTV last night?

Rodriguez: Cool Whip Killer?

Make-up girl: You didn't see that? They got a guy down in Queens murdering girls by tying them up and pumping cans of whipped cream down their throats till they suffocate.

Rodriguez, suddenly looking pale: God damn. I sure hope we don't find anything like that.

Close shot as the make-up brush cuts short its hula. The Make-up Girl's face dips into the mirror. Dark, hard eyes.

Make-up Girl: You fucking better find something like that. I need this job, okay? My dog's on dialysis.

*

Interior: small apartment. Various police officers mill about.

As Rodriguez enters, we *pan* to Senior Detective Seorise O’Clooney huffing over to meet her, dark moons waxing in the pits of his pale blue shirt.

O’Clooney, thick Irish brogue: You’re fooking late, rookie.

Rodriguez, abashed: I am so sorry. No idea make-up took that long.

Director: Cut.

*

O’Clooney: You’re fooking late, rookie.

Rodriguez, pretending to be unabashed: Hey. Like, LA traffic, am I’m right?

Director, angrily: Cut.

*

Interior, apartment building hallway. Dim lighting, smoker’s-teeth walls. Rodriguez breathing deeply, jiggling her muscles, muttering under her breath: badass, badass, badass.

Beyond the yellow police tape, a throng of people watch. Many in LAPDTV t-shirts, one girl with a Detective Rodriguez jersey already.

Girl: You can do it, Inez!

(Clapping)

*

O'Clooney: You're fooking late, rookie.

Rodriguez, unabashed: Judging by the look of you, the donuts must all be gone then.

Director smiling, fist-pumping: Cut.

Rodriguez, apologetic: I am so sorry. They told me to be badass.

O'Clooney, now in a breezy Californian accent: Don't sweat it, babe.

*

Extreme close-up: dead woman's face. Left eye closed completely, right eye staring up blank.

Neck and face a galaxy swirl of green and purple bruises.

O'Clooney: Good lord. She's roughed up worse than an armless boxer.

Rodriguez, pulling on surgical gloves: Jaw's badly broken, left cheekbone fractured.

The blow to the back of the head is what killed her, I'd say.

Director, v. angrily: *Cut.*

*

O'Clooney: Good Lord. She's roughed up worse than an armless boxer.

Rodriguez, nodding: Beaten worse than an egg in a hurricane.

Director, thumbs up: That's scene.

Rodriguez, looking around, confused: So, we can examine the body now?

O'Clooney, laughing: Babe, this isn't the body. You think they'd show some dead bitch looking like this on TV?

Dead women: Hi! So nice to be working with you.

Rodriguez, clutching chest.

*

Rodriguez off-set, leaning against wall, talking on mobile phone: I don't know if I can do this. It's *super* weird.

Rosario, talking on phone in a candle-turreted bath, curve of large breasts swelling above the foam: Relax. We talked this through, didn't we? All the big cases are handled this way now.

Rodriguez: Rosi, they got me examining a recreated corpse in a recreated crime scene.

Rosario: But there *is* a real crime to solve, right? And therefore a real criminal. One I pity, with the famous Detective Rodriguez on the trail.

Rodriguez: I guess. Hey, why do I keep hearing splashing?

Rosario, closing eyes, biting lip: I'm in the bath, baby. Wishing you were here.

Rodriguez, long pause, confused: Since when do you take baths?

*

Interior: Next-door apartment. Hale, handsome Elderly Couple sitting on a tweed sofa. Husband in thick wool sweater, wife's fingers noodling at her pearl necklace. Behind them we see a small section of a tastefully decorated apartment: tall chamberlain with blue-veined china, mahogany grandfather clock, variety of owl-related knick-knacks.

Wife: She was such a lovely girl. Always had time to chat and whatnot with us in the hall.

Husband: Hard to believe such evil exists that would want ill with an angel like that.

Rodriguez: Did you hear anything unusual going on last night?

Wife: We heard her and her boyfriend arguing, but that's not really unusual. They've been going through a bit of a rough patch, we gather.

Rodriguez, notebook poised: Arguing? Any sounds of violence?

Husband: Oh, no. Nothing like that. More of a lover's tiff. You know how hot-blooded the young are, ha ha.

Wife: We heard him storm out at about seven.

Husband, annoyed: God damn it, Patty. She's supposed to ask you first.

Wife, finger-snapping: Fuck-knuckles. That's my bad. Okay, from the young bit.

*

Husband: You know how hot-blooded the young are, ha ha.

Husband and wife stare expectantly at Rodriguez.

Rodriguez, eyes narrowing: Um, did you hear the boyfriend leave?

Wife: We heard him storm out at about seven.

*

Shot of clock. Typical, everyday, circular, plastic-faced clock. Wall-mounted. Ticking.

Shot of O'Clooney looking at clock. Shot of O'Clooney looking down at dead woman.

(Gradually pump-up sound of ticking clock to dramatic levels in post.)

O'Clooney, hushed: Not again.

As Rodriguez re-enters crime scene, O'Clooney gestures her over to body.

O'Clooney: Alright, Lassie. What do you make of this here clock then?

Rodriguez, looking at clock: It's a clock.

O'Clooney, slowly and dramatically using right index finger to trace invisible line from clock to the dead woman's legs: That's roight, and now look how neatly her fanny lines up with it, like. You t'ink that's a coincidence?

Rodriguez, tracking invisible line back to clock, staring at clock for long beat: Yes.

O'Clooney, ignoring: I've been tracking this fooker for a while now. He's subtle, like. Not so flashy. But if you look hard, you'll always find his killing card.

Rodriguez: A clock?

O'Clooney: Fookin Ay. Or a Rolex. Or an oven timer. Or a window that tidily frames the rising and setting of the sun just so. Or maybe he just angles their legs to look like the minute and hour hand, makes *them* the clock, the sick coont. Whatever it is, it's always in their own home, Rodriguez. In their gaff, where they'd think themselves safe. Because, when all's said and done, what is a woman never safe from?

Extreme close-up of O'Clooney's face w/ tortured, haunted, hung-over eyes: Toime.

Director: That's lunch.

(Applause from all on set.)

Dead woman, tearily: that was *so* beautiful.

Rodriguez, confused.

*

Exterior, street outside of apartment complex. Run-down area. Even rubbish bags slumped in gutters are graffitied. Rodriguez and O'Clooney move down the police cordon, signing autographs.

Medium shot of wizened, unhealthy-looking Old Couple. The old man holds out a glossy shot of Rodriguez with bosom much ampler than reality.

Wife: I can't believe LAPDTV was really in our apartment.

Husband: Did you like all the owl stuff? That's actually *our* owl stuff. We collect it, and they said, hey, this is a genuinely great collection, let's use it!

Rodriguez, surprised: Wait, you guys are the actual neighbours?

Wife, excited: That's right! And that was our real owl stuff!

Rodriguez, pulling notebook out of back pocket: Did you happen to hear anything last night?

Husband: The usual crashing and banging. Some screams. That boyfriend of hers is a piece of work.

Wife: We heard him running down the hallway at about ten.

Rodriguez, scribbling quickly: Ten? Not seven?

Wife: No, no, definitely ten. I know because NYPDTV had finished, and Houston Homicide was just starting.

Husband: Great show!

Wife: You know they got a guy down there strangling women and then doing it to their corpses while he watches football?

Husband, laughing, mock-strangling wife: Living the dream!

*

Rodriguez, on the car phone: Rosi, something seriously fishy is going on.

Rosario, with phone on speaker in front of her, as someone off-screen applies foundation to her cheek with a make-up brush: What's wrong?

Rodriguez: Well, there was a gap between the information I was supposed to get, and the information I actually got. And then my partner delivered this crazy speech about how our domestic was the victim of some ridiculous serial killer.

Rosario: Ooh, serial killer? As badass as that Cool Whip dude?

Rodriguez: Even more *loco*, if you can believe that. O'Clooney thinks this guy always aligns his victim's vaginas with clocks. Or oven timers. I don't know. It made zero sense.

Rosario: He got a name yet? How about: The Tick Tock Killer?

Make-up Girl: That's good!

Rodriguez, confused: Who's there with you?

*

Interior, interview room. In a metal chair before a thin, stainless steel table sits The Boyfriend. He's a weedy-looking guy, eyes twitching back and forth like he's watching a badminton game in his brain.

Rodriguez, speaking coolly, but with a killer glint in her eye: Okay, so let me just recap your statement. You and your girlfriend argued last night because she had previously asked you to bring a bag of her blood to the blood bank, but you had forgotten. To appease her, you agreed to fulfil the request then and there, and you were en route to said blood bank when you hit and critically injured a jackrabbit with your car. Then, in an attempt to save this animal's life, you tried transfusing your girlfriend's blood into the jackrabbit, but this operation was unsuccessful because you could not, quote, 'fit human blood into its tiny-ass rabbit veins', hence why your shirt was covered in this blood when we pulled you over. Is that all correct?

The Boyfriend nods. There is a loud double-knock at the door.

Track behind Rodriguez as she gets up and partly opens the door. Through the crack we see a sliver of O’Clooney’s whisky-puckered visage.

O’Clooney, in Californian voice: What the hell are you doing in there?

Rodriguez, whispering: They picked the boyfriend up off my APB, blood all over his shirt. This is it.

O’Clooney: No, we’ve got the boyfriend in the *other* room. Shit, Rodriguez. The Director’s been asking all over for you.

Rodriguez, trying to contain her anger: Look no offense, but shouldn’t we worry about the real boyfriend before we get after the fake one?

O’Clooney, also trying to contain his anger: Look no offense, but are you intending on getting paid this week? Cause me and my crippling addictions sure as fuck are.

*

Interior, interview room. In a metal chair before a thin, stainless steel table sits The Boyfriend. He looks like a handsome Lego figure, with tidy chestnut hair and a shirt buttoned right up to his Adam’s apple.

Boyfriend, half-speaking, half-sobbing: We argued over whether the Verdelho Madeira we were drinking was more Sercial or Bual. So, so petty, and now—now I’ll never be able to tell her she’s right.

(Boyfriend breaks down completely)

O’Clooney, Irish accent back: There, there lad. A little squabble doesn’t destroy the true love yas felt. Ain’t dat right, Rodriguez?

Rodriguez, stone-faced: So, what time did you leave the apartment?

Boyfriend, sniffing: Um, I guess about seven? I went and caught a matinee showing

of *Tokyo Story*. Ozu always smooths me out.

Rodriguez: Can you tell me why the neighbours say you left at ten, then?

Director: Cut.

*

Rodriguez, gritting teeth: Seven. Great. And can you tell me if you've (sighing)—if you've seen anyone loitering around the apartment complex lately? Maybe wearing (sighing)—maybe wearing multiple Rolexes or (sighing *deeply*)—or a clock necklace or—fuck it. No, you know what? I've got work to do.

(Rodriguez exits.)

*

Interior, interview room. Rodriguez opens door, looks at empty chair.

Rodriguez, v. angry.

*

Interior, Rodriguez's house. Rosario sits on the couch in panties and a bra, painting her toenails. Doorbell rings.

Exterior, front porch. Door opens and we see sliver of Rosario's beautiful face, looking pensive: Hello?

Voice, off-screen, rough as rubble: Ma'am, could I have a minute of your time?

*

Interior, office. The Sergeant sits behind a large wooden desk, upon which mounds of manila folders are piled high in haphazard stalagmites of paper.

Sergeant: What's this I hear about you not following O'Clooney's lead? He's a good cop, Rodriguez. Sure, he sometimes forgets to put coffee in his morning Jamesons, but his instincts are solid.

Rodriguez, still v. angry: His instincts are solid? We have a standard domestic, clear as day, and he's out there chasing Flavor Flav.

Director, laughing, both thumbs up.

Rodriguez, v. v. angry now: Why the fuck are you giving me the thumbs up?

Sergeant, to Director: Can we have a quick break?

Director: Hard five, people.

Sergeant, to Rodriguez: Step into my office.

*

Interior, office. The Sergeant sits behind a large wooden desk, upon which a few papers are stacked neatly in a metal wire tray.

Sergeant, hands outstretched: My balls, Rodriguez.

Rodriguez, confused: Excuse me?

Sergent: If you've finished juicing them in your virtue vice, I'd like them back please.

Rodriguez, sighing: I'm just trying to do my job, sir.

Sergeant, also sighing: And I'm just trying to do mine. Look, we're getting killed in the ratings. New York has their whip cream guy, Houston has their football guy, hell I've just

heard that Sacramento—Sacramento!—has some fucker that’s been grinding women up and selling them as hot sauce. What happened to this city, Rodriguez? We used to be flagship. The Lonely-Hearts Killer, The Hillside Strangler, The Grim Sleeper, the list goes on. And what do we have now? Wifebeaters and gangbangers. Try making that sexy seven nights a week.

Rodriguez, deeply unimpressed: How about I worry about solving cases, and you worry about how sexy they are?

Sergeant: If we don’t get our ratings up, there won’t *be* any cases to solve, because there won’t be anybody left to solve them. I have to look after my people, Rodriguez. I mean, shit, Sally’s dog is on *dialysis*.

*

Interior, police station. As Rodriguez leaves The Sergeant’s office, O’Clooney trundles over and gets right up in her face: I troied to tell yas, Rodriguez. Didn’t I troi?

Rodriguez, confused, visibly reeling from the heat waves of alcohol coming off her partner: Jesus. Are you drunk?

Director, annoyed: Cut.

O’Clooney: Shit. *Shit*. That’s not until later is it?

Director: Can someone please get Kyle a coffee?

O’Clooney, shaking head: No, I’m good. Just...line?

Director: Rodriguez, get your pert little ass in gear. We got another body out in Angelino.

O’Clooney: Rodriguez, get your pert little ass in gear. We got another body out in Angelino.

Rodriguez, clearly caught off-guard: Angelino? That's my neighbourhood.

Director, thumbs up.

*

Interior, police car. Rodriguez drives, hands at nine and three on the wheel. O'Clooney is slumped in the seat opposite, looking more like a pile of garage rags than a human being. Outside, it's a sunny L.A. day. We see palms trees, attractive rollerbladers, sky a birthday-cake blue.

O'Clooney, morose: What am I doing here, Rodriguez?

Rodriguez, exasperated: Oh great. So now we're doing the one-partner-monologues-existentially-while-the-other-one-drives bit?

O'Clooney, ignoring: I graduated top of my class in Julliard. I've had standing ovations at Geffen, Paramount, Shubert. Ben Brantley once said my Iago, quote, made Satan look like a kitten without teeth, claws or an adrenal cortex. And now here I am, not even pretend drunk, on my way to yet another cheesy twist.

Rodriguez, confused: Wait, what twist?

O'Clooney, sighing: All in good toime, Lassie. All in good toime.

Rodriguez, gripping wheel harder: You do know 'Lassie' is Scottish, right?

(O'Clooney breaks down completely)

*

Interior, apartment. The chamberlain, the china, the grandfather clock have all been cleared out. There are still owls. The Old Couple are watching TV. On the screen we see a

medium shot of a mutilated female corpse. The head, arms, and legs have been chopped off, but we still recognize the *hourglass* body of Rosario Rodriguez.

O'Clooney: I troied to tell yas, Rodriguez. Didn't I troi?

Husband, engrossed: To be fair, he did.

Rodriguez, v. angry, v. confused: This is not funny. Cut! I'm not okay with this! Cut!

Where's Rosi? Where's the real Rosi?

Wife, nose scrunching up: I don't *like* her. Very screechy. And The *Tick Tock* Killer?

What kind of name is that?

Husband: Well. You want to watch that new Sacramento Psychos instead? Or maybe, just maybe, you're in the mood for

(Husband putting hands around wife's neck)

football!

Wife: Ha. Ha.

Let's Talk Trojan Bee

I

There is shock and horror in the Californian almond region tonight.

—*CBS Sacramento*

Initial reports suggest ten dead and at least a dozen more injured.

—*CNN*

America's latest atrocity occurred in an idyllic, sun-dappled almond grove.

— 'Mass Shooting at Waterford Nut', *The New York Times*

With police confirming the deceased shooter as 32-year-old Toby Rogen, the burning question now becomes: why?

—*Fox News*

Mr Rogen's social media presence suggests a disturbed individual with an unhealthy grudge against bees.

— 'Waterford Nut Shooter Feared "Bee-vasion"', *Huffington Post*

II

Bees are the unsung, unpaid laborers of the American agricultural system.

— 'A World without Bees', *Time*

The principal mode of pollination of many plant species is by insects. Worldwide, an estimated 400 crop species are pollinated by bees...possible crop loss in some species would be more than 90 per cent in the absence of bees.

— ‘Climate Change: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability’, *IPCC*

Any factor that compromises honeybees’ abilities to forage effectively can drive a colony into decline.

— ‘Death of the Beehive’, *Science Direct*

Researchers at Northwestern University conducted a two-year, in situ field experiment that altered the temperature of honeybees’ nests to simulate a warming climate ... 35 per cent of bees died in the first year, and 70 per cent died in the second year.

— ‘Climate Change Linked to Population Decline in Honeybees’, *Northwestern News*

Over the coming decades, every region of the US is expected to experience hotter temperatures and more frequent and intense heat waves.

— ‘Heat Waves and Climate Change’, *UCS*

III

Over three-quarters of remaining American honeybee colonies were wiped out last year, triggering fresh panic in the agricultural industry.

—*PBS NewsHour*

A fourth straight year of cataclysmic colony die offs has left scientists in no doubt: climate change is killing our bees.

— ‘Here’s why All the Bees Are Dying’, *Mother Jones*

A U.S. Department of Agriculture study estimated that over \$50 billion a year in American harvests were threatened by the mounting toll.

— ‘Bee Deaths Put Crops at Risk’, *The Wall Street Journal*

‘Listen’, she says, gesturing out to rows of vineyards sparsely dotted with anaemic, dusty grapes.

I tell her I can’t hear a thing.

‘Exactly’.

— ‘Without Bees, Napa Valley Withers on the Vine’, *The Atlantic*

One shopper we spoke to rejoiced that they would no longer have to pretend almonds were a delicious snack alternative, or waste precious minutes of their day testing the softness of avocados.

— ‘Good News for Lovers of Wheat, Rice’, *The Onion*

IV

In this region heavily reliant on almond production, hope had all but died.

— ‘Beemigrants Divide Rural Community’, *L.A. Times*

Unable to source natural or industrial pollinators, the Huckleberg family knew they were left with few options to save their fifth-generation apple farm.

— ‘Our Mysterious Saviour’, *The Washington Post*

Like many others in the region, Jim and Sandy Freese were about to begin the costly but unavoidable recourse of replacing their cherry orchard with wind-pollinating wheat.

— ‘Miracle on the American Farm’, *The New Yorker*

Haemorrhaging money, Waterford Nut had already begun employee lay-offs. Then, CEO Jerry Waterford Jr. got a phone call he will never forget.

— ‘US Almonds Back from the Brink’, *Forbes*

Suddenly, mysteriously, the bees were back.

— ‘What’s with These Bees?’ *Slate*

V

The silent flowers had come to buzzing, bumbling life.

— ‘Tracing the Beemigrant’, *National Geographic*

Incredibly, pollinator supply is almost back to pre-crisis levels.

— ‘The Bees Are Back in Town’, *The Economist*

It appeared that the Huckleberg farm was saved.

— ‘Our Mysterious Savior’, *The Washington Post*

Jerry Jr. shakes his head, as if still in disbelief: ‘God heard our prayers.’

— ‘U.S. Almonds Back from the Brink’, *Forbes*

Though these bees have gathered nicknames like pollen, Sandy Freese only ever calls them one thing: ‘they’re our savior bees’.

— ‘Miracle on the American Farm’, *The New Yorker*

VI

Not everyone, however, is so sure on these new saviors.

— ‘Beemigrants Divide Rural Community’, *L.A. Times*

Isn’t a little unnerving how, you know, these bees just ‘showed up’?

—*Fox & Friends*

‘They do make me uneasy’, admits Walter Cromack, whose alfalfa farm was suddenly inundated this past spring.

— ‘The Enigma of the “Savior Bee”’, *National Review*

Once again, the mainstream media is failing to ask the important questions.

—‘BUZZ-KILL: Who Are These Bees Really “Saving?”’, *Breitbart*

Who do these bees work for?

—*Infowars*

VII

They’re just bees, okay? Chill. They’re just bees.

— ‘Enough Already with These Beespiracies’, *Vice*

Scientists have concluded that the ‘saviour bee’ is in fact *Melipona beecheii*, or the Mayan stingless bee.

— ‘U.S. “Saviour Bees” Are Migrants’, *The Guardian*

Many people in the U.S. would not have heard of Stingless bees, as the species is not cold-tolerant and lives mainly in the tropics.

— ‘Stingless Bees Get Their Moment in the Sun’, *Nature*

Prior to this recent migration, likely due to warming temperatures, the stingless bee’s natural range was thought to be from Costa Rica to Mexico.

— ‘Mass Migration of *Melipona Beecheii*’, *Bee World*

So, climate change cooked our honeybees, and then gave us some heat-loving, Central American pollinators as recompense. Problem solved, mystery over. Right?

— ‘What’s with These Bees?’ *Slate*

VIII

Agricultural production is mysteriously booming in what some are calling ‘the miracle on the American farm’.

—*BBC News*

In the season after the new bees arrived, the Freeses yielded their largest-ever cherry crop.

— ‘The Miracle on the American Farm’, *The New Yorker*

The Huckleberg farm wasn't just saved—it was reborn.

— 'Our Mysterious Savior', *The Washington Post*

Waterford Nuts has seen a 150 per cent increase in profits.

— 'U.S. Almonds back from the Brink', *Forbes*

On Sundays, the church is packed with farmers grateful for the miraculous upturn in fortune.

Some, however, continue to see only the devil's handiwork.

— 'Beemigrants Divide Rural Community', *L.A. Times*

IX

An alarming new report from the Department of Homeland Security shows a surge in the number of migrants crossing into the U.S. illegally.

— 'Illegal Border Crossings Are Up', *El Paso Times*

Record numbers of migrants are streaming into the United States, overwhelming border agents and leaving holding cells dangerously overcrowded.

— 'Crisis at the Border', *Arizona Republic*

Before this latest surge, undocumented immigration had previously been in steep decline for years—a result of stricter enforcement and the rise of robotic labor.

— 'Illegal Immigration to the U.S. Is Rising Again', *Houston Chronicle*

Officials are scrambling to explain this sudden and irrepressible immigration surge.

— 'In Washington, Contesting Theories on Immigration Increase', *Politico*

Some have begun to wonder: is it the bees?

— ‘Enough Already with These Beespiracies’, *Vice*

X

Locals have a nickname for the opportunistic, undocumented workers who are suddenly everywhere: ‘beemigrants’.

— ‘Beemigrants Divide Rural Community’, *L.A. Times*

It does appear that many of those arriving illegally find work in the burgeoning fields and orchards of the ‘savior bee’.

— ‘Are Bees Key to Immigrant Surge?’, *Newsweek*

Productivity just happens to be booming in one of the few areas robotics is yet to comprehensively figure out: labor-intensive and difficult-to-pick crops like cherries, apples, and almonds.

— ‘Robotics’ Achilles Heel is Beemigrants’ Boon’, *WIRED*

One of the few areas still reliant on low-skilled foreign workers is therefore also one of the fastest growing.

— ‘New Trends in Illegal Immigration’, *Pew Research Centre*

‘We’re sure this is all just an innocent coincidence.’

— ‘Internet Calls for Calm, Common Sense on Beemigrant Issue’, *The Onion*

XI

Let's talk 'Trojan Bee'.

—*Infowars*

The open-border-craving globalists, through multinationals like Monsanto and Bayer, dramatically and deliberately reduced the U.S. honeybee population via neonicotinoids, thus goading the Mainstream Media into 'bee-pocalypse' hysteria.

— 'Globalist Pesticides Were Behind Massive Honeybee Die-off', *Zero Hedge*

Then came the secret release of a genetically modified bee, one lab-designed to radically boost the productivity of certain crops reliant on cheap foreign labor.

— 'The Dark Agenda of the Trojan Bee', *Alt-Market*

Distracted by the 'gift' of this 'savior', and the 'endangered' crops it has supposedly saved, the American public was primed to accept the filthy hordes crossing in the bees' wake.

— 'The Trojan Takeover Has Bee-gun', *The Daily Stormer*

With the borders now successfully overrun by illegal aliens, the loony left and the globalist MSM cabal are attempting to deflect via their favourite manufactured culprit: climate change.

—'BUZZ-KILL: Who Are These Bees really "Saving?"', *Breitbart*

XII

Scientists have determined that climate change, and not the so-called 'savior bee', is the main cause of our boosted crop yields.

—*MSNBC*

Whereas most tropical regions have experienced production losses due to rising temperatures, production in temperate regions is benefiting from the warmer climate and longer growing seasons.

— ‘UN Report Identifies Where Global Harvests Have Risen’, *Centre for American Progress*

An atmosphere with more CO₂ boosts crop yield in the short term via increased rates of photosynthesis.

— ‘How Climate Change Actually Helps Some Farmers’, *Scientific American*

Fleeing the devastating heat and drought of their natural habitats, *Melipona beecheii* arrived at a fecund region desperate for pollinators.

— ‘Our Opportunistic “Saviors”’, *Think Progress*

These ‘refugees’ moved north because our farmland could save *them*, not vice versa. And they’re not alone.

— ‘Savior Bee or Refugee?’, *Huffington Post*

XIII

Like the bees before them, there is a simple reason migrants—or ‘beemigrants’—are travelling north en masse: desperation.

— ‘The Truth about These “Beemigrants”’, *Mother Jones*

In the settlement of Plan de Jocote, Chiquimula, Gloria Diaz’s crops didn’t produce a single grain of corn.

— ‘Changing Climate is behind Migration Surge’, *The Guardian*

It’s the height of monsoon season in Mexico, but in the village of Zapopan, the rains came months too late, then stopped altogether.

—Linkages among climate change, crop yields and Mexican migration’, *PNAS*

After a season of merciless drought, and with his starving family surviving only on the dwindling *mantiocas* they could find in the surrounding scrubland, Juan Uribe Francisco was left with no other choice but to head north.

— ‘Tracing the Beemigrant’, *National Geographic*

There is no mystery here, no conspiracy. There are just desperate people looking for our help at the exact same moment we need theirs.

— ‘Let’s Squash the “Trojan Bee”’, *San Francisco Chronicle*

XIV

A shortage of migrant workers is resulting in lost crops in California.

— ‘Californian Crops Rot due to Immigrant Farmworker Shortage’, *Fortune*

Despite the recent migration surge, farmers with record yields are still struggling to get enough hands on board, and Americans appear to have no interest in picking fruit.

— ‘Can Immigration Reform Fix the Agricultural Job Shortage?’ *The Wall Street Journal*

United States agriculture cannot afford to waste this opportunity. If American workers are unwillingly to help, you need to increase our migrant workforce ASAP.

—Jerry Waterford Jr., Testimony to Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Border Security and Immigration

Under pressure from the agricultural lobby and the public outcry over rotting crops, Congress passed a historic law today that drastically simplifies the H2A farmworker visa process, essentially giving instant employment to the thousands of asylum seekers detained along our southern border.

— ‘Congress Passes “Farmworker Shortage” Bill’, *Real Clear Politics*

Predictably, not everyone is pleased.

— ‘The Alt-Right Has Absolutely Flipped Its Lid Over This New Farmworker Law’, *BuzzFeed*

XV

Welp, the puppet cucks in Congress just bent America over and lubed her up.

—*Gab*

No one can still credibly claim that the “Trojan Bee” is a conspiracy theory. It’s not even a *theory* anymore—it’s an event happening before our very eyes.

—*YouTube*

We’re screwed. Time to start learning Spanish, *amigos*.

—*4chan*

Good news: the upcoming midterms are an opportunity to protest this BS.

Bad news: who the f ya gonna vote 4?????

—*Twitter*

Riding the wave of anger over recent visa reform, anti-immigrant third-party candidates are popping up all over the country.

— ‘Midterms Rocked by Angry New Party’, *Nation*

XVI

This new political force in America is vehemently anti-immigrant and, yes, anti-bees.

— ‘What Exactly Does the Bread Party Want?’ *Salon*

A dark thread of conspiracy weaves through their political views. In their world, the recent H2A bill is proof of a ‘globalist’ conspiracy to promote immigrant anarchy via boosted agriculture yields.

—‘Introducing (sigh) the “Bread Party”’, *New Republic*

#3—Demand that all genetically modified *anthophilia* be destroyed, and that those operating the labs face criminal punishment.

—*Shut the Gates, Purge the Fields: A Bread Party Manifesto*

Their unhinged and hyperbolic manifesto explains that ‘bread’ represents ‘but one of the many wholesome products Americans can still enjoy once our immigrant infestation has been purged’.

— ‘Explaining the Dumbest Name in Politics’, *Vox*

Aside from believing in far-fetched conspiracy theories, supporters also adhere to a boycott on all food products relying on bees.

— ‘Inside the Strange World of the Bread Party’, *Vogue*

XVII

Patriot-purge complete: strawberries, almonds, apples, blueberries, all night-night down the garbage disposal.

—*r/bread_party*

[Safeway employees sniffing in fruit section, looking confused]

Them: did someone piss on these melons?

me: ☺

#BPRise

—*Twitter*

This is the fourth Missoula fruit store this week to be tagged with swastikas.

—*KPAX Nightly News*

What do we eat? Bread! What do we grow? Wheat!

—Bread Party Rally, Mobile, Ala.

‘We are officially redundant.’

— ‘Every Satirist Everywhere Retires’, *The Onion*

XVIII

Brad Hardigan (R) 59 per cent, Sally Litchfield (D) 31 per cent, Elijah Mason (B) 10 per cent

—Mid-term results, Mobile County, Ala.

Election night was a resounding disapprobation of this new party's toxic worldview.

— 'Bread Party Fails to Rise', *The New York Times Magazine*

Despite encouraging returns in some southern states, their cocktail of nativist fury and tinfoil gobbledegook is unlikely to ever tempt mainstream voters.

— 'Bread Party Stuck with Heel of Midterm Loaf', *FiveThirtyEight*

They may have been roundly defeated, but those writing off the bread party do so at their own peril.

— 'Still Plenty of Slices Left for Bread Party', *The Weekly Standard*

Worryingly, their poor election results seem to have only deepened their conspiratorial tendencies.

— 'Bread Party Hardens Conspiracy Crust,' *The Economist*

XIX

Across the country, Bread Party candidates are refusing to concede, claiming electoral fraud.

— 'Bread Party Seeks Midterm Recount', *NPR*

Mississippi candidate Timothy McKee, who lost in the state's 4th congressional district, today said that 'illegals voted early, and they voted often'.

— ‘Bread Party: Illegal Immigrants Swayed Election’, *Clarion-Ledger*

A Bread Party demonstration in Charleston turned violent today, as supporters brawled with Antifa protestors outside the West Virginia state capitol building.

—*WDVM News*

They are so far down the road of this ridiculous conspiracy that it is hard to say what will happen when reality hits.

— ‘The Bread Party Has Nowhere to Go’, *American Prospect*

Citing no evidence to support claims of widespread voter fraud, the voting integrity commission today rejected the possibility of special recounts.

—‘Report: No “Significant” Voting Fraud in Midterms’, *Bloomberg*

XX

Juan Uribe Francisco, 30; Carlos Gomez Garcia, 31; Julio Ernesto Acuna Garcia, 23; Javier Hernandez, 25; Enrique Hernandez Lopez Obrador, 28; Nelson Roberto Espinal Matamoros, 34; Anabel Pineda, 26; Joaquin Sabina, 37; Jose Luis Tepeu, 22; Andres Luis Videgaray, 30.

— ‘These Are the Victims of the Waterford Nut Shooting’, *People*

Witnesses say that Mr Rogen was shooting at workers and bees alike.

— ‘Waterford Nut Shooter Feared “Bee-vasion”’, *Huffington Post*

He was a registered Bread Party member, and his posts on Facebook, Twitter, and Gab echoed alt-right conspiracies such as the ‘trojan bee’.

— ‘Did the Bread Party Cause the Waterford Nut Shooting?’, *Daily Kos*

In a final, chilling post he claimed that ‘beelegals’ would pay for ‘stealing the election’.

— ‘The last Days of the Waterford Nut Shooter’, *USA Today*

One can only pray that this is a turning point, and that the extreme fringes of our political spectrum learn to tone down their rhetoric.

— ‘The Tragic Lesson of the “Trojan Bee”’, *The New Yorker*

XXI

Two words: false flag.

—*Infowars*

A guy walks into a busy orchard with an AK-17 and only kills eight people? #WaterfordNot

—*Twitter*

Sure, it’s not at all suspicious that his social media postings parrot ‘trojan bee’ theories verbatim.

—‘The Details of That Almond Shooting Are ...Weird’, *Daily Wire*

Notice how the ‘victims’ are all illegals no one can trace?

—*r/bread_party*

‘A false flag is always an attempt by those in power to trick the public into fearing something. In this case: us.’

— ‘Bread Party Calls “False Flag” on Waterford Nut Shooting’, *Gateway Pundit*

XXII

In a rare display of unanimity, Congress passed legislation today effectively barring the Bread Party from American politics.

— ‘Congress Bans Controversial Party’, *Politico*

The Bread Party Control Act ‘criminalizes membership in, or support for the party, and defines evidence to be considered by a jury in determining participation in the activities, actions, objectives, or purposes of said party’.

— ‘The Bread Party is Cooked’, *Daily Beast*

The new legislation is based on the Communist Control Act of 1954.

— ‘Yes, There Is Precedence for Kicking Out a Political Party’, *Slate*

While some—in the wake of the Waterford Nut Shooting—see necessary action, others fret that extreme measures could have adverse consequences.

— ‘Out of the Frying Pan, into the Oven?’ *Economist*

Lock and load.

—*r/bread_party*

XXIII

There is shock and horror in the Michigan blueberry region tonight.

—*NBC Detroit*

Mourners have lit candles and placed wreaths outside of this family-owned alfalfa farm.

—*CBS Des Moines*

A once-peaceful cherry orchard is now a ghastly crime scene.

—*NBC Portland*

Napa Valley is stunned by this latest outbreak of violence, the tenth to occur across the country this week alone.

—*Fox Oakland*

Miguel Angel Gonzalo, 27; Tom Huckleberg, 47; Jill Huckleberg, 42; Janice Huckleberg, 13; Tom Huckleberg Jr, 6; Gabriel LaTorre, 29; Paulo Torreria, 35; Francisco Javier Rodriguez Rodriguez, 20; Alejandro Ricardo Sanchez, 34.

— ‘These Are the Victims of the Huckleberg Apple Shooting’, *People*

XXIV

Is this really how America falls apart? Over *bees*?

— ‘Are We at War?’ *Chicago Tribune*

This time, the terrorists are us.

— ‘Nothing to Fear but Fear Ourselves’, *Atlantic*

A preposterous conspiracy theory—about bees no less—has exposed the fault lines of our tenuous Union.

— ‘The Stupid War We’ve Long Had Coming’, *Intelligencer*

The more vehement the denials of the ‘trojan bee’, the more violent the response seems to be.

— ‘This War Will Not Be Won by Logic’, *ProPublica*

By the conflict’s end, the death toll stood at near ten thousand humans as well as countless numbers of bees.

—‘From Pizzagate to the Trojan Bee: Ten Conspiracy Theories that Turned Deadly’,
Listverse

A Short History of Guns in America

The Gun Emerges

The first firearm was the Chinese fire lance, a gunpowder-filled bamboo tube first depicted on a 10th century silk banner originating from the Gansu Province in Western China. Early incarnations of the fire lance were used mainly for shock value in melees, with the weapon little more than a glorified firework attached to a spear. However, improvements in the explosive capacity of gunpowder eventually led to iron pellets and porcelain shards being added to the tubing as proto-bullets, with the spear framework often being discarded. Further advances in both gunpowder and tubing, with the original bamboo being swapped for more durable copper, produced the oldest surviving firearm, the Heilongjiang hand cannon of 1288.

Guns Reach Europe

Via the Silk Road trading route, gunpowder and firearms had made their way to Europe by the late 13th century. English philosopher Roger Bacon was the first Westerner to mention this new technology, with his 1267 treatise *Opus Maius* describing gunpowder as ‘exceeding the roar of strong thunder, and a flash brighter than the most brilliant lightning’. Intrigued by these effects, inventors such as Giovanni da Fontana and Berthold Schwarz experimented extensively with firearm technology but failed to make any significant improvements. As a result, the guns of the 15th century were essentially unchanged from the Chinese hand cannons of two centuries previous. These weapons were cumbersome and often required two soldiers to operate: one to apply a lit match to the priming powder of the flash pan, and a second to keep the firearm steady. Furthermore, the continuing instability of gunpowder meant weapons often exploded in their user’s face, or else failed to fire at all, and even skilled operators could not achieve a fire-rate of more than one or two shots per minute. This dangerous unreliability led the generals of both England and continental Europe to dismiss guns as ineffective in battle, and they instead

continued to count on the tried and tested weapons of the time: swords, halberds, longbows, and armed animals.

Armed Animals and the English Bill of Rights

With guns relegated to nothing but a curio, the main weapon for both large-scale warfare and private self-defence in England was the armed animal. The concept of training animals for battle first came into the English consciousness during their disastrous defeat at the Battle of Hastings in 1066. The English army, composed almost entirely of traditional infantry, was overwhelmed by the Norman-French army's creative use of longbows and armed animals—in this case over two thousand boars trained to charge at the opposition and impale them on fitted pikes. By the time Norman control of England ended in 1154, the culture of training and arming animals—including boars, rams, and bucks—was well established. Initially, the English ruling elite pushed for a populace adroit at utilizing these weapons, with Edward III going so far as to order every able-bodied man to train their animals on church holidays in preparation for battle. However, when those in power began to fear revolt at the hands of an armed lower class, they passed a succession of laws, most notably the Game Act of 1671, designed to keep armed animals out of the hands of all but the noble and wealthy. After the Catholic King James II was dethroned in the Boarious Revolution of 1688-89, the English Parliament moved to permanently enshrine civilian possession of armed animals in the English Bill of Rights: 'subjects which are Protestants may have Animaes Arm'd for their Defence suitable to their conditions and as allowed by Law'.

Armed Animals in the New World

When the first English settlers arrived in North America, they brought their armed animals with them, and these weapons so impressed the local Native Americans that they promptly sought to acquire some for themselves. At first, the English freely bartered their armed animals for corn and other foodstuffs, but they soon regretted this decision once these weapons, repurposed for the tactics of guerrilla warfare, threatened their foothold in the New World. Whenever the settlers forayed beyond their forts, something increasingly necessitated by their dwindling food supplies, they would suffer devastating ambushes by the Native Americans' armed animals, which hid easily in the dense New England forest. In fact, it is highly possible that the winter of 1610 would have been the end of the Jamestown settlement, were it not for a settler named John Dods, who, fleeing through the forest after escaping an ambush, stumbled into a cave in which a black bear was hibernating. Upon arriving in the spring of 1607, the settlers had considered the bears they encountered to be too wild and unwieldy to ever capture, but this bear's incapacitated state allowed it to be quickly muzzled, chained, and dragged back to James Fort. Encouraged by this find, settlers continued to scour the countryside for more dens, and they quickly established a regiment of two dozen or so confused and grumpy black bears. These bears proved to be the ideal weapons to help the settlers in their dire straits: aside from being strong, ferocious, and highly trainable, the bears' possessed a keen sense of smell capable of sniffing out ambushes up to twenty miles away. Although the role of bears in conquering the New World is at times over mythologised—diseases decimated the local populace far quicker than any weapon—they still helped turn the tide, and by the time the Native Americans were defeated in the King Philip's War, the only animals the English were arming for battle were bears.

The American Revolution and the Second Amendment

Despite the end of the King Philip's War, continuing hostilities against both the Native Americans and the French meant the need for armed bears remained. The fragmented colonies had no standing army to call on, so the citizens of each settlement organised themselves into militias that gathered regularly to train and prepare their armed bears for battle. Although some citizens kept bears at home, many either had no need for them in their day-to-day lives, or else could not afford the amount of food needed to keep these animals in fighting shape. More frequently, towns and villages would pool their resources together and keep a collection of bears in a central stable, where they could be accessed quickly and easily in the case of emergencies. It was just such a stable that King George III, incensed by colonial protests over British taxation, ordered his soldiers to destroy on April 18, 1775, the day that marks the beginning of the American Revolution. As the eight hundred British soldiers marched towards the bear stable in Concord, Massachusetts, they were stopped in Lexington by a militia of around seventy men armed with bears on leashes. Despite the British commander's protestations to 'muzzle ye arms, ye damned rebels', one of the colonial's bears was let free and the skirmish began. To help the militias in the fight for independence, a professional standing army was soon established and put under the command of General George Washington. At the war's end, Washington successfully pushed for a constitutional article that gave Congress the power to fund such standing armies in the future, a development that outraged those who viewed a full-time military force as a tyrannical threat to their hard-fought liberty. James Madison tried to appease these criticisms of the constitution with the 1791 Bill of Rights, whose Second Amendment was later to become one of the most contested sentences in American history: 'A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and arm Bears, shall not be infringed'.

The Bear that Won the West

In May of 1805, roughly one year into their westward expedition, Captain Meriwether Lewis and Second Lieutenant William Clark came face-to-face with *Ursus Horribilus*, aka the grizzly bear. It was, according to Lewis' journal, a horrifying encounter: Lewis described the bear as 'verry large and a turrible looking animal' and wrote that the party had 'Sent ten Bears at him before we killed him, & 5 of those Bears are no morre'. Bigger, stronger, and more ferocious than the black bear, the 'grizzly'—a misspelling of *grisly*, or 'horrible'—became a lucrative commodity to trap and sell to the bear breeders back East, and the ensuing 'Grizzly Rush' was so important to the development of the West that to this day California features the animal on its state flag. The grizzly's additional bulk allowed for experimentation in its armament, and in 1860 Benjamin Tyler Henry developed a prosthetic steel arm with sharp dagger-length claws that could be attached to the underside of a grizzly bear's forearms. When the bear clawed at its enemy, these secondary arms repeated the motion, leading to this new weapon's name: The Henry Repeating Grizzly. The Union's adoption of this deadly new weapon during the Civil War exasperated the Confederates, with one soldier famously describing it as 'that damned Yankee bear that swings its arm on Sunday and claws us all week'. When the war's end resulted in a collapse of demand, breeders responded by focusing on the domestic market. Advertising sought to imbue armed bears and their owners with attributes of rugged individualism, courage and self-sufficiency, turning what had previously been an important yet quotidian tool for hunting and self-defence into a mythopoetic symbol of American Manifest Destiny. One of the biggest successes of this marketing strategy, the 1873 Winchester Grizzly, was famously coined 'the bear that won the west', although there was some irony in this pronouncement: the weapon actually had poor sales until 1890, the year the Western frontier was officially closed.

Bear Control in America

Despite the dime novels and movies that would later portray the Western frontier as a lawless, bear-ridden warzone, many towns actually had strict bear control laws that required visitors to check their weapons at a stable next to the local sheriff's office. However, the creation and implementation of these laws remained a local issue until the middle of the 20th century, when the federal government first began passing national bear control legislation. World War I had introduced America to the horrors of machine bears, powerful grizzly bears with petrol-powered chainsaws attached to their repeating arms, and when these weapons started getting into the hands of prohibition-era criminals such as Al Capone, Franklin Roosevelt responded with the National Armed Bears Act of 1934. This act placed a heavy tax on the breeding, selling, or transporting of certain armed bears, most notably machine bears, and its constitutionality was tested five years later in the Supreme Court case *United States v. Miller*. After a district court ruled that Jack Miller's indictment for transporting a machine bear across state lines violated his Second Amendment rights, the Supreme Court reversed the ruling, with Justice McReynolds writing that 'the Court cannot take judicial notice that a grizzly having multiple, electrified limbs has today any reasonable relation to the preservation or efficiency of a well-regulated militia, and therefore cannot say that the Second Amendment guarantees to the citizen the right to keep such a bear'. This interpretation of the Second Amendment tethered the right to arm bears to the collective right to form militias, a reading that would pave the way for more bear control legislation in the coming decades.

The National Repeating Bear Association

In the aftermath of the American Civil war, Union veterans William C. Church and George W. Wingate decided to start an association dedicated to improving the upkeep and use in battle of

armed bears. For its first century, this National Repeating Bear Association (NRBA) was only mildly interested in politics, and it broadly supported bear-control legislation such as the National Armed Bears Act and the 1968 Bear Control Act (the latter a response to the assassination of President Kennedy, crushed to death by a grizzly bear sent leaping from a Dallas book depository). Although a substantial portion of its members were increasingly concerned about what they deemed to be legislative threats to the Second Amendment, the NRBA actually sought to distance itself even further from politics in the 1970's, focusing instead on the purchase of a 77,000-acre bear sanctuary in New Mexico. However, the association's direction was dramatically altered during the 1977 NRBA annual convention, when a group of hard-line anti-bear-control members used the association's bylaws to oust much of the old guard. From then on, the NRBA focused its attention on fighting any and every type of bear control in the country, pouring money into the election campaigns of politicians and ranking their dedication to the cause on a scale of zero to five 'claws' (to be a zero claw, or 'declawed', politician in a conservative state soon became a career death warrant). A number of successes followed, including the 1986 Bear Owners' Protection Act, which prohibited the federal government from microchipping and registering armed bears, and the landmark Supreme Court case *District of Columbia v. Heller*. When police officer Dick Heller appealed a Washington D.C. ban on armed bear cubs (smallish weapons popular for both self-defence and criminal activity due to their relative portability), the Supreme Court backed him by a vote of 5 to 4, with Justice Scalia writing in his majority opinion that the Second Amendment protected 'an individual right to arm a bear unconnected with service in a militia'. This interpretation was a huge boon to the NRBA and the bear breeding industry, and within a decade of the *Heller* decision there were more armed bears in the United States than people.

Bad Bear Syndrome

On September 6, 1949, Howard Barton Unruh released his Repeating Grizzly from the suburban garage-stable in which it was kept and goaded it into a killing spree that claimed the lives of thirteen people. Unruh, who was later found to be criminally insane, had been starving and torturing the bear for weeks before turning it loose, fomenting in the animal a wild and indiscriminate rage later to be defined as Bad Bear Syndrome. A number of such ‘bad bear’ killings occurred sporadically over the next five decades, before the turn of the century saw their frequency increase exponentially, and their casualty rates skyrocket due to the potency of the modern weapons available for legal purchase. Whilst the American public increasingly favoured bear control measures that might help stem the tide of violence, legislative action in Washington remained gridlocked throughout the first two decades of the 21st century. The Republican party’s desperate courting of conservative, rural voters had subordinated it to the NRBA, so much so that in the late 1990’s the party officially changed its animal symbol from the elephant to the bear. The Democrats, for their part, remained spooked by Bill Clinton’s 1994 ban of Assault Bears (military-grade polar bears fed steroids from birth and furnished with multiple repeating chainsaws). The backlash to that ban had cost the party the house majority in the 1996 midterms, and possibly the presidency in 2000, with Clinton’s successor, George W. Bush quietly allowing the ban to expire in 2004. Meanwhile, the standard NRBA response to bear attacks was to first offer ‘thoughts and condolences’ to the bereaved, and then to quickly advocate for even more armed bears in public places, with the association’s Executive Vice President Wayne LaPierre famously declaring that ‘the only way to stop a bad bear with a chainsaw is a good bear with a chainsaw’. Despite widespread mocking of this ‘thoughts and bears’ response, the NRBA successfully managed time and time again to ward off any laws that would significantly reduce these incidents, and it appeared that America’s bear problem was an intractable one.

The Gun Returns

In late 2012, the students at Cambridge's John Dods elementary were an hour away from being dismissed for Bearsgiving break, the annual national holiday celebrating the Jamestown discovery of those first sleepy black bears, when twenty-one-year-old Patrick Sloan entered the school grounds with two Assault Bears he had been starving for weeks. The final death toll stood at thirty-two, with the horror infinitely compounded by the fact that the majority of victims were children. Among the dead was six-year old Michael Whitelock, the only child of Edward Whitelock, a History professor at nearby Harvard University. After burying his son, Whitelock spent the first half of 2013 dealing with his grief the only way he knew how: research. He became obsessed with the history of how armed bears had displaced other weapons to become the dominant tool for modern violence, and police later found his books on inventors of the 14th and 15th century filled with scribbled marginalia that reacted, often disparagingly, to those era's failed experiments to craft battlefield-ready firearms. In the fall of 2013, Whitelock mysteriously sold his house and moved across the country to occupy a small trailer home in northern New Mexico, telling no one, including his ex-wife, Angela DeWitt, of his plans. Once settled in New Mexico, Whitelock began purchasing antique European hand cannons off the Internet, and he was a regular and inquisitive customer at the hardware store of a nearby town. Otherwise, Whitelock kept to himself: fellow occupants at the trailer park later described him as a polite but reserved neighbour who often worked through the night at the converted metalworking studio that took up half of his tiny home. In late November of 2014, five days before the second anniversary of the John Dods massacre, Whitelock left his trailer home for good, and travelled to the NRBA bear sanctuary in nearby Raton, where he camped for three days. Little is known about Whitelock's actions during this stay at the

sanctuary, although some campers claim to have heard loud cracks that they initially dismissed as tree boughs breaking under the mountain region's heavy snowfall. Whitelock then returned to Cambridge, appearing on the grounds of John Dods Elementary, where fifty-three-year-old James McRoy was standing guard with an armed bear (new legislation passed in the summer mandated that all schools must be guarded). McRoy did not recognize the long, metal object Whitelock cradled in his arms, later telling CNN that he thought it was 'some sort of strange walking stick', and so he was confused when this stranger raised the mysterious object and pointed it in his direction. Whitelock proceeded to shoot McRoy's armed bear through the eye, killing the animal instantly, before calmly reloading his firearm, the first to be fired in six hundred years, and turning it upon himself.

The Flintlock

Edward Whitelock's suicide was deemed to be a tragic, yet understandable reaction to the horror of his young son's death, and the focus soon turned instead to the revolutionary instrument with which he had chosen to end his, and a bear's, life. Remarkably, it had taken this former History professor less than two years to overcome technical obstacles that had stumped legendary inventors for centuries. The key development was that his gun eliminated the prohibitively awkward process of applying a lit match to the priming pan, with the necessary spark now being created via a complex hammer mechanism that reacted to the pulled trigger by striking steel against a shard of flint. Notebooks found at Whitelock's trailer show that this breakthrough use of flint, a form of mineral quartz long noted to be an excellent fire starter, had arrived after an impromptu visit to a nearby mesa known as *Cerro Pedernal*, or 'flint hill'. Meanwhile, the secondary problem of dangerously volatile gunpowder had long ago been solved: modern incarnations of this explosive substance, now more commonly known as

‘blastdust’, no longer blew up at the slightest jostle, and were widely used throughout the mining and construction industries. For ammunition, Whitelock packed this blastdust into items so quotidian they could be found at just about every gas station, supermarket checkout, and souvenir shop in the country: bear claws. The end result was a weapon, quickly dubbed the ‘Flintlock’, that could be easily and reliably operated by a single person, while also producing enough deadly force to fell a military-grade bear with a single shot.

Rebearicans and Gunocrats

As historians began to debate Whitelock’s central thesis, repeated across his scattered writings and marginalia, that such a gun would, and in his opinion should, have been the death knell for armed animals in the 15th century, others turned to a more pressing issue: what to do with this weapon *now*? In late 2014, President Barack Obama convened the Panel on Gun Technology, and tasked it with exploring ‘the potential effects of modern gun manufacturing and ownership’. This interagency panel, after talking to experts from a wide range of fields, as well as governors, mayors, and police commissioners, arrived at a single, electrifying conclusion: America needed more guns. According to the panel’s report, ‘widespread adoption of guns in the place of weaponized *Ursidae* would significantly decrease the amount of high-casualty “bad bear” attacks’, as well as help ‘ameliorate the issue of loose and unlicensed animals terrorizing low-income, urban neighbourhoods’. There was an additional benefit to swapping bears for guns that the report astutely chose not to mention, but which was certainly front and centre in Democratic lawmakers’ minds: because guns were not protected by the Second Amendment, they would be much easier for the federal government to regulate. This fact was certainly not lost on the NRBA and Republicans, who moved to appease the rattled bear breeding industry (Remington Bears’ stocks alone fell by nearly 50 points after the report’s

release), by labelling Whitelock a terrorist, and pressing for legislation that would put copycat gun manufacturers in jail. Thus, as the 2016 Presidential election neared, guns became the headline issue, so much so that Libertarian Party candidate Gary Johnson famously complained that voters were ‘stuck choosing between Rebearicans and Gunocrats’. It was certainly true that each party nominated a candidate as far-out on the partisan divide as possible. The pro-gun Democrats chose Michael Bloomberg, a former New York City mayor and long-time bear-control proponent who was pledging to use his personal fortune to help jumpstart gun manufacturing. The anti-gun Republicans, meanwhile, essentially completed their merger with the NRBA by nominating none other than that association’s vice president, Wayne LaPierre.

Bears-for-Guns

The July 2016 issue of *America’s 1st Freedom*, the official journal of the NRBA, featured a cover image of Bloomberg depicted as a Machiavellian-looking octopus, his eight tentacles clutching guns, decapitated bear heads, and a torn-up Bill of Rights. This was just one of the countless provocative images that bombarded voters during the 2016 election campaign, but in the end it was Bloomberg who emerged victorious, thanks largely to his success in the rust belt swing-states of Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, where he promised to reinvigorate dying factory towns by employing them to, as his ubiquitous slogan said, Make America’s Guns & Ammo. By the end of 2017, enough guns had already been stockpiled to begin a national ‘bear-for-gun’ trade scheme, the central policy of Bloomberg’s campaign. Over the next year, an astonishing 38.1 million bears were turned into the federal government in exchange for a new version of the Flintlock sleekly redesigned to be produced on a mass scale. However, while obtaining an armed bear had previously only required a criminal background check (a limited hurdle that was often avoided anyways via the ‘bearshow loophole’ of private

sale), those applying for a gun, either through trade or outright purchase, first needed to obtain a licence that was granted only after an interview and background check at a local law enforcement agency, as well as the completion of a six-week gun safety course. The results of this licensing system were overwhelmingly positive: a 2018 study by the American Public Health Association found that the average gun was 40% less likely to be involved in a homicide compared to the average armed bear, and 15% less likely to be involved in a suicide. In the same year, a violent incident in gun-majority Massachusetts, in which a disgruntled former employee of an Arby's shot two people dead with a Flintlock before being tackled to the ground, was hailed as a strange sort of success: 'had an Assault Bear been involved', read *The Boston Globe* the next day, 'the death toll would have been substantially higher'.

The Future of the Gun in America

Despite these positive results, Bloomberg and the Democrats remain frustrated by the speed with which the country is adopting guns. At the start of this year, most urban counties of reliably Democratic states were majority gun, but rural populations and the cities of Republican-voting states are steadfast in their armed bear ownership. For some, these weapons are simply too entwined with their culture and pastimes to give up ('you can't fish with a gun', reads one popular bumper sticker). Others, harking back to 18th century fears of tyranny, are distrustful of the federal government's central role in manufacturing and licensing guns. Conspiracy theories positing a Globalist takeover of de-beared America, widely disseminated online by Russian hackers during the 2016 election, continue to boost armed bear sales in many portions of the country. Truthfully, the immense challenge of changing America's bear culture should have been clear to the Democrats from the moment of LaPierre's 2016 'concession' speech, when, channelling former NRBA president and movie star Charlton Heston, he told

the crowd in Fairfax, Virginia that ‘they’ll only give us guns when they force them into our cold, dead hands’.

V-Beeb

The knock that woke me up was unmistakably a man's knock. Rude, loud, unpersuadable. I got out of bed and slipped a hoodie on. Seasick legs. Fizz of adrenaline in my veins.

There were two of them. They wore identical black suits and patinaed loafers. Their hair neatly slicked to one side, a shark's tooth of white scalp biting at each crease.

'I'm Agent Carter,' said one. 'And this is my partner, Agent Jones. Can we come inside and speak with you?'

They held their badges out. Silhouette of a woman with a bulging stomach. One nimbus around her head and another around her belly.

'What is this about?'

I knew what it was about.

'Why don't we sit inside and talk?'

I stepped back from the door and they shuffled in. The transient room I was staying in was a partitioned shipping container about the size of a double bed, and all it contained was a double bed. I sat on it. Let the executioners stand.

'Tyra Griffin,' said Carter, 'as I am sure you are aware, termination of a pregnancy is now a federal felony.'

'Thanks. I'll remember to pass that on to anyone still fucking real dick.'

He smiled. The pupil of his left eye started to glow green and then it projected in the small space between us a hovering square, on which grainy surveillance footage showed a woman standing on the corner of a street with her arms loosely crossing her lower stomach in an 'x'. A white panel van stopped in front of her and she got in.

I got in.

Up in the top-right corner of the screen: my face, date of birth, social security number.

‘I didn’t realize it was illegal to have friends with vans now,’ I said. ‘What did you all call that law? Justice for the unpainted windows act?’

They were both grinning ear to ear. I was pleasing them, like a feisty mouse pleases the cat.

This time, Jones’ pupil glowed. Two crimson lasers shot out of his eye and into the still looping video. Two pulses of red light: one on the left-hand side of my chest, the other in my belly. The video changed now. The same van dropping me off at the same corner. I hobbled out of view, the depleted owner of a single pulse of light.

‘Heartbeat monitoring,’ said Black. ‘It starts beating after three weeks. A milestone you were well past.’

Carter tutted.

‘How could you,’ he said.

‘If you really cared,’ I said, ‘you wouldn’t try to understand.’

Their faces dropped all of the feigned pleasantries now. I could see them hardening into their new roles of magnifying glass above the ant.

‘I won’t give you anything on them. No matter what you do.’

The video dropped out.

‘We already have them,’ said Carter. ‘And now we have you.’

‘Look into my eyes,’ said Jones. ‘Don’t blink’.

I shut them as hard as I could.

A loud sigh. I heard the soft shuffling of what sounded like two grown men playing a round of rock, scissors, paper.

Then a heavy body pushing me violently down onto the bed. Fingers scrabbling at my eyes. I squeezed as hard as I could but they were insistent and I was soon staring up at a blurry green orb that pulsed like an exploding star and then the fingers and their body released me

and I scurried away to the far side of the bed and turned to the wall. I could still feel the finger pads spidering over my sockets, the hot breath on my face. I was crying like a child.

No.

I wasn't.

In the middle of the bed, a pink mass. Its naked worm peering up at me.

'Congratulations,' said Jones. 'It's a boy.'

And then they left.

*

I locked the door and turned around and collapsed down with my back against it. No matter how hard I tried to plug my ears, the wild crying would not abate.

Because the sound wasn't coming from the fury on the bed.

It was coming from inside me.

As the crying boiled over into screaming, needles of pain started punching through my temples, then screws, then fishhooks. I leapt up and lunged at it. Its face was flushed and shiny with tears. Its little hands writhed like upturned beetles. At the sight of this, my heart betrayed me with a pang, and I reached out and lightly touched its foot. Warm. Soft. I took a deep breath and then I bent down and took it in my arms. Its screaming ceased almost immediately, replaced by a manageable whimper. I started to rock it gently. One of its hands curled around my ring finger and it stared up at me with strange, grey-blue eyes. Eyes like a stormy sea, people always told me.

*

At first, I thought the transient's alarm had gone off. I sat up and looked over at the red LED timer set into the wall. Still three quarters of an hour left. What then was that sound and why did it hurt so God damn much? Something brushed my thigh and I yelped. The child. We had curled up on top of the blanket and both fallen asleep. You could smother a real baby that way.

I picked it up. This time, its crying didn't stop. The ruby 'o' of its mouth snuffled at my chest like those strange fish that vacuum the bottom of the sea. More betrayal. This time a sensation in my breasts that I could only describe as yearning.

I slid the right side of my hoodie down over my shoulder. It quickly latched on to my right breast and I cried out as the ribbed roof of its mouth sandpapered my nipple. I waited. Nothing. It flung its head away in frustration and screamed. Two missiles of pain in my temples collided into one another and firebombed the rest my body.

Through the shuddering pain I could just about make out a small screen that suddenly appeared above the thing's howling face. It showed a cartoon of a contented baby suckling at a teat. I looked at it and blinked hard twice. My right breast immediately felt fat and warm. There was tingling at my nipple. I guided its little mouth back on and this time it started to drink. I sighed as the pain receded, leaving only the raw tug of its greedy little mouth.

The screen above its head had changed. The cartoon was gone, replaced by a few lines of text on a white background. A receipt.

V-Beeb Ltd.

x1 Digital Lactate (right b.)

\$270.00

Back to Store

I nearly dropped it when I saw that number. That was an entire good day's work for me, and I don't have many good days. Or days, for that matter.

I stared and blinked at the link below it. The screen expanded to the size of the room. At the top, *V-Beeb* was written in huge bubbly letters, striped pink and blue. There were dozens of cartoon boxes. More as I scrolled down. Bottles of milk. Snack bars. Clothes. Toys. The prices were insane. I stopped at a onesie that said, 'Poop hard or go home'. Only \$599.99! I blinked out in disgust.

I looked down at the thing's little wrinkled face as he sucked, and I moved a single finger through his corn silk hair.

'Last supper, motherfucker.'

*

Half an hour later, the thing was sleeping in the middle of the bed and my backpack was on. There were a few minutes left on the timer. When it ended, the alarm would blare, and the automatic disinfectant spray would go off. I felt momentarily bad about how scary that would all be for the little thing. Then I shut the door and walked away.

The transient was in the old port. A thousand shipping containers at least, all rentable by the hour. It was a depressing place but today it seemed shiny and new. I breathed in the fish rot of the nearby sea with relish. All that looking over my shoulders these last months, the bile that rose in my throat when I read about the latest executions, it had all been expelled. I had an audition downtown at 12. It was with a director I had worked with before and I had a good feeling about it. The sun was warm on my face.

I had walked about ten feet from the transient when the pain hit me so hard that I doubled over right there and then. It felt like one of those circular saws they use to halve logs had nestled itself right between my eyes and started spinning. Huge red words flashed in my vision: V-BEEB UNATTENDED. It took everything I had to get up and stumble back to the transient. I still had a few seconds left on the clock, so it scanned me and let me in. As soon as I entered the room, the letters disappeared and with them the pain. Then the alarm went off and the disinfectant spray gushed from the little unobtrusive nozzles and the thing woke up and screamed murder and here was more fresh pain waving hi with its little chainsaw hands. I took the thing outside and bought another \$270 fat tit and it quieted down. Relief.

Then a cool, drifting dread entered my body.

I saw their smirking faces lurking over me again.

I hadn't gotten away with a God damn thing, had I?

*

The air was chilly, so I tucked the thing beneath my hoodie. It was naked against my skin, but no way was I dropping six hundred on hilarious digital baby clothes. I barely had enough for another feed. How often did these things get hungry? For now, it seemed content as any dude to nuzzle against a breast, so I jogged awkwardly out of the port and up the causeway to catch my bus. Which I missed. The next was in thirty minutes and so was my audition. I ordered a Pod and it arrived and I got in and as we slugged our way through the traffic, I watched my savings dissolve like sugar in a rainstorm. If I got the gig, I would have to beg for an advance, which I wasn't even sure was a thing you could do, and besides: *if* I got the gig.

The audition was in one of those skyscrapers downtown that look like a giant metallic dildo. In the elevator up, the thing stirred and gurgled, and I had to shush it back to sleep. The other people in the elevator studied me from the corners of their eyes. After a moment, I turned to a pale man with cratered acne standing next to me, and I zipped down my hoodie, revealing the thing clumped there against my bra.

‘What do you see?’

His eyebrows shot up. A small smile trickled along his face.

I zipped back up and turned away.

The door opened and I went out into a small lobby. Dozens of men and women were waiting on backless cube chairs, but as soon as I sat down amongst them, Bryan’s face appeared through a white door and he waved me in.

‘This is exciting,’ he said, once we were in the small space within. ‘Between you and me, you’re pretty much a shoo-in, but company dictates that we have to go through the process. Wait. What’s wrong with your arm?’

I was pinning my arm against my chest to keep the thing in position. It had started squirming.

‘I pulled a muscle rock-climbing. It’s nothing.’

He stared at me for a beat. Then he nodded.

‘Maybe no rock-climbing if you get the gig, OK? We need you healthy.’

Bryan’s tech assistant, Matt, came over and scanned my eyes and on one of the white walls, the swirly multicolour patterns of my brain began to writhe. On another wall, carrots.

‘So,’ said Bryan, ‘in this game, you’re a rabbit, and you have to dig up as many carrots as possible, whilst avoiding the farmer and his cat. We need a couple of emotions from you today. The first is the pure joy when you pop a carrot out of the ground. Judging by your sterling work on SpaceHogs, I know you can do this.’

Matt started playing the game, his eyes zipping around and his nose scrunching as he controlled the rabbit POV.

I readied myself, trying to get back to the joy I had felt that morning out in the transient. I have wanted to be an E-moter since I was a little girl, playing virtual games in our trailer as I tried to block out my mother moaning behind the bed curtain in either pleasure or withdrawal. In the trillion-dollar games industry, even the lowest rungs on the ladder are hotly contested. I was up against rich kids who went to specialized academies and had parents on the board of Valley companies. But what they didn't have was my ability to delete my surroundings and float away, a skill I was forced to cultivate as I was shuttled off to one creepy foster home after another.

Which is to say I *was* the little rabbit who zipped through the farmer's leg, sending him sprawling into a nearby wheelbarrow. Matt used that gap in time to start ferociously digging at a nearby carrot and as its green stalk gave way to a tapering orange phallus, I could actually feel how good it would be to have that carrot in my mouth. On the far wall, my brain waves were a simmering pink. Bryan nodded eagerly in encouragement. I readied myself for the crescendo, the pop of happiness that every gamer would feel surging through them as they played.

Then a smell.

A horrible smell and a sticky wetness on my chest.

It had shit on me. A watery yellow curry smear that made me gag.

The carrot popped out.

My brainwaves were a boogery green.

'What the hell, Tyra? Why are you giving me disgust right now?'

I couldn't help it, I leant down and barfed onto the ash-white carpet.

Matt and Bryan yelled in unison and jumped back. The room was small. It immediately steamed up with the stench of yesterday's Pad Thai.

'Yeah, get the fuck out,' said Bryan, his words muffled by his hand over his mouth. 'Ask Katy to send a cleaner in as you go. Jesus.'

'I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I must have eaten something. Can we reschedule?'

'Out.'

As I went, I looked at Matt, but he avoided my eyes.

*

Digital V-Beeb wipes cost twenty bucks each. In the lobby of the building, I wiped us both down and then I bought a single diaper for forty and as soon as I had the thing wrapped up it started crying in hunger again and I bought another feed of milk and soothed him down. I checked my bank balance. Nothing before the decimal.

It was after two by the time Matt came out of the elevator with his satchel slung over his shoulder. He saw me and then he looked quickly away and tried to sneak out behind a group in business suits. No dice. I cut him off just before the wide spinning doors.

'Oh,' he said. 'What are you still doing here?'

'I need money,' I said. 'From you.'

His eyes darted around.

'Why?'

'Because I'm with child.'

That brought his eyes right the fuck back. He grabbed my arm and pulled me away from the door.

'What the hell? I thought you said you iced it.'

‘Iced it? O.K., Corleone. I did. And then some gentlemen from the Bureau of the Unborn found me and gifted me this government-issued ghost baby.’

He stood back and looked just to the left of where I cradled the thing beneath my hoodie.

‘A V-beeb?’

‘You know of these demons?’

‘I freelance design some shit for them sometimes. I actually came up with this hilarious onesie.’

‘Of course you did.’

‘Sorry, what’s the problem, though? Just dump the thing in the trash and let’s go get a laksa.’

‘I can’t. I leave it alone for a second and it’s like Hiroshima in my skull.’

‘That’s...that’s not how they work.’

‘Well it’s how mine works.’

He looked out the window for a moment. His mouth does this little fish-pucker when he’s thinking. It’s weird. Weirdly cute. He’s cute. His ribs stick out of his skinny frame like excavated fossils. His long, nimble fingers—

This being the line of thinking that got me here in the first place.

‘OK,’ he said, turning back to me. ‘Try pressing on its fontanelle.’

‘It’s fontawhat?’

‘That little soft spot in the middle of its scalp. Press down on it for a few seconds.’

It stirred as I felt along its scalp until I found the soft spot. I had to stop myself from vomiting again as I pressed down. A huge screen popped up. It was entirely filled with that same silhouetted woman and her Saturn baby. I was beginning to both detest and empathize with her.

‘You got it?’

‘Got what? It’s just the Bureau logo. There’s nothing to blink at or anything.’

‘What? No. There should be an off button, or at least some settings. Volume control, skin colour, something.’

My heart sank. I could feel panic scrabbling at my throat. The thing stirred once more against my chest and I shushed it.

‘Why do you keep fucking shushing me?’

‘I’m not. I’m shushing this thing. If it wakes up again, I don’t have money left to feed it with.’

More mouth-puckering. Less cute by the minute.

‘Fine. I’ll loan you some cash. How much?’

‘Well the thing is basically a money funnel with a micro-penis. So, I don’t know. At least a couple of grand to get me through today?’

‘A couple-? Jesus, Tyra. I work in this building. I don’t *own* it. Isn’t there anyone else you can ask?’

The thing let off a cat-like yowl that dragged a fork across my brain.

‘*Please*. You know I don’t have anyone else.’

‘Actually,’ he said, looking around, ‘I didn’t know that. In fact, I don’t really know you at all, do I?’

Mouth puckering.

Mouth gone.

As I crumpled to the floor in pain, I saw his bouncing satchel disappear into the crowd.

I pulled the thing out. Its face was tomato-red. Maybe if I bounced that face hard enough off the marble floor this would stop?

I couldn’t.

I wanted to.

I couldn't.

Those grey-blue eyes.

That little fish-mouth.

Next to the pop-up window of the feeding baby, a new box appeared. A cartoon of a man in a suit. Trilby hat on his head. Briefcase in his hand. I blinked at it and then everything went black.

*

And that's when I woke up here.

That is one nice bed you have. I honestly didn't even know they made beds that big. Comfy, too. Sheets like whipped cream. I thought I was in heaven. At least up until this little guy here started crying and back comes the cattle prod through the eye-socket.

I guess I was in a pain-haze there for a while. I don't even know how I found my way down to the kitchen. And when I found all those bottles lined up in the fridge, I thought it was a mirage.

I mean...did you?

You did.

Well, I appreciate that. A lifesaver, really. Very generous.

Yes, I looked around a little, once he calmed down. I hope you don't mind. This is a beautiful house. The dining room is like a basketball court. I love the exposed floorboards in the parlour. And the fuzzy blue carpet in the nursery. Very cute. The garden looks lovely too. I did try and go out to have a smell of those gorgeous roses, but something happened at the door.

No, no. I wouldn't really call it a headache. More of an excruciating vertigo. The world sort of crashed down on me like a wave when I opened the door. I apologize. I may have made a mess on that Persian in the hallway.

I'm fine now. Thank you. Though I do have a few questions. About the door. And this ring on my finger, which doesn't seem to physically exist but also sort of zaps me when I try to take it off.

Most of all I am concerned that you may have been given the wrong impression. As I've tried to explain, I was under some duress earlier, and may have inadvertently committed to something I didn't quite understand the magnitude of.

The house is beautiful. I said that.

No, there's nothing wrong with you either, sir.

I'd rather not.

No, I'd really prefer not to call you that.

Fine.

Fine.

Can I leave now, honey?

Captain Honor

Brooklyn-based superhero who is capable of flight and superhuman strength. Known as the 'Guardian of the Bridge' due to the high number of suicide attempts he has prevented from the Brooklyn Bridge. Captain Honor is currently under review for acceptance into Manhattan's Hall of Justice supergroup.

*

Brooklyn-based superhero who is capable of flight and superhuman strength. Known as the 'Guardian of the Bridge' due to the high number of suicide attempts he has prevented from the Brooklyn Bridge, although these rescues have become a source of controversy. Captain Honor is currently under review for acceptance into Manhattan's Hall of Justice supergroup, but his nomination is in doubt after an anonymous letter sent to *The New York Times* accused the superhero of sexual assault back in October 2017.

*

Controversial Brooklyn-based superhero who is capable of flight and superhuman strength. Known as the 'Guardian of the Bridge' due to the high number of suicide attempts he has prevented from the Brooklyn Bridge, although recent controversies regarding these rescues have led to a new nickname: 'Groper of the Bridge'. Captain Honor is currently under review for acceptance into the Hall of Justice supergroup, but his nomination has been threatened by accusations of sexual assault made by Patricia Swanswell, a NYU student who says Captain Honor groped her while saving her from a fall in October 2017. Swanswell initially made these allegations in an anonymous letter to *The New York Times* but decided to go public after

Captain Honor described the letter as ‘fictitious’ and suggested it was a desperate attack from one of his ‘many embittered nemeses’.

*

Highly controversial Brooklyn-based superhero who is capable of flight and superhuman strength. Known as the ‘Guardian of the Bridge’ due to the high number of suicide attempts he has prevented from the Brooklyn Bridge, although recent sexual assault allegations have also led to the nicknames ‘Groper of the Bridge’ and ‘Captain Boner’. Captain Honor’s nomination to Manhattan’s Hall of Justice supergroup has been postponed for an internal investigation into the recent accusations made by Patricia Swanswell, a NYU student who says Captain Honor groped her while saving her from a fall in October 2017. After Captain Honor initially dismissed Swanswell’s anonymous letter as ‘fictitious’ and her public statements as ‘confused’, famed superhero photographer Jane Rothschild tweeted a photo of the incident in which the superhero appears to be grabbing Swanswell’s left breast. In response, Hall of Justice review board members Rooster Boy, Mr Hugegantic and Sheriff Sherlock have promised a ‘lengthy and very thorough investigation’.

*

Highly controversial Manhattan-based superhero and Hall of Justice member who is capable of flight and superhuman strength. Known as the ‘Groper of the Bridge’ or ‘Captain Boner’ in reference to the sexual assault allegations that have made him a target of the burgeoning #Hero2Whom movement. Captain Honor’s acceptance into the Hall of Justice supergroup had previously been in doubt, but a three-day internal investigation cleared him of the accusations

made by Patricia Swanswell, a NYU student who says Captain Honor groped her while saving her from a fall in October 2017. Despite public criticism over the all-male makeup of the Manhattan supergroup's review board, and rumours that the investigation had declined to hear from a number of anonymous accusers, the Hall of Justice decided to accept Captain Honor's testimony that the inappropriate contact with Swanswell, shown in a photo tweeted by famed superhero photographer Jane Rothschild, had been 'accidental and unpreventable during an attempt to save a deeply troubled life'.

*

Divisive Manhattan-based superhero and Hall of Justice member who is capable of flight and superhuman strength. Nicknamed 'Groper of the Bridge' and 'Captain Boner' in reference to the multiple sexual assault allegations that have made him one of the targets of the growing #Hero2Whom movement, alongside other recently accused superheroes such as Hall of Justice member Rooster Boy. After a controversial Hall of Justice internal investigation initially cleared Captain Honor of the accusations made by NYU student Patricia Swanswell, five other women, including famed superhero photographer Jane Rothschild, publicly stated that they had also been groped by the superhero during falls from the Brooklyn Bridge, and that the all-male Hall of Justice had refused to hear their testimonies. In response to the latest wave of allegations, Captain Honor promised to 'listen and learn' from his accusers, but also questioned the memories of 'women so troubled as to have decided to try and end their lives'.

*

Divisive Manhattan-based superhero and Hall of Justice member who is capable of flight, superhuman strength, and possibly mind-control. Known as the ‘Groper of the Bridge’, ‘Captain Boner’ and ‘Creepin On Her’ in reference to the high number of sexual assault allegations that have made him one of the targets of the powerful #Hero2Whom movement, alongside other recently accused superheroes such as Hall of Justice members Rooster Boy and Mr. Hugegantic. After a controversial Hall of Justice internal investigation initially cleared Captain Honor of the accusations made by NYU student Patricia Swanswell, more than a dozen other women have publicly stated that they had also been groped by the superhero during falls from the Brooklyn Bridge, and have also begun questioning whether the superhero had mentally coerced them into jumping. One of these women, famed superhero photographer Jane Rothschild, wrote a *New York Times* op-ed in which she revealed that her mood on the day of her apparent suicide attempt had been ‘upbeat and positive’, and that she has been trailing Captain Honor for years due to her scepticism over the ‘sudden mysterious impulse’ that had caused her to climb the bridge stanchion and jump that day. These new claims have led to fresh pressure on the embattled all-male Hall of Justice supergroup, whose members are facing their own allegations, to expel or even convict their newest member.

*

Supervillain and current Hall of Justice nemesis who is capable of flight, superhuman strength, and mind-control. Formerly known as Captain Honor, before his superhero status was destroyed by allegations of sexual assault that made him a target of the worldwide #Hero2Whom movement alongside other recently accused superheroes such as Rooster Boy, Mr Hugegantic, and Sheriff Sherlock. After a controversial Hall of Justice internal investigation cleared Captain Dishonor of the accusations of NYU student Patricia Swanswell,

more than twenty women, including famed superhero photographer Jane Rothschild, signed a petition stating that they believed the former superhero had infiltrated their minds, forced them to jump from the Brooklyn Bridge, and then groped them in mid-air. In response to the petition, the all-male Hall of Justice supergroup labelled Captain Dishonor a ‘villain in disguise’ and declared their intention to ‘convict him of his heinous and upsetting crimes’. Captain Dishonor is currently at a large after escaping the supergroup’s Manhattan headquarters.

*

Deceased supervillain and former Hall of Justice member/nemesis who was capable of flight, superhuman strength, and powerful mind-control. Formerly known as Captain Honor, before his superhero status was destroyed by allegations of sexual assault and mind-control that made him a target of the worldwide #Hero2Whom movement, which had also previously accused superheroes such as Rooster Boy, Mr Hugegantic and Sheriff Sherlock. In response to more than twenty women signing a petition stating that they believed Captain Dishonor had infiltrated their minds, forced them to jump from the Brooklyn Bridge, and then groped them in mid-air, the Hall of Justice supergroup declared their intention to convict their former member of his ‘heinous and upsetting crimes’, and tracked him down to his Dumbo lair in Brooklyn, New York. After Captain Honor was accidentally killed in the ensuing battle, Hall of Justice members Rooster Boy, Mr Hugegantic and Sheriff Sherlock revealed how the supervillain had long been using his ‘impressively wide-ranging’ mind-control powers to force ‘a number of otherwise good heroes to commit reprehensible and uncharacteristic acts’. The supergroup has since declared the ‘unfortunate’ Captain Dishonor affair to be closed and have stated that the city is ‘once again safe for man and woman alike’.

Georgia O'Keeffe

'Go on,' Darrell says, 'think about her', and I do, but when she arrives, she looks nothing like I imagined.

Her flawless skin has the glow of youth. Her hair is thick and brown and curves about her neck like a bell. Both breasts push against the thin material of her sleeveless summer dress, a dress the baby blue of birthday cake icing, a colour so vividly bright it's hard to believe it wasn't here three seconds ago.

'I bought her that dress our last Christmas,' says Darrell, dreamy-eyed. 'Didn't I?'

She blinks twice and walks out the room. From the kitchen comes the sound of running water.

'What is she doing?'

Darrell cranes his neck to spy into the kitchen.

'Well, shit. Wouldn't it be just like our old Mama to make the dishes her first port of call?'

'She can do the dishes?'

Darrell snorts.

'Good lord, Carol-Lee.'

*

I don't think I understood how completely alone I was to be until I picked up and held her wrist those final moments. It felt as light and inconsequential as a used toilet paper roll. I couldn't feel a pulse, and I was too scared to press deeper in search of one. I kept imaging her bone snapping like honeycomb in my hands.

She had slept well that morning, and I had used the time to empty the hospital gift shop of flowers and arrange them all about her little curtained-off quarter. The second she opened her eyes, I knew this to be a mistake. The space was too small, the flowers pressed in too close. I had to watch regret play out upon her face as she died.

*

What I see in the kitchen is the dishes being washed, but also the dishes staying dirty in the sink. *Witchy Woman* by the Eagles is playing from an old iPod dock I swore gave out my freshman year of high school. Mama hums along to the tune, high and chipper.

I decide that I have seen enough, but when I turn to go, Darrell wraps his arms around me and starts walking us back towards her.

‘Hey Mama,’ he says. ‘You think you could put them plates down long enough to give your ol Crispy a hug?’

I don’t even bother struggling. Darrell is like a Chinese finger trap when he has you.

‘Well heck, Crispy,’ Mama says, turning towards us, a quizzical look on her face as she pats her hands all over the front of that *Pink Panther* apron I threw out after she died. ‘Now I could have sworn I had a spare hug lying around here somewhere.’

Which is when it really hits home for me, because isn’t that exactly what Mama would say, forcing her tired self to smile in the hope that I might follow suit, and no quicker do I think this than her skin begins to pucker and crease, and her chest deflates, and her apron is now an old woollen sweater splattered with paint.

‘What in the hell?’ says Darrell, and his grip weakens just enough for me to break free. I run through the house and lug upstairs this strange body that got old and jiggly on me when

I wasn't looking, and I get into my room and dive under the quilt cover of my bed like I am a little girl in a thunderstorm again.

Eventually, I hear Darrell come up the stairs and stand outside my door.

'Well, Carol-Lee.'

'I think I'll just nap a spell if that's all right.'

'Shit. Your Mama waits near on twenty years for a hug and then you go ahead and nap on her.'

'I'm feeling poorly, if I'm honest.'

'Well. All right.'

'Darrell?'

'Yeah.'

'Did she hug you?'

There is a long silence, during which I can hear only the familiar screeching of air through Darrell's once-broken nose.

'Carol-Lee,' he says, finally, 'I do not appreciate you remembering her like that.'

*

When Darrell first began going on his rounds, he would bring back only the essentials. He'd commandeered a Toyota pickup from somewhere, and he'd fill it up with canned goods and bottled water and jerry cans of gasoline scattered about the abandoned houses of our region. As the years wore on, however, his disappearance would last for longer, and his clothes upon return would often be stained with blood. From these later trips he would bring back items of increasing strangeness. A television whose characters would step out of the screen and confide in you; pyjamas that replayed your dreams in the morning; an amorphous blob that would

cohere into a dog, or a lion, or eagle, and which ran about our house for weeks until Darrell tired of it and turned it off.

And then he came home this last time with a small, pulsing orb, and, pressing it to my forehead, he told me to think about our Mama.

*

At some point in my cowering, I drift asleep. When I wake, the light has been quietly leeched from the day, and Mama is in my room. I pull the quilt up to my nose and watch her. She sings softly to herself as she puts folded laundry into the wooden chest of drawers I have had since I was a child. The clothes are little girl's clothes—frilly white dresses, lacy socks, Wonder Woman underpants—and the drawers both open and do not open as she works.

*

I was sixteen, Taylor Swift on my headphones as I tried not to listen to Daddy getting at Mama in the living room downstairs. Darrell came in with his football bag on his shoulder, and he walked over to the bed where I sat and kissed me on the forehead. This was not normal.

'You be good, Carol-Lee,' he said, and then he turned and left, a Swiss Army knife open in his hand. Years later, Mama had to give a buyer ten dollars off our old leather three-cushion because he found blood in the zippers.

*

We are having grilled cheese sandwiches for supper, grilled cheese sandwiches being the only dish Darrell can prepare. I once joked, in our early days back together, before I'd relearned how he was, that he would be capable of surviving years out in the wilderness, provided he had a skillet and steady supply of Wonder Bread and Kraft singles. Darrell had lurched out of his seat and slapped me right there and then at the table, easy as swatting a fly.

'Thank you for the supper,' I say.

'Well you said you were feeling poorly, and I thought I would treat you.'

'I appreciate it.'

'Well just don't get used to this living like a queen.'

At the end of the dining room table, Mama is eating her sandwich. Her chewing is barely a sound, like termites in wood.

'You make her one?'

Darrell laughs. He does not have a handsome laugh, Darrell. It is always pointed at someone.

'No, I did not make her one, Carol-Lee. She don't eat. Not really.'

'Oh.'

As I watch Mama chew, I recall that Darrell had planned on going hunting tomorrow, and that I will be alone all day.

'Can she be turned off?'

Darrell drops his sandwich onto his plate and gives me the look.

'Now why in the hell would you want to do such a thing to your very own mother?'

'I was just asking.'

*

He could be kind, Daddy. That was what made it all so hard. After a blow-up, there would be a calm spell during which he would try and regain our love with small favours: ice cream after school, an extra hour of television, trips to the minigolf, that sort of thing. He would stop brooding in his armchair after work and take Darrell out to play catch instead, or he would set up the tent in the backyard and we'd cookout marshmallows. I was still plenty young when I figured out this cycle for what it was, but Darrell never seemed to understand. Each time Daddy showed him the littlest bit of affection, Darrell opened up like a flower to the sun.

*

We sit in the living room after dinner, the three of us. Darrell pours himself long glasses from a bottle of Jack Daniels he brought back on this latest round.

'You remember that time Carol-Lee ate a slug, Mama?'

He and Mama both laugh.

'Unfortunately, I do,' she says. 'Damn me if it wasn't still squirming when she brought it back up.'

It is her voice, and her words, exactly.

'How can she remember that, Darrell?'

Darrell gives me the look.

'Don't talk about your Mama like she ain't here, Carol-Lee.'

'You two quit kissing and move along,' says Mama. She's looking right at me, hot white light shining from her eyes.

*

We would go driving on the weekend. Nowhere in particular, just looking for little places to get a coffee and pleasurably spend what few dollars we had. Once, we stopped in a café and bookshop out on a little coastal town, the type of place where the best houses sit idle all winter. We were browsing the shelves, waiting for our milkshakes, when Mama gave a little yelp of glee. She had a large coffee table book open in her arms, shaking her head in a sort of disbelief. I looked over her shoulder at the glossy photos of paintings which at first looked like abstract grooves of color, until they revealed themselves to be flowers, except zoomed right in, like you were a child with your face up against them.

‘Georgia O’Keeffe,’ said Mama, still shaking her head. ‘There was a time in my life when all I wanted to do was to paint like this woman’.

‘You painted?’

‘Sub-majored in art at college. Even won a prize or two in my day.’

The deeper I dug down into the strata of Mama’s previous life, the more I was amazed by the artifacts I found there.

‘Why’d you stop?’

She looked up from the book, sudden venom in her eyes.

‘You know why, Carol-Lee.’

*

That night I dream that I am walking the streets of a city undergoing some unnamed catastrophe. There is smoke in the air and bodies on the ground. Everywhere I look people are holding one another and crying. It is a very alive feeling.

After walking for an indiscernible period of time, I stop outside a florist, and peer through its shopfront window, which has been shattered. Amongst the gloom there is a woman

with grey hair pinned up beautifully in a tortoiseshell clip. She is sweeping up the broken glass with an old-fashioned straw broom, humming something mournful to herself as she works. I go in. There are scattered petals all over the red and cream linoleum floor, but otherwise not a flower to be found. The vases that remain unbroken show dark mouths.

‘I don’t understand,’ I say. ‘Why would anybody loot flowers?’

The woman stops sweeping, and, leaning on her broom, stares out the ruined window into the distance, as if the question had not until then come to her mind. Finally, she looks at me with very kind, very blue eyes, and out of her open mouth comes not words but reams and reams of ribbon.

I wake to a deep darkness in which my breathing is like the clawing of a caged and desperate animal. My thoughts go immediately to Mama, and to how Darrell’s childhood room is now full of canned goods and old magazines and ammo, which necessitates Darrell sleeping in what used to be Mama and Daddy’s room.

I get up and creep along the hallway. For forever, the moonlight has shone through the transom window of the front door and used the balustrade of the landing to paint prison bars on the white door of Mama and Daddy’s room. I knock. I can hear Darrell’s snoring cut off like a car engine.

‘Darrell?’

‘Shit.’

‘Darrell, Mama in there with you?’

There is a long pause, during which time I figure Darrell to have fallen back asleep. I knock again.

‘Yes, God damn it,’ he says. ‘She’s in here.’

‘Well.’

‘That satisfy you?’

‘I suppose so. As long as she’s comfortable.’

I hear him snort, and I know he is giving me the look amongst the darkness.

‘Why the hell wouldn’t she be? It’s her bed ain’t it?’

‘Well. All right’.

‘Ain’t it?’

‘All right. I might have a glass of milk while I’m up. Can I get you anything?’

‘Some uninterrupted sleep might be nice.’

I creep downstairs and open the fridge, but decide that milk, or anything else for that matter, is impossible. Instead, I lean on the counter and look out the dark window over the sink for a while, until I see her standing behind me.

*

Truth be told, Mama did not have all that much of a capacity for it. Her paintings looked like simplified pastiches of those in the book. I on the other hand, to both our surprise, did have something of a knack. I took the general concept of this O’Keeffe woman’s—that anything viewed particularly up close can yield a new mysterious beauty—but I ditched the flowers. I’d spent a childhood focusing on things—the curvature of curtains, the number of grills on a heating vent—with such ferocity that their patterns detached from the things themselves, went floating untethered through my mind. It is a technique I perfected during the long hours in which I did not want to understand the muffled going-ons occurring in other rooms of the house, and I found that I had that ability still, and could paint for hours, applying and reapplying this or that touch of colour to better capture the edge of a screw or an unruly tuft of carpet. To others, the paintings could never be traced back to their source, which remained my secret

alone. Only the colours and patterns remained, and these were often pleasing in a strange way, or so said my mother. On her recommendation, I sold a few around the town, including some in the old-folks home we both worked at. Encouraged by my success, Mama tried to do the same, but did not manage it. After a while she lost interest in painting, and I would have to travel myself to the only arts supply store around, a good hour away.

*

I don't dare go back to sleep. The rest of the night I spend in bed trying to weave together the still frames of my life into some comprehensible narrative, but by the time the sun arrives and butters the white walls I am still as bemused as ever.

I hear Darrell get up and boil water for his coffee downstairs. After some time, he comes lunking back up and opens the door to Mama's room.

'Well I'm off then, Mama,' he says.

'Well. All right then.'

'You have a good day, Mama. I love you.'

'You go on and get you a buck, Darrell.'

'I love you Mama.'

'Well. All right then.'

I don't even realize I am holding my breath until the front door shuts and it all comes out in a whoosh. I lie there dizzy as Mama pads quietly past my door and the kettle again begins to whistle in the kitchen. There comes the sizzle of bacon frying. Mama is singing along to Patti Smith's *Because the Night* in her good, deep voice that was always richer and sadder when she thought no one else was listening. After a while, I hear her come up the stairs, still singing softly to herself, and she knocks on my door.

‘Were you planning on sleeping all day, Carol-Lee,’ she calls, ‘or just the sun-shiny part of it?’

‘That’s alright,’ I say. ‘You go on and breakfast without me.’

‘Now you know I burnt your bacon how you like it.’

‘I’m feeling poorly, if I’m honest. You go on.’

To my horror, the door both opens and stays shut. Mama comes in wearing the loose, blue-jean button up shirt she liked to wear around the house those last precious years. She has her hair tied up in a red bandana, making her look like one of those ‘can do’ women in the old World War Two propaganda posters. She looks like the Mama I want, is what she looks like.

‘Let’s see what the Mama thermometer thinks about your condition,’ she says, raising her left hand.

She comes over and sits beside me. The bed dips a little beneath her weight, but also doesn’t. I feel seasick. Mama puts her hand on my forehead, and I almost pass out with the shock, because I can actually feel the heat of her palm, and within it the little cool oasis of her wedding band.

*

I had planned on escaping the day I finished high school, but two weeks before school finished, the phone rang. Mama was in bed with a headache, one I’d plainly heard Daddy putting the ache into the night before. I answered.

‘Hello?’

‘Janine?’ said a man’s voice. ‘It’s Carl from the rig. I’m afraid I have something very hard to tell you’.

‘This is Carol-Lee,’ I said.

‘Oh. Hi, there Carol-Lee. Um. Would you be a good girl and grab your Mama for me?’

She sobbed hard on the phone and then stopped the second she hung up.

*

The bacon tastes exactly how I remember it, but all it does is leave me ferociously hungry. I get up quietly so as to not disturb Mama at her coffee and crossword, and I go get some baked beans from the kitchen pantry that it is stacked floor to ceiling with them. Our old oven ran on gas, and that turned off long ago, so I open the can of beans and pour them into an electric skillet set up on the counter. One of the first things Darrell did after he returned was to hook up a generator in the basement. It keeps us with power when we need it, although we have to take care, as Darrell’s rounds turn up less and less gasoline.

Mama comes into the kitchen and starts filling up a sink suddenly full of dishes. I watch her a while. The sight of that tall figure at the sink, her back hunching down towards the lathered water, was so common in my childhood that it might as well have been burnt onto my retinas. I decide that I cannot and will not watch it anymore.

*

We buried Daddy in ground made appropriately cold and hard by winter, and then we went home and got drunk on his whiskey. Mama added orange juice to mine to make it palatable. It

still made me gag, but I liked the warm feeling in my stomach, like swallowing doused embers.

We sat at the dining room table and watched each other a while as we drank.

‘He was a complicated man,’ said Mama.

‘He was a son of a bitch is what he was.’

She laughed, a sound that actually startled me, so uncommon was it.

‘Well.’

I rubbed at a blunt dent in the edge of table, where Daddy once brought down a chair while enraged at something or other.

‘Are we going to let Darrell know?’

Mama stopped mid-pour.

‘And how would we do that?’

‘The rumor is he joined the army.’

Mama looked at her half empty glass a long time, before finishing the pour and tipping the whole lot into her mouth.

‘I’ll look into it,’ she said.

*

When Darrell comes home from his hunt, Mama and I are cuddled up on the couch, watching Matlock on the television Daddy put his foot through thirty years ago.

‘Well ain’t this sweet,’ he said, leaning his rifle up against the wall and studying the easel Mama had set up against the window.

‘You catch anything?’ I ask, in my brightest voice.

Darrell snorts. I get a whiff of whiskey fumes.

‘I ain’t convinced there’s anything alive out there to catch. You all been doing anything constructive or just vegging?’

Mama jumps up and walks into the kitchen. The easel disappears along with the tubes of paint and the vase of flowers.

‘Darrell,’ I say. ‘You can really feel her. We’ve been cuddling all day.’

Mama comes back in with a plate of cookies in her hand. She’s back in the blue dress again. Darrell takes one from the plate and bites into it, and as he chews, Mama turns and gives me the look.

‘So how come Mama will cuddle this bitch and not me,’ she says.

*

Daddy never gave out to me what he did the other two. I might get my arm pinched, or my ear pulled hard, but that was it. Nonetheless, his attentions filtered down to me through Darrell. After dark, my door would creep slowly open, and then he would be at the side of my bed, his little sweaty hands pulling my hair until clumps of it came away and I was in tears. Once, I felt a sharp pain in my leg, and then wet heat. ‘You think you’re such a perfect bitch,’ he said, so close to my face I could smell our meatloaf dinner under a mask of toothpaste. When he was gone, I lay awake for hours before finally rising and turning on the light. There was a three-inch incision on my right thigh, his Swiss knife. The blood looked like cooling lava, black and sticky. I knew, and he knew, I wouldn’t say a word. If I told Daddy, he’d kill him.

*

I am sitting on the edge of my bed, doing nothing at all, just watching the striped shadows of the blinds lean into night, when Darrell knocks at the door.

‘Am I to be expecting supper,’ he says, ‘or should I just go ahead and start squirting ketchup on my forearm?’

‘There’s beans in the pantry if I’m not mistaken.’

Darrell swings the door open so hard it bounces back off the wall and nearly hits him in the face.

‘Does somebody need quizzing again, Carol-Lee?’

‘God damn it, Darrell. Why can’t you just ever let me be?’

He pounds across the room and grabs my arm, starts twisting.

‘Question one: which one of us was nearly starved down to their ribcage upon the other’s return from service?’

‘God damn it, Darrell.’

He twists harder.

‘Say it.’

‘Me.’

‘Question two: which one of us most likely would have died, or else have been taken by some roaming gang for much worse, if the other had not fortunately intervened?’

‘Me.’

‘Good. Question three, and this is a crucial one: which one of us is so thankful for all of the above that they are going to march their fat ass downstairs sans backtalk and start getting at some dinner?’

‘Me.’

He lets go. Finger marks like cherry tomatoes on the thick cheese of my arm.

‘Heed my words,’ Daddy used to say, ‘because they’re a hell of a lot softer than what comes next’.

*

About two years after Mama died, I lost my job at the old-folks home. I was not the only one. In fact, even the folks living there were kicked out on the street. Something was going wrong in the country; I tried to watch the news about it, but it never gelled in my mind. Something about long-standing debts being called in by our debtors. The result on the street was plywood boards tacked across shopfronts, people living in the streets, their nice clothes growing mould. I was lucky in that Daddy had paid off the house, so no one came knocking to evict like they did so many others. Still, I had no income, and the small savings I had became worthless when the bank went under. The electricity shut off, followed by the water. I ate cold what was left in the pantry, and then I simply began to go hungry. By the time Darrell showed up, I had taken to licking the morning dew off the lawn.

*

In the kitchen, Mama is making meatloaf. It smells so good. Mama used to put basil and mint in her meat mixture, herbs of which I thought I had forgotten the smell of. I get a can of beans out of the pantry, and I go over to the cooker, but the dial is still switched to ‘On’ from breakfast. My heart drops down into what must be the pointy end of my intestines. I turn the dial back and forth, feeling for any sign of heat on the range, but no. We are out of gas, the gas which Darrell only brought home yesterday, talking of its increasingly scarcity. Mama silently watches me, and I can smell her meatloaf start to burn.

‘It’s alright, Mama,’ I say.

‘What’s alright,’ asks Darrell, standing behind me.

*

He didn’t die that day, though I don’t know how. By the time I got downstairs, Darrell was already gone, and the blood coming out of Daddy’s neck spurting between his fingers like fine ribbons. Mama wrapped a towel around him, and they drove off to the hospital. A few hours later, she called.

‘He’ll be alright,’ she sighed.

*

Supper is a strange combination of Mama’s steaming meatloaf and beans as cold as a corpse, the two laid over one another on the same plate.

‘I am awfully sorry again,’ I say.

Darrell just grunts and spoons another mouthful.

‘Well. I sure wish I could cook you real meatloaf as an apology,’ I try.

‘Carol-Lee your meatloaf wouldn’t ever be shit next to hers.’

‘Well.’

All three of us chew for a while to the whine of Darrell’s nose. When he’s finished, he leans back in his chair and watches us.

‘What’s with the painting?’

I look to Mama, as if for reinforcement, but she is staring straight ahead into nothing, a wide smile fixed on her face.

‘Just something we used to do.’

‘Something to fill the days, I suppose.’

‘I suppose so.’

‘I guess tracking down your brother didn’t sufficiently fill up your spare time.’

Just then Mama raps her knuckles down hard on the table, one, two, three, so hard that the plates both rattle and do not.

‘You two quit kissin’ and move on,’ she says. ‘You can’t park here.’

Darrell stares at her, wide-mouthed, as her eyes light up.

*

I started messing around with boys, something I would never have contemplated when Daddy was alive out of fondness for the boys’ lives. I’d tell Mama I was going to the movies with a friend, but she knew. We would at least keep the pretence alive: I would walk two blocks to the main road before the boys would pick me up in their battered second-hand cars and take me somewhere to make-out. Once, in the parking lot of an abandoned gas station, three loud raps on the window startled us. We wound it down to find a police officer with a sheepish grin on his face.

‘You two quit kissin’ and move on,’ he said, with a wink. ‘You can’t park here.’

He turned to go, but then he stopped, and shined a flashlight in my face.

‘Well if it isn’t Carol-Lee Sanders. You got in touch with that crazy brother of yours yet?’

I slipped my bra up over my shoulder, my face burning against the cold wind that came hushing in through the window.

‘Um. We ain’t heard anything on his whereabouts yet.’

The police officer made a face.

‘That’s strange. I could have sworn we passed on to your Mama that he’d joined the army out of Nashville.’

*

I don’t know if my jaw is broken, but it feels sore enough to be, like someone replaced it with a ball-end of a Knight’s mace. I lay on my side in bed, letting blood and drool drip from it onto the sheets. Out of the corner of my eye, I see the door open and stay shut. Mama comes in wearing her bright blue dress. She kneels by my bed and puts her warm hand on my forehead.

‘I am sorry,’ she says, her voice like fingers through gravel.

‘I know.’

‘It’s who I am, Carol-Lee. I wish I could stop being him, but I can’t.’

‘I know.’

‘I love you, Sis. I do.’

‘I know, Darrell. I know.’

*

Two years of quiet joy, and then one day Mama asked me to come into her room. I could hear fear in her voice, and worse, an attempt to hide that fear. She was standing naked in front of her vanity mirror, one fat breast full in her hand.

‘Honey,’ she said, ‘I’m being silly, but could you feel something for me?’

*

The same dream again, the ruined city, the beautiful florist, her eyes gazing out the window, and when I wake up, there is something huge growling in the inky dark. I sit up in bed. It's Darrell's truck, warming up for another trip. Just then, he knocks at my door.

'Carol-Lee?'

'Yes?'

'I'm heading out. See if I can't find us some gas somewhere.'

'O.K. I'm sorry about all that again.'

'It's alright. And I'm gonna take that Mama device with me and throw it away somewhere. I know it was bothering you some.'

'What?'

'Bye, now Carol-Lee. Don't open the door for anyone.'

I stand up too quick and the pain in my head arrives like a comet. I have to close my eyes and grit my teeth. By the time I get back to thinking clearly, I can hear the truck disappearing down the road. I open my eyes. Mama is sitting on the edge of the bed in her blue dress. She's transparent and, when I reach for her, as substantial as smoke.

'Goodbye, Mama,' I say. 'I'm sorry about the flowers.'

Her skin sags and her chest collapses and her cheekbones emerge like rocks at low tide. That blue dress is once again my favourite grey-wool sweater flecked with paint. She smiles at me. Her real smile.

'I believe they mean to eat them,' she says, and then she disappears.

The Juansons

I

The early bus is packed full of factory workers dozing where they stand. Paula thinks she'll be too nervous to sleep, but she begins to droop as they rattle out of town, each pothole rumble dredging up more exhaustion and depositing it like silt behind her eyes. When the bus's slowing awakes her, the light outside is bright as milk.

*

At the bus station, she goes, as instructed, to the Star Rapido Taquilla. The ticket woman has her hair tied up in a blood-red bandana, and she smacks gum as she asks Paula where she is heading.

—*Muy lejos*, says Paula. She looks around quickly, and then takes a roll of tightly wound pesos from her right bra cup. It is more money than she has ever seen in one place.

The ticket woman counts the money and nods.

—*Ya*. Terminal eighty. At ten.

Paula turns to go, but the ticket woman grabs her arm.

—Wait. You don't have luggage?

—No, says Paula, confused. *¿Por que?*

The ticket woman sighs dramatically. She bends down beneath the counter and comes up with a pink Nike backpack.

—Take this, she says, handing it to Paula. It would be weird to travel so far without luggage, right?

When Paula just stares at the bag, the ticket woman mutters *dios mio* under her breath, and then leans out the window to whisper in Paula's ear.

—*la migra*.

*

She sits on the bus station's sticky plastic seats and waits. Her stomach churns nervously, but she cannot go to the toilet to relieve herself. They charge 10 cents entry and she is flat broke. Eventually, a bus decorated in white stars and red stripes pulls into the parking bay outside. Paula gets up and joins a line that starts at the bus's door and curves back onto the sidewalk like a scythe. Behind her, two young men push and jostle each other.

—You ain't gonna beat me at basketball anymore, laughs the shorter one.

—*Mierda*, I don't need to be taller than you to kick your ass, says the other.

The bus driver, a heavyset man with sweat patches in his lime-green polo shirt, takes their tickets as they board. Paula gets a seat near the front, next to a tired looking woman in a flannel shirt and jeans.

Once everyone is onboard, a young man in a black Adidas sports shirt enters. The tips of his dark hair are bleached ice blue, and he has a thin gold chain around his neck. He does a quick head count under his breath, and then slaps the driver on his shoulder.

—*Ya vamos*.

They pull out of the station, threading through an industrial area before the road opens up onto a highway heading south, back towards the town Paula had left that morning.

After a while, the young man in the chain stands up from his seat beside the driver and turns. He puts two fingers to his mouth and whistles sharply.

—*Ya. Senores y senoras.* This bus is going to Potosi, ¿*de acuerdo?* Please, repeat after me: this bus is going to...

The whole bus mumbles the words back. The young man points directly at Paula.

—*Chica.* Where's this bus going to?

Paula's stomach drops. The man's eyes are red-rimmed and raw looking.

—To Potosi, she says, softly.

—And why are you going to Potosi, *hermosa?*

—¿*Cómo?*

The young man walks over to Paula and lays his arm on her headrest.

—I asked why you were going to Potosi. You must have a reason, yeah? People don't just get on a bus and go somewhere without some fucking purpose.

It feels like the stench of his armpit is pushing its tentacles up Paula's nostrils. She tries to speak, but her throat locks up.

The young man turns and shouts at the driver.

—*Parra!* Stop the bus. This *puta* is getting off.

The bus driver turns and looks back at Paula uncertainly.

—I can't just leave her on a highway.

At this, the young man stomps back up the bus, and slaps the driver hard on the back of this rumpled neck.

—I said stop the fucking bus, *choncho.* If *la migra* stop us, she'll fuck the whole load.

—Cancer, says Paula.

The young man turns and walks back to Paula, his hand to his ear cartoonishly.

—Speak up, *hermosa,* he says. I didn't hear you.

—My aunt has pancreatic cancer, says Paula. That's why I'm going to Potosi. To say goodbye.

The young man leans down close and tucks a loose strand of Paula's hair behind her ear, then pats her gently on the head. His fingers smell of cigarettes.

—*Bueno, hermosa*, he says. Let me know if there is anything I can do for you in this sad time.

*

They drive for hours through brown scrubland that looks like it wouldn't even understand the concept of rain. Blue mesas in the distance. Paula watches a single eagle circle the sky's drain, and when it disappears from view, she closes her eyes. The bus radio is playing salsa so softly it comes to her like music from a valley far below. Paula strains her ear and thinks she hears a familiar melody, a song her mother would play as she swept out the house on Sundays. In her own dark auditorium, Paula begins to fill out the ghostly sound of the radio, adding trumpets, bass, tingly piano, the scritch-scratch of guiro, drums that kick like a wild horse, and then there is a band on stage in a small club she used to frequent with girlfriends, a place where the music was so loud that the framed portraits of dead greats shimmied on the walls, and the red and purple lights painted the slick of sweat, and now all her family are there dancing happily, and she is too, until the hot lights begin to burn her skin, and the sound of the music is overpowered by that of screams, and she finds herself surrounded by yellowed-bone skeletons whose melted faces drip through their fingers, and who converge on her to shake and shake and shake, and then she gasps awake, and the tired woman beside her says, very softly, we're here.

*

The bus is parked at the base of a small hill in the middle of nowhere. After they all exit, it drives off, leaving behind a thick finger of dust that lingers long after the highway has emptied.

—*Vamos*, say the young man.

They walk for fifteen minutes or so in the fierce late afternoon heat, following a thin trail up and over the hill. The dry earth is loose and slippery. The woman from the bus slips and falls, cutting her knee on a rock. After Paula helps her back up to her feet, they both look at the blood beginning to trickle out of the small wound.

—Oh well, says the woman, laughing. I guess I'll have to get a new one.

*

On the other side of the hill, protected from the view of the highway, is a small prefab construction trailer hooked up to a black four-wheel drive. A small generator whirrs steadily by its the side.

—Line up, says the young man. He knocks a complex rhythm on the door, and enters when the door opens, before reappearing after a minute or so and motioning for the first person to come inside. This goes on for the next half-hour, the passengers entering the small building one by one. None come out.

Paula is near the end of the line, a few people behind the two young boys who had jostled each other that morning at the bus station. They are jostling each other again now, giggling and looking back at Paula, and as their turn to enter the building nears, these looks became more and more brazen. Eventually, the shorter of the two breaks from his place in line and walks over to Paula.

—*Hermosa*, he says. How about those beautiful lips get kissed one last time?

The boy couldn't be more than sixteen. A strap of raw-looking acne crosses the bridge of his nose and flames out on either cheek.

—Go away, says Paula, looking at the ground.

The boy reaches out and touches her cheek lightly.

—*Hermosa*. Don't you want something to remember this beauty with?

This time, Paula looks him directly in the eye.

—I said get the fuck away from me, *feo*.

The boy's face twists. He hawks deeply and spits a fat wad of phlegm into the dirt at Paula's feet.

—*Put*a, he says. I hope you get fucking glitched.

*

The air inside the building is cooled by two large fans. A man in a blue singlet sits within the vector of the fans behind a desk, a large computer screen in front of him. A thick black cable snakes from the computer console across to the other side of the room, where it lifts off the ground and connects into the back of what looks like a large black shower head mounted to the ceiling. On the ground beneath, a large, slightly wobbly circle has been drawn in red marker.

—Hurry up, says the man behind the computer, when Paula stops in the doorway. The young man from the bus leans against the far wall, eyeing Paula greedily. She undresses quickly, slipping free of her dress and undergarments, and dropping both on the accumulating pile to the left of the door.

The man behind the computer whistles slowly. Paula moves into the circle, covering herself as best she can, the two men leering at her, and then these two men change, quick as a blink. The one behind the computer now wears a grey puffer jacket and blue LA baseball cap,

and the second wears a Chicago Bulls varsity jacket and dark green fisherman's beanie, wild tattoos climbing his neck and into the dark hollows beneath his eyes. This second man grabs Paula's arm, and pulls her out of the circle, this time drawn in blue.

—*Vamos, vamos, vamos.*

This interior of this construction trailer is nearly identical to the other, although the florescent lights are brighter, harsher, and they expose a number of large reddish-brown stains on the peeling linoleum floor. In the corner near the door is a pile of clothes. Paula selects a pair of Adidas track pants and a blue V-neck sweater, but she struggles to put them on. Her body feels foreign: her arms and legs longer, her hips thinner, her breasts smaller. She almost trips on her backside trying to pull on the track pants, and she giggles despite herself, feeling drunk. Then a horrible, wet scream fills the trailer. It takes Paula a moment to recognize the strange mash of flesh writhing beneath the dark shower head as the woman who had cut her knee on the hill. Or at least half of her. The woman's body terminates suddenly at her upper stomach, leaving a large gaping hole from which two malformed spindly legs, just skin and bone, emerge amongst the viscera to clatter on the floor as she spasms. Paula turns away to the wall and violently vomits up a thin gruel of bile.

—Fuck me, says the man behind the computer. I ain't cleaning that up.

*

In shock, Paula is barely aware of being pulled out of the trailer, into what looks like a scrap yard, rusted shells of cars lying about in various states of dismemberment. She climbs into the back of one of five white, windowless vans with the words 'O'Connell's Plumbing' painted on the sides. There are at least a dozen other passengers inside, and no place to sit save the metal

floor. They start to move, the van's tyres growling across the rocky ground, and the passengers all tumble into each other before finding their balance.

After they turn onto the relative smoothness of the highway, a swirl of shy voices begins to rise out of the dark.

—Hello. How are you. Thank you. Nice to me you. My name is Brittney. My name is Roger. I am an American.

*

After a while, they begin to hear the sounds of traffic, and the van starts to stop intermittently. When the doors open again, it is night outside, and Paula catches a glimpse of an urban area, sidewalks lit up by cones of amber light. A man in a hoodie stands at the open door with a clipboard.

—Monica, he says.

A tall, thin woman with short-cropped brown hair raises herself up and makes her way to door.

—Good luck, she says, and then giggles at the sound of her own voice.

This process happens four more times before Paula's name is called. She stands up, whacking her head on the ceiling, before nearly slipping over as she climbs out.

—You look like a fucking drunk giraffe, laughs the man with the clipboard, before slamming the door and climbing back into the van's passenger side.

—Wait a minute, says Paula. It is the first time she has spoken since crossing, and she is shocked to by how easily these foreign words glide from her mouth. Wait, where am I?

But the van's loud engine drowns this question out, and it quickly drives off, its exhaust fumes thick as dough in the cold air. Paula looks around. High red-bricked apartment buildings

loom over her, each looking exactly like the rest. People are out and about, playing basketball in the courtyards, or sitting on benches listening to music on portable speakers. She can hear hip-hop in one direction, and salsa in another. A group of Black men walk past her, looking her up and down. She starts to panic. She realizes that the address that she had been repeating to herself all day is gone, a wallet pickpocketed in a crowd.

—Paula?

She turns towards the voice, which comes from a group of tall, blonde women sitting on the stairs at an apartment complex's entrance. One of them has a bottle wrapped in a brown paper bag, and she gets up and runs towards Paula.

Paula takes a step back, unsure what to do, but the woman doesn't hesitate, and almost tackles her to the ground in a bear hug. Paula can smell the tang of vodka on her breath.

—Valeria?

—Yeah, it's me, cuz. I thought we should wait for you out front. I know how fucking foggy the brain can get when it crosses.

A wave of relief hits Paula, and she all but collapses against this strange body whose ribcage juts into her midriff, and whose waist and arms feel terribly thin. Without any warning, Paula begins crying, her chest heaving and tensing, her throat swollen.

—Shh, Paulita, says Valeria, patting her hair. You're going to do great things here.

*

In the shower of Valeria's tiny bathroom, Paula looks down at her body, pinching and poking it. She has a dissociated feeling, like her eyes are cameras secreted in another's skull, and this feeling only accelerates when she gets out and looks at her reflection in a small mirror above the sink. Her irises are an azure blue, her pale skin nearly translucent, her hair long and corn-

blond. Paula starts to comb this hair, and then she yelps, quickly wrapping a towel around herself and going out to the room that serves as both lounge area and kitchen. Valeria is sitting on the couch drinking wine with Sofia and Clara, the two other girls who share this one-bedroom apartment.

—Something is wrong with my ear, says Paula, bending over to show Valeria how the left lobe ends in a ragged tear.

Valeria only smiles sadly. She kicks off her right bedroom slipper, revealing a foot with no pinkie toe.

II

At half past five, the Johnsons' little boy, Eric, knocks on Norma's front door. She takes him inside and pours him a glass of iced tea, and then she calls each of his parents' mobile numbers three times. Sally and Jerry Johnson are friends of hers. Sally's phone rings out each time, but Jerry eventually picks up.

—Hello?

—Jerry, it's Norma. Where are you? Eric says you guys haven't come home from work.

—What? No, no. This isn't Jerry. I found this phone on the sidewalk.

She calls the police.

*

The two police officers arrive only minutes after her call. They cordially accept Norma's offer of coffee, and they talk to Eric in soothing tones. For as long as they are talking, she feels at ease. The worries only return when they leave: car accident? Mass shooting? Terrorism? These

worries might have overwhelmed her, were it not for the physical presence of the boy, the boy's needs. She feeds him a grilled cheese sandwich, which he seems to finish without taking a bite. As she has no fresh clothes to put him in, they cross the road to the Johnsons' house, a tidy white and navy bungalow, where the boy retrieves a key from the underside compartment of a fake stone. After he changes into a t-shirt and pyjama bottoms, the boy goes downstairs and, without discussion, turns on the television to the Cartoon Network and curls up on the sofa like a cat. Norma sits next to him. It has been a long time since she has watched a cartoon, and the modern variant leaves her dizzy and perplexed, but also enthralled. She doesn't even realize the boy has fallen asleep until the knock at the door.

*

Once the police have taken the boy away, she crosses the road back to her own house. As empty as a tomb. She lies in bed for an hour and then gives up and goes downstairs. The sandwich press is still out on the counter, so she makes a grilled cheese for herself. As she eats, she remembers a winter lunch, what feels like a thousand years ago, when she had made sandwiches and tomato soup for her and her own boy in this same kitchen. He had tipped the soup bowl over and spilled the thick red soup all down his front. She had scolded him, far too harshly. The memory of his pouting lip a barb in her heart.

*

In the morning, she walks over to the Johnsons' place and knocks on the door. Nothing. She calls the police, but once the officer on the phone understands that Norma is not the boy's kin, he brushes her off. She makes coffee and goes into the living room and turns on CNN.

A banner across the screen reads: INSTANT MASS DEPORTATIONS ACROSS U.S. After ten minutes, she turns it off again and she goes to the bay window and looks out on the grey morning.

—You old and useless idiot, she says.

*

They had been neighbours for close to a decade. She still remembered the day the two of them, this was before Eric, had arrived and unloaded their few boxes from the back of a mustard-yellow station wagon. She and Al had watched them from that same bay window. They don't have much, do they, Al had said. They had gone over later to introduce themselves, bringing a welcome basket of fruit. When Norma had handed the basket to Sally, Sally had begun to cry.

*

It is all anyone talks about at the Patterson's dinner party that night.

—Can you believe it, says Dan Stoltz. All this time, and we may actually have been living next to the *Juansons*.

Incredibly, Ashley Woodland's girl actually saw it happen. One minute she was waving to Sally at Safeway and then the next minute Sally was gone, her clothes slumping into a little heap. They all shake their heads at this.

—Your poor girl, says Mary Patterson. What a thing to witness.

—My boy played over there all the time, says Kaitlin DeBree. He slept over.

I just want to know how the heck they afforded this neighbourhood in the first place, says Mary.

Norma feigns a stomach bug and leaves early. At home she turns on CNN, but it is all the same. She switches to Fox and watches the red faces shout for an hour straight. Her blood boils. She goes back to the Patterson's. They are eating dessert and the table quietyens when they see her standing there in the dining room arch.

—Shame on you, she says. These were our friends.

—Well hang on, says Dan.

She turns and leaves. Although a fierce wind is blowing, and she has only a thin sweater on, she walks the ten blocks to the corner of Collins and Lincoln. The bouquet that she taped to the stop sign two weeks ago is already ragged. Grief hits her in a way it has not for years. She sits down right there on the cold sidewalk. A passing car honks at her but does not stop. After a while, she gets up and goes home. She brews a pot of coffee and turns on her computer and writes a letter to her senator.

*

That day, she had come home early from work to pack. They were going to the country for the weekend, up to a lake house that they time-shared with the Stoltzs and Pattersons. She filled the cooler with food and soft drink and put Cody's clothes and a few favourite toys into a small suitcase, being careful to include Senor Burro, the stuffed donkey Cody could not sleep without. When she was finished, there was still fifteen minutes before Al would be home with Cody from kindergarten. She made an espresso and sat down on the couch with a collection of Ann Beattie's short stories, a rare moment of indulgence in the otherwise endless march of selflessness that was motherhood. She had been reading for half an hour when the doorbell rang. Two police officers stood on her front porch. One much younger than the other. They both had their navy-blue hats in their hands. As she opened the front

door, the younger one dropped his hat onto the sun-flaked paint of the porch, swearing under his breath as he quickly stooped to pick it up.

*

She wakes with a shock in Al's old armchair. The T.V. is back on CNN: WHEREABOUTS OF DEPORTED IMMIGRANTS UNKNOWN. She turns it off, heart sick. It is not yet dawn, an anaemic light just visible outside. Through the bay window, she sees a blur of movement on the Johnsons' side of the street.

She whips out the front door and down her porch steps. Bone cold mist in the air.

—Eric, she hisses.

He freezes. The fake rock is in his hand. He is wearing a black hoodie, from which his breath emerges and pools above him like a thought bubble.

—It's OK, she says, when she crosses over to him. I know.

*

The Johnsons had brought an ice-blue bouquet of African Lilies to the funeral. Seven months later, Norma crossed the street with a stuffed bear of the same color. As she climbed the steps to their porch, she heard the baby wailing inside. She bent down to leave the bear and card on the welcome mat, but as she straightened up, the door clicked open. Sally stood there with Eric writhing in the crutch of her arm. Her eyes like empty wells.

—Norma, she said. Help.

In the Johnsons' plushly carpeted living room, Norma gingerly took the child and laid him face-down along her arm, putting pressure on his little belly. He immediately quieted.

—Oh my God, whispered Sally. I'll pay you a thousand dollars an hour.

Norma sent her for a shower and sat down on the couch with Eric. Eyes the same blue. Same wild thatch of hair, colour of wet sand. The nose was a little broader, the lips a little thinner. She lent in and took in the aroma of milk and no time seemed to pass before Sally sat in the chair opposite, smiling at the two of them. The long hair that she normally wore down was wrapped up in a towel. When she saw Norma looking, her hand immediately went to the lobe.

—Neighbour's dog, she said.

*

They had fostered Eric with a family twenty miles away. As soon as everyone was asleep, he stole his foster mother's phone and used the GPS to walk home.

She helps him take his Air Jordans off in the kitchen. Socks dripping with blood. She puts antiseptic and band-aids on his raw blisters and makes him a bowl of Cheerios and a cup of hot cocoa.

—I am so sorry I let them take you, she says, sitting across from him with a coffee. They told me they'd located your relatives.

He shakes his head.

—We don't have anyone here.

—Well. You have me.

He chews for a while, eyeing her shyly.

—Did they tell you?

—No, honey, she says, reaching over and putting her hand on his. And they were right not to.

*

Everyone had just assumed that she would move. How could she ever stay there, ghosts greeting her in every room? She put the house on the market. Her neighbours told her how sorry they were to see her go, but she could see something like relief in their eyes too. No one wants to be constantly reminded of how brittle the ice is, she didn't resent them for that. Only the Johnsons seemed to be genuinely distraught. When she told Sally that she was going to accept a bid, there were tears, and then a demand that they take her out for dinner that night. The restaurant was a cosy Korean-fusion place tucked into an alleyway in the city. The manager knew the Johnsons, he bought chillies through the small food distribution company they owned, and the dishes arrived in unrelenting waves. As did the watermelon margaritas with gochujang chilli sauce, and before long, Norma was shimmeringly drunk, the words and laughter rolling from her like the past year was a mirage.

The next morning, she took a slow black coffee in the backyard, letting the sun rise over the top of the willow tree to kiss her forehead. Then she went inside and called her real estate agent and told him she wanted more time.

—I guess someone hasn't checked the news yet, he said. The bubble's burst. *Again.*

*

Eric slaps his hand to his forehead when he sees her ancient computer.

—Does this thing even have Presence on it?

She shrugs and leaves him to figure it out. With the foster mother's phone in her hand, she goes out to the garden shed and takes the hammer from Al's meticulously organized tool

wall and then she puts the phone on the brick patio step that Cody has once chipped a tooth on, and she reduces it to smithereens. The Stoltz's tabby is perched on the back fence eyeing her coolly.

—One word and you're next, she says.

After she has swept up the glass and plastic and dumped it all into the trash, she goes back inside and finds Eric chatting to the face of an elderly woman. This woman jumps when she sees Norma lurking in the backlit arch of the kitchen doorway.

—*Estas bien*, says Eric. This is her.

The woman laughs and puts her hand to her chest. She has a beautiful smile and soft brown eyes, above which seem to be meticulously painted eyebrows the deep purple of blackberries.

—Hi, says Norma, aware that her own untended eyebrows look more like a blackberry bush. It's nice to meet you.

—*Gracias por cuidar nuestro nieto*, says the woman. *Familia es lo todo*.

*

When the economy went belly up, so too did the Johnsons' distribution company. Norma was worried that they would lose their house and move away. She had already paid off her own mortgage with the sizable accident settlement from the trucking company, but others were not so lucky. Even in that relatively wealthy neighbourhood, foreclosed properties had started showing up like dead teeth in a smile. The Johnsons, however, adapted quickly to the new reality, and within weeks both were working multiple low-wage jobs that provided just enough to make ends meet. But this meant long hours, sometimes arriving home well after Eric was asleep. Norma can't remember whether they had asked, or she had offered first. Whichever

way, she began picking the boy up from school, always taking the long way to avoid Lincoln. She would make him an after-school snack and leave him to play in his room or watch T.V. until dinner, while she read a book on the Johnsons' couch. As he got older, she helped him with his homework, his heart beating on her arm as he leaned in to watch how she multiplied and punctuated.

Eventually, he got old enough to catch the bus and stay home by himself. Then Sally managed to find an office job that allowed her to be home at a reasonable hour. And yet, it was still rare for Norma to eat dinner alone. She had quietly, without any fuss, become a member of the family. Birthdays, school plays, soccer games, she was there for all of them without question, but also for the quiet moments too. Even when Eric reached the edge of manhood, peach fuzz appearing on his lip, he would still sometimes fall asleep on her arm when the family gathered together to watch *The Late Show*.

And she was there, cradled in her corner of the Johnsons' increasingly frayed couch, on election night. She had been as disgusted as anyone when that horrible man—as if the country hadn't had enough of them—strode out to declare victory. But she was shocked by the violent burst of first Sally and then Eric's tears, and by Jerry's hardened face, normally so jovial, but now like a fist with nothing to hit.

*

They are watching Telemundo when the slam of car doors outside jolts them both. A black van is parked out in front of the Johnsons, the word ICE emblazoned across its side.

—Upstairs, she says. Get beneath the bed.

She rushes into the kitchen to put his dishes in the dishwasher and then puts the kettle to boil and looks out over the sink at the lightly swaying willow and tries to empty her mind.

The kettle is not yet steaming by the time they come over and knock on her door. She makes her way through the kitchen, already feigning a look of surprise and worry, and only then does she notice the thin constellation of blood that trails across the linoleum and then down the hallway carpet to the laundry room. She stops dead. Another knock, louder. Eric's socks, soaking in their bowl of reddening water atop the washing machine. Another knock. The door-knob jiggles. Her car is in the driveway, the still-blaring T.V. clearly visible through the bay window. She bends down and tries to wipe at some of the blood with the inside of her sweater sleeve, but it is half-congealed and sticky, and only partially comes away. She rushes back to the kitchen bench and slides a knife out of its wooden slot and then she takes a deep breath and she plunges the sharp point into the fat of her palm.

Cops Say the Darndest Things

1

Police Officer One: Ah, shit.

Police Officer Two: What? What is it?

PO1: God damn it.

PO2: What?

PO1: No gun.

PO2: What do you mean, no gun? Of course there's a gun.

PO1: No gun.

PO2: You got to be fucking kidding me.

PO1: I wish.

PO2: Well shit.

PO2: Yep.

PO1: God damn it. What the hell was he reaching for then?

PO1: You aren't going to believe it.

PO2: What?

PO1: His rabbit.

PO2: His rabbit?

PO1: Yeah, his rabbit. Look.

PO2: What the hell you mean, his rabbit?

PO1: I mean his fucking rabbit. Look for yourself.

PO2: ...

PO2: ...

PO2: ...

PO2: Jesus! The fuck he got a rabbit in his car for?

PO1: I guess it was his...what have you...helper animal?

PO2: His helper animal?

PO1: Yeah.

PO2: Shit. Is that why it's got that little orange vest on?

PO1: I'd say so.

PO2: Shit! I can't...I mean...helper animal...I did not get blind vibes off this guy, did you?

PO1: That's not the only reason people get helper animals, Lenny.

PO2: Well shit. I mean...fuck me...does that mean the rabbit was driving?

PO1: Are you—...Jesus! No, the rabbit wasn't fucking driving.

PO2: Well, then what?

PO1: Anxiety, I'd say.

PO2: Anxiety!

PO1: Yeah, you know, like, stress.

PO2: Stress!

PO1: Yeah, fucking stress. You pet it and it helps with the stress.

PO2: Jesus! I mean...what...what in the fuck could this fucker have been so stressed out about that he needed a rabbit within petting distance at all times?

PO1: ...

PO2: ...

PO1: ...

PO2: Don't you fucking say the police, Carl.

PO1: I wasn't—

PO2: I swear to God, Carl. I fucking swear to God.

PO1: I wasn't—

PO2: I swear to God, Carl. Sometimes I seriously question which team you are on.

PO1: Which team? Whi—...Jesus! I'm on the we-need-to-replace-this-fucking-rabbit-with-a-gun-so-we don't-go-to-jail team. That a good enough team for you?

PO2: Yeah, well. Yeah.

PO2: ...

PO1: ...

PO2: ...

PO2: Well now what the fuck are you doing?

PO1: What? I'm petting the rabbit.

PO2: Why?

PO1: What do you mean *why*?

PO2: I mean *why*?

PO1: 'Cause I'm fucking stressed, that's why!

PO2: Jesus H. Christ. You have got to be fucking kidding me.

PO2: ...

PO2: ...

PO2: ...

PO2: Is it...I mean...does it help?

PO1: Shit. Only one way to find out.

PO2: Well.

PO2: ...

PO2: ...

PO2: ...

PO2: Man, I feel—

PO1: I know, I know.

PO2: ...just *so* much better.

2

PO1: Whoa! Hey, Dan. Shh. Shh. That's not OK.

PO2: What? What did I say?

PO1: Seriously?

PO2: Yeah, seriously. What's with the face?

PO1: Wow. Just wow.

PO2: C'mon. What's with the face?

PO1: We don't say that shit no more, OK?

PO2: Say what shit?

PO1: African American, Sam. We don't say African American anymore.

PO2: Get the fuck out of here.

PO1: We say Black, Sam. That's what we say now.

PO2: Get the fuck out of here, we say Black. You're tuggin' me, right?

PO1: Nope.

PO2: You're fucking tuggin' me. I was sure African American was the way to go.

PO1: Uh-uh.

PO2: No shit.

PO1: It's considered insensitive.

PO2: Well. Sorry.

PO1: That's alright.

PO2: Honestly did not mean to offend here.

PO1: I know. I know.

PO2: ...

PO2: ...

PO2: So...

PO2: ...

PO2: ...

PO2: So, what's the difference, though?

PO1: Excuse me?

PO2: What's the difference? Between African American and Black.

PO1: Shh! Fuck me, Sam! Shh! There's a difference, O.K.? Believe me.

PO2: Well all right, Brainiac. How's about you *delineate* to me that difference, if you're so fucking in-the-know then?

PO1: Seriously? Seriously I got to do this with you, right now? With this guy laying right here?

PO2: I look like I'm fucking tuggin' you?

PO1: Wow. *Wow*. O.K. Fine. So, the *difference*, you ignorant fuck, is that calling someone African American implies that that person is somehow less American than the rest of us. Like they're half-African, half-American, or some shit.

PO2: ...

PO1: O.K.?

PO2: ...

PO2: But is that not what Black people are, though?

PO1: Fuck me, Sam. Shh!

PO2: What!

PO1: No! No that is not what fucking Black people are.

PO2: Well then what the fuck are fucking Black people?

PO1: Fuck me sideways, Frank. You are actually dumber than dumbness.

PO2: You don't even know.

PO1: Lord save me. O.K. Fine. I will explain this to you, if you promise to just shut the fuck up. Deal?

PO2: Deal.

PO1: Lord save me.

PO2: I'm waiting, maestro.

PO1: ...

PO1: God damn you.

PO1: ...

PO1: O.K. Fine. Here it is. A *Black* person is a *full* American who just happens to be Black due to the slavery trade that occurred back in the 14th century or whenever it was. Whereas an *African American* would be like a guy who is from, let's say, *Rwanda*, and who then migrates over here and becomes an *American* citizen whilst potentially keeping his *Rwandan* passport or whatever at the same time.

PO2: ...

PO1: That all clear enough for you?

PO2: ...

PO2: ...

PO2: ...

PO2: So why don't we just fucking call him a Rwandan-American, then? Make it easier on everybody?

PO1: Shh! Fuck, Sam! Shh!

PO2: What?

PO1: ...

PO1: ...

PO1: I mean...

PO1: ...

PO1: ...

PO1: Yeah, you actually have yourself a fair point there.

PO2: Is it maybe because of how hard it is to tell one African nationality from another?

PO1: Shh! Fuck me, Sam. Shh!

PO2: What!

PO1: Let's just...let's just leave it there.

PO2: What the hell did I step in now?

PO1: Leave it. I'm begging you.

PO2: ...

PO1: ...

PO2: ...

PO2: Now Doug was mentioning something about protocol soon requiring us to refer to certain people, Black people if you will, as melanin-enhanced Americans. What is that about? Because our job is hard enough without having to spit out that absolute word salad all the time, don't you think?

PO1: O.K. Right. Now recall that this is Doug who told you this.

PO2: ...

PO1: Think on that for a minute.

PO2: ...

PO2: What, you think he was tuggin' me?

PO1: As a general rule, Doug tells you something, safe bet to file it away in the tuggin' section.

PO2: That son of a bitch.

PO1: He's a piece of work, all right.

PO2: I am going to slap that S.O.B. right in the pants knuckles when we get back.

PO1: No less than he deserves. Help me turn him over, will you? Story doesn't really stick if he's face-down.

PO2: ...

PO1: ...

PO2: ...

PO1: ...

PO2: Whew.

PO1: Yeah.

PO2: Heavy-set feller, isn't he?

PO1: You're not wrong.

PO2: ...

PO2: ...

PO2: ...

PO2: Which one is he, though?

PO1: Excuse me?

PO2: Which one is this guy? Is he *Black* or *African American*?

PO1: Fuck, Sam! Shh! That doesn't matter!

PO2: How could it not matter?

PO1: How could it?

PO2: Well, shit. I'd rather have shot a half-Rwandan than a full-American, wouldn't you, Dan?

PO1: Fuck me, Sam. Shh!

PO2: Well? Wouldn't you?

PO1: Jesus, Sam. What kind of question...

PO1: ...

PO1: ...

PO1: I mean...

PO1: ...

PO1: ...

PO1: O.K. Fine. Look. I guess if one had to, one could devise a highly hypothetical situation in which one was forced to shoot either a Black American or a Rwandan-American, and, less of course any contextual information regarding who this person was—their hopes, their dreams, the things they have or haven't done, any kin financially reliant on them not dying, etc—than yeah. O.K. I suppose I'd probably prefer to shoot the Rwandan.

PO2: Well there you go.

PO1: Yeah.

PO2: Thank you, Dan.

PO1: Sure.

PO2: You are a hell of a better partner than Doug ever was. I can promise you that.

3

PO1: How about this one? He looks like an asshole.

PO2: I don't know, J.D.

PO1: Or what about him? Shit. That dude right there is one doughnut away from a coronary anyways.

PO2: I don't know, man.

PO1: We make it look like that rhino was coming at us? A hundred percent they say we were justified to unholster.

PO2: ...

PO1: One hundred percent.

PO2: ...

PO1: ...

PO2: ...

PO1: Hey. You O.K., T.B.? I got to say, your downbeat attitude is kind of freaking me out a little over here.

PO2: It's just—

PO1: Talk buddy. Get it out.

PO2: It just feels wrong, is all. It doesn't feel wrong to you?

PO1: Well, shit yeah, it feels wrong to me. Sure it does. And do you know why it feels wrong?

PO2: Bec—

PO1: Because it is fucking wrong, T.B. It's wrong! It's rotten to the core. I am not trying to obfuscate that cold truth, I promise you.

PO2: OK, but—

PO1: But you know what else is wrong? Prison, T.B. Us living in prison. Us *dying* in prison. I mean...do you know what they do to cops in prison, T.B.?

PO2: No, I—

PO1: Me fucking neither, and I don't intend to, because whatever it is, it probably involves dicks and shivs. You interested in any sort of scenario involving dicks and shivs, T.B.?

PO2: No, but—

PO1: Good. Very glad to hear it. Because we've been through this, O.K.? We have, by whatever random accumulation of fates and fortunes, shot a few folks of color lately.

PO2: ...

PO1: That's just the bold facts, T.B.

PO2: ...

PO2: Yeah, bu—

PO1: Are you not able to see that there's a pattern developing here, T.B.? O.K., yes, a pattern completely devoid of intent or malice on our part, sure, but a pattern, nonetheless. And do you know what some might interpret that pattern to mean?

PO2: ...

PO2: ...

PO2: ...

PO2: I ain't a God damn racist cop, if that's—

PO1: Whoa, T-Bone! Hold on to your reins there. Of course, you're not a Goddamn fucking racist cop.

PO2: Well, then don't—

PO1: You think I don't know you? You think I don't know that you have not one fucking racist bone in your body?

PO2: Right, so then—

PO2: Hello? Hello? Mission command calling down to ol Bad to the Bone, it's your dearest friend J.D. on the line.

PO1: All right, all—

PO2: Jay to the Dizza? Ever heard of him? Only been your partner for near on eight years. Only been your sous chef at the B.B.Q. cook-out comp for near on six. Only been your tee-ball assistant coach for near on five.

PO2: I know, I know—

PO1: You think someone who stood by your side, marvelling at how you almost single-handedly transformed Watermont Elementary's sorry ass tee-ball program into a team in playoff contention two out of five years is going to turn around and suddenly accuse *you* of being a racist fucking cop?

PO2: ...

PO2: No, I...

PO2: ...

PO2: I mean...

PO2: ...

PO2: And we've had Black kids on the team.

PO1: We've had countless Black kids!

PO2: Well. We haven't had *that* many Black kids.

PO1: We've cherished whatever number of Black kids we've had!

PO2: I do tend to cut the Black kids after tryouts. But then, they don't tend to be as good.

PO1: It would be racist not to cut them!

PO2: Although I have heard grumbles that cutting kids isn't really in the elementary tee-ball spirit.

PO1: ...

PO1: You're shittin' me.

PO2: Nope.

PO1: ...

PO1: You have got be...

PO1: ...

PO1: Two out of five fucking years, and you're telling me there's been *grumbling*?

PO2: Alyssa heard it through the grapevine. Apparently, the Black kids' parents are thinking about organizing a petition or something.

PO1: ...

PO1: I just...

PO1: ...

PO1: Sometimes I really start to wonder about humanity's capacity for gratitude.

PO2: Well. I'm with you on that one.

PO1: Two out of five fucking years.

PO2: Yep.

PO1: Well.

PO2: Yep.

PO1: ...

PO2: ...

PO1: ...

PO2: ...

PO1: Let me just pose you a hypothetical, though, T.B. Can I do that?

PO2: Shoot.

PO1: What exactly do you think would happen to all those grumbles poor Alyssa's been hearing if...say...I dunno...you didn't cut all the Black kids this year?

PO2: I cut them because they ain't as good!

PO1: Whoa, T-Bone! Weapons down, soldier! Must I once again remind you that it is your ol pal Jane Doe talking to you here.

PO2: I know, I—

PO1: Because, what I would hate, nay, *detest*, is to think that my partner of eight years is somehow conflating me with a bunch of grumblers.

PO2: No, no—

PO1: That thought, frankly, puts an arrow in my heart.

PO2: I'm sorry.

PO1: Puts a God damn arrow right *here*.

PO2: ...

PO2: ...

PO2: I...

PO2: ...

PO2: I guess the grumbles would somewhat go away if I stopped cutting the Black kids as much.

PO1: They just might dissipate a touch.

PO2: I suppose.

PO1: Of course, you know...what with the wacky place our culture is at right now...there's a chance not even that would appease those grumblers.

PO2: How do you mean?

PO1: How I mean, T.B....how I mean is that to *really* bamboozle those grumblers, you might...and please hear me out here...you might want to...you know...consider cutting a few White kids now and then.

PO2: Are you fuc—... like who? Like Terrell Davis?

PO1: Terr—? No! Jesus. That kid hits home runs for breakfast. Goodness. I'm not saying sink the whole ship over this, T.B. Not saying that at all. No, no, no. I was thinking more like your...you know...what have you...Norton Willow types?

PO2: Norton Willow.

PO2: ...

PO2: Norton Willow.

PO2: ...

PO2: Which one's that again?

PO1: The booger kid.

PO2: Ah.

PO1: The one we're always wiping the bats after.

PO2: Yeah, yeah. Norton.

PO1: I mean...shit. What's does that kid bat at anyways, like .150?

PO2: Something like that.

PO1: It's tee-ball for Christ's sake.

PO2: Yeah. Norton.

PO2: ...

PO2: ...

PO2: ...

PO2: I can't see anyone grumbling too much if we cut that kid's ass.

PO1: Hell, T.B. Hell. There'd be *applause*.

PO2: Yeah.

PO1: I mean, even Norton's dad would probably shake your hand when the dust settles. It's got to be embarrassing.

PO2: Yeah.

PO1: And we'd save a bundle on bat wipes.

PO2: Yeah.

PO1: And, you know, in addition, it would...change the narrative somewhat.

PO2: I can see that.

PO1: You're no longer the guy who just cuts Black kids. You're the guy who cuts *any* kid that needs cutting.

PO2: Right.

PO1: You're a color-blind child cutter is what you are.

PO2: Yeah.

PO1: A narrative shift, T.B. That's what we're discussing here.

PO2: Yeah. I think I'm following you now.

PO1: Good. Good.

PO2: ...

PO1: ...

PO2: ...

PO1: ...

PO2: ...

PO1: ...

PO1: So how about this asshole over here with the hat?

4

PO1: Hands up motherfucker!

PO2: Hands up! Hands up!

PO1: Get your fucking hands up, *now*!

PO2: Up motherfucker, up!

PO1: I ain't fucking saying it again!

PO2: This is your last chance motherfucker!

PO1: Hands up! Hands up!

PO2: ...

PO1: ...

PO2: ...

PO1: ...

PO2: ...

PO1: ...

PO2: ...

PO1: ...

PO2: ...

PO1: ...

PO2: ...

PO1: ...

PO2: ...

PO1: ...

PO2: ...

PO1: ...

PO2: ...

PO1: ...

PO2: ...

PO1: ...

PO2: ...

PO1: ...

PO2: ...

PO1: ...

PO2: Clear.

PO1: Clear.

PO2: God damn.

PO1: I tell you what.

PO2: My heart is pounding like a badger in a cage.

PO1: I wish I could inject this shit.

PO2: You ever think about it while you're fucking?

PO1: I would if I ever was fucking.

PO2: Thing still acting up, huh?

PO1: You ever try and jack up a car with string cheese?

PO2: Damn.

PO1: Yeah.

PO2: This ain't a bad substitute for that, though.

PO1: It about trumps it in my opinion.

PO2: ...

PO1: ...

PO2: Well. I'll go call it in.

PO1: Go on. I'll slip some of this in his jacket.

PO1: ...

PO1: ...

PO1: ...

PO1: ...

PO1: ...

PO1: What in the—

PO1: ...

PO1: Ty! Tyler!

PO2: What?

PO1: Tyler! Hang the fuck up!

PO2: What?

PO1: Hang the fuck up and get over here!

PO2: ...

PO2: ...

PO2: ...

PO2: Problem?

PO1: You could say that.

PO2: What's the deal?

PO1: Well, shit. Look at his arms.

PO2: ...

PO2: ...

PO2: Wha—...

PO2: ...

PO2: Where are they?

PO1: Well, yeah.

PO2: Did we—...

PO2: ...

PO2: I mean...did we shoot them off?

PO1: Wha—...no we didn't shoot them off. Jesus.

PO2: Well, where in the fuck are they then?

PO1: Well, shit. I don't know. Probably somewhere over in Fallujah judging by that purple heart pinned to his lapel.

PO2: Purple heart?

PO2: ...

PO2: Like...like a *military* purple heart?

PO1: No, Tyler, like a McDonald's Happy Meal purple heart.

PO2: ...

PO1: ...

PO2: ...

PO1: Yes. A *military* purple heart.

PO2: Shit.

PO1: Yeah.

PO2: ...

PO1: ...

PO2: Well.

PO2: ...

PO2: Well, I mean...look. I thank him for his service and everything, but.

PO1: ...

PO2: ...

PO1: But what?

PO2: But I guess I don't see what all the problem is exactly.

PO1: You don't see what the problem is.

PO2: Not exactly.

PO1: Interesting. So...what were you planning on writing in your report then?

PO2: Well, shit. The usual.

PO1: The usual.

PO2: Yeah. The usual. You know, that...that the suspect was loitering suspiciously and that we told him to put his hands up in the air where we could see them and that...although I certainly do thank him for his service...he sadly did not comply.

PO1: And you're thinking that the usual is going to cut mustard this time. Is that right?

PO2: I *said* I'd thank him for his service.

PO1: Interesting.

PO2: ...

PO1: ...

PO2: What?

PO1: Did you ever consider how difficult it might have been for this gentleman, given his unique set of personal circumstances, to comply with that particular order?

PO2: ...

PO2: Oh snap.

PO1: Yeah.

PO2: Shit.

PO1: Yep.

PO2: Are we...

PO2: ...

PO2: Are we gonna get hashtagged over this shit?

PO1: Ty, if all we do is get hashtagged, it's a been a good day.

PO2: ...

PO2: Shit.

PO1: Yeah.

PO2: ...

PO2: ...

PO2: Well, let's find him some arms then.

PO1: Excuse me?

PO2: Let's find this fucker some arms and plant them on him.

PO1: ...

PO1: You want to plant arms on this man. Is that what I am hearing?

PO2: You got a better idea?

PO1: ...

PO1: ...

PO1: ...

PO1: ...

PO1: ...

PO1: Well where would we even find some?

PO2: Well, shit. What about that Fallujah place you mentioned?

PO1: ...

PO1: Fallujah is in Iraq, Ty.

PO2: ...

PO1: Iraq is a country.

PO2: ...

PO1: In the Middle East.

PO2: ...

PO1: We can't go there right now, is what I'm saying.

PO2: Damn.

PO1: Good lord.

PO2: Well, where's the closest hospital?

PO1: Wha—...he's long dead, Ty.

PO2: No, I mean for the arms. They'd have those plastic ones there, right?

PO1: You don't think a couple of cops waltzing in and asking for plastic arms might raise some suspicion?

PO2: They'll comply. I can promise you that.

PO1: And what would you have us do with him in the meantime?

PO2: ...

PO2: ...

PO2: We'll bring him with!

PO1: Excuse me?

PO2: You still got those sunglasses on the dash?

PO1: Jesus.

PO2: No, hang on and listen. You ever see *Weekend at Bernie's*?

PO1: No, Ty.

PO2: Oh, you should! It's a hoot. These two buddies are invited to a party—

PO1: I mean no to your plan, Ty. I've seen fucking *Weekend at Bernie's*. Everyone has.

PO2: Isn't a hoot?

PO1: It's...it's. Yeah. It's pretty good.

PO2: No scrub on the sequel, of course.

PO1: ...

PO1: There's a *sequel* to *Weekend at Bernie's*?

PO2: Uh, how do you think I found out about the first one?

PO1: Bu—...how the hell can they extend that premise? The man is dead, Ty. He's a corpse.

A corpse that has been trotted out in the summer sun for a whole day, I might add. I mean...there's only so much cologne in the world.

PO2: He comes back to life.

PO1: Get the fuck out.

PO2: Yeah, yeah. There's this voodoo queen—

PO1: No, no, stop right fucking there. I can't hear this shit, Ty.

PO2: What?

PO1: I swear to God. Merciful Jesus above, Ty. Is there really no Goddamn creativity left in the world? Is Hollywood really so drained of talent that all they can drudge up is a God damn voodoo rehash of an already pretty sketchy concept to begin with? I mean...seriously, is it just me or is somehow a putrefying corpse that nobody notices is dead *for apparently two movies now* nothing if not the perfect metaphor for the all the other slop the bastards tip into our troughs daily only for us to slurp it up and belch like the mindless peons that we are?

PO2: ...

PO1: ...

PO2: ...

PO1: ...

PO2: Your face is all red, man.

PO1: Sorry.

PO2: You need to get laid.

PO1: I guess.

PO2: Like, yesterday.

PO1: Yeah, yeah.

PO2: I just thought it was a hoot.

PO1: I know.

PO2: ...

PO1: ...

PO2: Well, why don't we just take the arms off someone else?

PO1: ...

PO1: Excuse me?

PO2: Let's find some other suspicious fucker that doesn't want to comply and then post-compliance we'll take his arms off and plant them on this guy.

PO1: Wha—...and then how do we explain the second armless body?

PO2: Ah.

PO2: ...

PO2: We just take one arm!

PO1: Jesus, Ty.

PO2: No, no. Think about it. That leaves us with two one-armed non-compliers. And, well...one arm's all the arms complying requires. At least the last time I checked.

PO1: Good lord.

PO2: What? You got a better idea?

PO1: ...

PO1: ...

PO1: ...

PO1: ...

PO1: ...

5

PO1: Well, Doug. This is one for the books.

PO2: What's that?

PO1: This boy we just laid out...his skin is rubbing off.

PO2: ...

PO2: You mind running that one by me again, Cal?

PO1: I said, I'll be damned if this boy's skin isn't rubbing off on my fingers.

PO2: ...

PO2: Yeah, no. I'm afraid that's still not computing.

PO1: Well get on over here and look then. His skin is leaving my fingers all black.

PO2: ...

PO2: ...

PO2: ...

PO2: Cal. That's paint.

PO1: Paint?

PO2: This boy is covered near head to toe in black body paint.

PO1: Wha—...what on earth for?

PO2: Probably been at a frat party or something. Dig his wallet out there and check the ID.

PO1: ...

PO1: Blaze...

PO1: ...Matthews.

PO2: There you go.

PO1: Well, but. Shit. This boy's whiter than heaven.

PO2: Hence the paint.

PO1: Hence the paint?

PO2: Yeah. Hence the paint.

PO1: Wha—...but what godly purpose is the paint supposed to be serving?

PO2: ...

PO2: He was doing blackface, Cal.

PO1: Blackface?

PO2: Yeah, Cal. Blackface.

PO1: ...

PO2: What, you never heard of blackface before?

PO1: You know I don't watch the news, Doug. You know I'm—

PO2: A BBC mysteries guy. Yeah, yeah, Cal. I know. But...still. You ain't ever heard about people doing blackface?

PO1: What are you telling me here, Doug, that this is a common thing folk do?

PO2: Well...I mean. Not *common*.

PO1: Well have you ever done it?

PO2: No! Hell no!

PO2: ...

PO2: I mean...

PO2: There was this one time in college, but.

PO1: Lord, the things I am learning today.

PO2: That was a long, long time ago.

PO1: I'm sure it was. So, tell me then: what in God's name does one achieve by painting themselves black?

PO2: It's...it's like a throwback to...to...you know...minstrel times.

PO1: Minstrel times?

PO2: Yeah.

PO1: What in the hell does that mean?

PO2: Back when...you know...I guess...slavery was still funny?

PO1: ...

PO1: Back when slavery was still *funny*?

PO2: I'm not really explaining this adequately.

PO1: When the hell was slavery ever funny?

PO2: No, no-...I mean...slavery itself was never funny...

PO1: That's what you just said!

PO2: No...I mean...back when people still *thought* slavery was funny.

PO1: ...

PO2: You know?

PO1: Well that clears all that up, then.

PO2: Look, it's not my fault you don't turn CNN on every once and a while, Cal.

PO1: I. Am. A. Bee. Bee. Fucking. Cee. Mysteries. Guy. *Doug*.

PO2: Well. I'm just saying that maybe you could be a History Channel guy sometimes, too.
Expand your horizons and all.

PO1: Oh sure. Oh goody! Isn't that just what ol Cal wants after another bleak day stuck out
on these streets with God's offal: come home to a history lecture on fucking *minstrel* times.

PO2: I'm just saying you might not be so blindsided by developments like this.

PO1: Lord.

PO2: I'm just saying.

PO1: ...

PO2: ...

PO1: ...

PO2: ...

PO1: So...this is like a Liberal thing?

PO2: What? History?

PO1: No, smartass. Blackface.

PO2: No, Cal. It's not a Liberal thing.

PO1: You sure? This type of bleeding-heart homage seems just like their calling card.

PO2: Trust me, Cal.

PO1: Well, alright. Then whose calling card is it?

PO2: I don't know. People who...you know...don't like Black people, I guess.

PO1: ...

PO1: Folks are painting themselves near head to toe in black body paint because they *don't* like black people?

PO2: Yeah. They're making fun of them.

PO1: They're making *fun* of them?

PO2: More or less.

PO1: Wha—...So, you're telling me this boy got himself killed out here for the purposes of a joke?

PO2: Pretty much, yeah.

PO1: Lord.

PO2: Yeah.

PO1: ...

PO2: ...

PO1: ...

Po2: ...

PO1: Can I ask you a question, Doug?

PO2: Shoot.

PO1: What is wrong with this country?

Magpies

Abbas is nearly unrecognizable from the skeletal man I first found cowering in the closet of a ramshackle house in Meneng. His cheeks have filled out, and on them he sports a thick but tidy beard. His arms, legs, and chest are sleekly muscular: a result, he tells me later, of the hours and hours of running he does daily. In truth, the only aspect of him that navigates me back to the old Abbas, the Abbas I met all those years ago, is his eyes, which are a delicate sandalwood brown, and just as sad as ever.

*

Ten years ago, I was awoken at 5:00 a.m. by a phone call. I didn't recognize the number, but I did recognize the country code: +674: Nauru. After a few groggy moments, I also recognized the voice on the other end, although it had been nearly a year since I had heard it last. It belonged to a man named Lionel, one of the few people who had been willing to speak to me when I was in Nauru. Lionel was speaking fast, obviously agitated by something, and it was initially hard for me to make sense of what he was saying. Once I calmed him down, however, his story took my breath away. It would change both my life and this country forever.

*

Abbas welcomes me into a small apartment, and offers me a cup of Kahwah, a popular tea in Afghanistan that is a delicious mix of green tea leaves, cardamom, cinnamon bark, and saffron. We sit at a small card table in two plastic chairs, one white, one black. The black chair, Abbas later admits, was bought specifically for the occasion of my visit. I am the first person he has ever entertained here. Aside from this makeshift dining room set, the apartment is almost

completely devoid of furniture. There is a small single bed in the next room, a refrigerator in the kitchen, and that's about it. There is no television or couch in the living room, and no artwork or photos or other signs of life on the walls.

I feel a pang of guilt as I look at these austere surroundings. Abbas' story eventually got me a promotion and significant pay rise at *The Guardian*, and not long after he was finally brought to Australian shores, my wife Claire and I managed to buy a house in Punchbowl. It's not a palace by any means, but it has more than a single bed and a fridge.

Abbas asks about my trip over, and I tell him about the frightening turbulence that shook the plane as it descended into Adelaide, and the booking mix up that saw me waiting at Hertz for my rental car. I immediately feel like a complete idiot. What's turbulence and a thirty-minute wait to a man who nearly died of dehydration on a leaky boat in the middle of the Pacific?

After a few more pleasantries, any conversation quickly dries out, and the only sound is the sipping of our tea. I realize that although Abbas' life and mine will be forever intertwined, we barely know each other at all.

*

I had been on Nauru while working for *The Guardian*, trying to figure out the mystery of what was happening with the asylum seekers detained there. It had been years since anyone detained on the island had been granted a visa to continue their life in Australia, but as far as anyone could tell, they hadn't been returned to their families either. In fact, a number of families, from a range of countries, claimed that they had stopped even receiving letters or phone calls from their loved ones. Meanwhile, our country's offshore processing centres had become blackholes, with no journalists allowed in and no information leaking out. It was therefore unsurprising

when my visa application for Nauru was rejected, but I wasn't going to be deterred. At the behest of *The Guardian*, I joined up with a Greenpeace crew that monitored whaling in the Pacific, and soon arrived on the island in the same way so many others did: by boat.

Initially, my attempts to get to the bottom of things in Nauru were unsuccessful. Even those, like Lionel, who were willing to talk to me didn't have much to offer. They told me that Navy boats still docked sporadically outside the processing centre, always in the dead of night, but that no one on the island had seen anyone inside the centre for at least a year. Eventually, I decided to be brazen and walk the centre's perimeter myself, and sure enough, it was empty. At one spot, I could see straight through the chain-link fence into the main courtyard area: it was a ghost town. Had the centre shutdown? If so, why hadn't the government announced this, and more importantly, what had happened to the detainees whose whereabouts no one seemed able to account for?

No sooner had I started to wonder these thoughts, than a sign of life presented itself inside the centre. Not a detainee, but two guards dressed in black and with guns holstered at their hips. As they walked across the courtyard to where I stood at the fence, I recognized the Serco logo on their shirts, with its blood-red drop beneath the 'o'. Serco started out providing services to the UK cinema industry in the 1930s, but it has since grown into a global organisation with its grubby fingers plunged into a wide variety of public services pies, most recently the medical sector. Its presence here was a mystery unto itself. Last I had heard, the Brisbane construction firm Canstruct owned the operator's licence.

'What are you doing, sir?' one of them asked.

I told them the truth: that I was a journalist looking to get information on, or even possibly speak to, the detainees they were in charge of.

'There are no detainees', said the other guard. 'Do you even have a visa to be here?'

I told him that that question was not really the domain of a processing centre employee.

‘Wait here,’ said the first guard, and then he walked away from the fence and conversed into a walkie-talkie, while the other stared at me with a look of severe boredom. When the first guard returned, he brought a completely unexpected surprise: I was to be given a tour of the centre. They opened the electronic gate and proceeded to walk me through a number of dorms, bathrooms, and a kitchen area, all spotless and completely deserted.

Why, I asked, if the place is empty is there still a security team in place?

‘A new load of detainees could arrive at any time,’ said the guard with the walkie-talkie. ‘The processing centre may be empty at the moment, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t active.’

This answer seemed both strangely rehearsed and highly unlikely for the penny-pinching government back on the mainland. I let it go, however, because I had a more important question: where were the detainees whose last known whereabouts had been Nauru?

‘They’ve either been settled or sent home’, was his reply, but I knew this was not true, and I told him so. This noticeably rattled him.

‘That’s above my paygrade. You’ll need to contact the Department of Immigration.’

And with that the tour was over. Having been notified of my presence on the island, the Australian government quickly issued me a visa and instructed Nauru immigration to let me fly home without complications. I expected myself and *The Guardian* to receive some sort of slap on the wrist upon my return, but nothing came, and as I typed up my article on what I had seen at the processing centre, I couldn’t shake the feeling that I was a puppet on a string.

*

On our second cup of Kahwah, I break the silence by asking Abbas what he remembers about the day we met. At first, he just shakes his head, as if these are not memories of which he is willing to speak. This makes me anxious. After all, I’ve been commissioned to write a long

profile of this man on the tenth anniversary of his arrival in Australia, and if he is not comfortable talking to me, I am going to need some very lengthy Kahwah descriptions to fill out the word count.

But speak he does.

‘I was very afraid,’ he says, finally. ‘I thought maybe you were one of them’.

One of the guards?

‘Yes. And, of course, my English than was only very small. I did not understand what was happening.’

He gazes out the small window above the kitchen sink. It is early evening, and an unreal tangerine light angles through onto the counter.

I tell him how lucky he was to have chosen to knock on Lionel’s door. Not everyone on the island would have been brave enough to hide him.

‘Yes,’ says Abbas, smiling for the first time, though it is a strange smile, one which seems to intimate not happiness but the acceptance of pain. ‘It is hard to believe such luck’.

*

As if by fate, my visa to Nauru had only a few days left on it when Lionel called. I rang my editor at his home and told him what I had heard. He authorized funding immediately, and by midday I was on a flight out of Brisbane, peering down at the impossible blue of the Pacific. Not for the first time, I wondered at how desperate a person had to be to roll the dice on crossing such an expanse.

At six p.m., I arrived at the Nauru International Airport, which is no bigger than a country pub. As I stepped through the sliding doors into muggy heat, I half-expected to be accosted by government officials and ferried away in some tinted-window sedan. Instead, I

was greeted by Lionel and his 50cc Yamaha scooter. The Lionel I had met nine months previously had been irrepressibly exuberant, with a constant cheeky smile. Now his face looked drawn and nervous. His eyes darted around as he shook my hand and I climbed onto his bike's pillion. We zoomed off onto the white dirt road that circles the island. The late evening light had gilded the ocean with flecks of gold, amongst which I could just make out the dark ribs of rock pinnacles jabbing out of the water. The ride only lasted five minutes or so. Running the circumference of Nauru wouldn't even give you the length of a half marathon.

Lionel lived in a simple house whose bricks were painted the same beautiful cerulean blue that one sees throughout the island. It appears that at some point a developer had planned a second storey for the building, but this was abandoned, leaving Lionel's home with a strange crown of a steel girders. This sort of half-finished construction is a common sight on Nauru. The final depletion of the phosphate reserves froze this nation in time, and the acquiescence to playing host for Australia's asylum seekers was just the government's latest desperate attempt for a thaw.

Lionel looked around nervously again before we entered his front door. Shamefully, it was only then that I really considered the risk he was taking. The combined power of the Australian government and a global organisation like Serco could squash this man like a bug. It was not hard to imagine one of those armed guards I had met on my last visit being given an extracurricular task that involved a visit to Lionel's bedside in the night. Nor, I realised, a visit to mine.

Once inside, Lionel shuttered the window blinds throughout the house and checked the lock on the back and front door, and then beckoned me into his small bedroom, shutting the door behind us and pushing a dresser drawer up against it. The whole thing felt fantastical. It seemed impossible that there could be someone hiding behind the thin roller door of Lionel's tiny closet, but there was, and when Lionel revealed the man crouching there it was all I could

do not to gasp. My first impression of Abbas was, frankly, that he looked like a cross between Jesus and Otzi the iceman. He had a long, ragged beard, and hair that ran down nearly to his hip. Even his fingernails were long; they ran an inch past his tips and ended in lopsided blockish cuts, like they had been crudely clipped. The aspect that shocked me the most, however, was how incredibly thin he was. His arms, jutting out of the teal hospital gown he wore, looked like they belonged on a scarecrow, and the skin sucked so tightly to his skull that I could see the veins in his temple pulse. This man is going to die, I thought.

*

As we discuss that first meeting, Abbas stands up from the table and begins to absentmindedly pace the perimeter of the room, lightly touching each corner in turn before starting the process over again. I am reminded of a zoo animal circling its cage, a trait that I recall being told is a sign of insanity in the animal.

I ask him if thinking back to this time makes him anxious, and he admits that this is the case. I tell him that we can stop for the day, although truthfully there is a lot more I'd like to ask him about both the events of ten years ago and his life since, especially as I'm only scheduled to be in town until tomorrow night.

He pauses and looks again out the kitchen window. It frames a eucalypt branch upon which two magpies sit, backlit by the furious red of the setting sun.

'Do you like to run?' he asks me.

*

I will never forget the look of terror on Abbas' face as he sat in that closet and listened to me explain, via a mixture of basic English and Google translate, what the editorial team at *The Guardian* wanted him to do. At first, our thought had been to try and smuggle Abbas out the same way I had smuggled myself in the year before. This would be the safest method, but it also meant sacrificing the story. According to Abbas, there were many others still stuck inside the processing centre, but the only proof we had of this was his word. By the time he got to Australia and spoke up, the government would likely have realized he was missing, and the whole operation might have been packed up and shipped off to God knows where. Furthermore, if Abbas was to go public, he would surely be condemning himself to deportation back to Afghanistan or worse. No, as far as we could tell, the only way that we could affect real change was for Abbas to willingly go back into the centre and secretly record what was going on in there.

For this purpose, the tech team had supplied me with a mini camera, roughly the size of a small dice and made out of black plastic. They had been unsure about where exactly to hide the device, but as soon as I saw Abbas' wild, black beard, I knew. It was a massive risk, but it was the only card we had to play, so as Lionel and I sat in the bedroom staring at the streaming video on my phone, Abbas walked out the front door and made his way towards the distant hulk of the processing centre. He waited outside the gate as instructed, and when the startled guards arrived and dragged him inside, he acted disorientated and confused in the exact manner that we had discussed.

It is very important, I had told him, that you act like you think you are still dreaming.

The guards took him into a small, non-descript room that I imagine was previously used for solitary confinement. They left him alone for fifteen minutes, during which time I could barely breathe. For all I knew, they would come back in and put a bullet in his head and that

would be that. Instead, a balding man in glasses and a white lab coat entered with two guards at his back. He was holding a syringe.

‘You’ve had quite the ordeal’, he said. ‘This will help calm you down.’

After injecting the syringe’s clear fluid into Abbas’ arm, the balding man and the two guards simply stood there and stared. It was an eerie feeling: they appeared to be looking directly at Lionel and I through my phone. After a minute, the video swooped downward, filling the screen with Abbas’ lap.

‘He’s out’, said the balding man’s voice. ‘Let’s get him in there and I’ll hook him back up.’

For the next several minutes, the video captured only the grey ceiling passing overhead and the sound of the guards breathing heavily as they carried Abbas’ limp body. I began to panic. What if Abbas remained horizontal, and all we had to show for the gamble we had played with his life was drab concrete and the occasional flash of a fluorescent light? Thankfully, there came a moment where the guards laid Abbas down on a bed and then tilted him ever so slightly to the side in order to adjust a pillow, and in this moment, no more than a few seconds in total, we see it all. The room he had been placed in was full of single beds arraigned tightly together, like the bedroom of a Dickensian orphanage. In each of these beds there lay a person. Most were males, but there were a handful of women and children as well. They were all dressed in the same gowns as Abbas and hooked up to a variety of machines. It wasn’t until after I had sent the video off to my editor and returned to a freeze-frame of this section that I recognized what these machines were. These thin black boxes, no bigger than a digital alarm clock, were, and still are, a common sight in the contemporary home, although I have long ago banned it from mine. At the time, however, I could only wonder what use a refugee processing centre had for a DGS, or Dream Generating System.

*

More luck. This time, the minor miracle that although I am half a foot taller than Abbas, we somehow have the same shoe size. He gives me a pair of grey and lime green Nikes and a matching Manchester United shirt and shorts set, and soon we are outside, turning away from the major road that skirts his apartment complex, and up into the guts of hilly suburbia. He runs at a terrific pace, but I can keep up. There was a time in my life when running was the only thing that kept my anxiety at bay, avoiding the sudden panic attacks that would scrabble at my throat and make me feel like I had fallen to the bottom of an abandoned mineshaft. Those days, thank God, are gone, but I still run religiously, addicted to the way that motion seems to slow down the rapid fire of my brain, allowing me to finally catch and examine my own thoughts. I imagine that Abbas feels a similar sensation. As night closes in and we pulse in and out of cones of streetlight, I can feel him relax alongside me. He begins talking more freely about his life, and soon he is telling me his story in full.

*

Abbas had been in a lecture at Kabul Medical University when his phone buzzed. His mother was calling. His heart pounded as he made his way out of the classroom and called her back.

As soon as the line clicked through, he could hear sobbing.

‘Your father is dead’, his mother told him. He remembers clearly the dissociative numbness of shock in her voice. ‘They took your uncle and burned the house half to the ground’.

It was the moment he had been dreading. In the years after the Taliban had taken control of the central mountain region in which his family lived, the group had begun using false

pretences of banned books or rebel weapon stashes to raid the houses of the educated and moderately wealthy. Not only was Abbas' family both, they were also Hazaran, a minority ethnicity that the Taliban had already begun massacring with impunity.

'They were asking about you,' said his mother. 'I don't know how long your uncle can hold out. You have to run.'

He fled south-west across the mountains towards Pakistan, bribing truck drivers to hide him beneath their tarps or scurrying from hiding place to hiding place on foot. The threat of the Taliban was ever-present, even when he crossed the border into the elevated city of Quetta, sometimes called the 'Fruit Garden of Pakistan' for its bounty of fruit orchards. He gave the last of his money to a smuggler, who issued him a fake passport and drove him to the airport in Peshawar. Under the bright, official lights of the airport he was sure he would be recognized as a fraud and taken away by the soldiers with their olive-green khakis and AK-47s, but before he knew it he was in the air, looking down on the endless brown ripples of mountains that he knew hid sadness and horror behind their folds. It was only then that he had time to cry for his father.

After the chilly altitude of Quetta, Jakarta's humidity felt like being squeezed in a giant's fist. A smuggler drove him to a cheap hotel and told him not to leave until instructed. However, he had no food supplies left, nor money, and so in the dead of night he would sneak out into streets still hot underfoot and he would trawl through garbage bags for something to eat. After ten days of this, the smuggler returned to the hotel past midnight and drove him to a small island where a boat was waiting. As he boarded in the dark, he could barely see the boat itself, nor the people crammed around him. They set off, and as a grey light slowly dawned, he realized that he was mostly surrounded by Afghan Hazaras like himself, and that the boat was barely seaworthy. It was an old fishing vessel made out of peeling wood, and over their ten days at sea, its engine stopped numerous times, the sudden silence filled by a gathering storm

of prayers, moans, and eventually a horrendous communal wailing, all of which cut short again when the thing guttered back to life. Eventually, they were intercepted by a Navy boat in Australian waters. They were transported to Darwin, where they spent the night in a large hall, sleeping on mattresses strewn about the floor. In the morning, the group was separated, each flown or shipped off to a different onshore or offshore processing centre. Abbas was taken to Nauru, and he says he didn't know what to think as the boat neared that tiny full-stop of land in the middle of the sea.

'I knew that I should feel grateful that I was safe,' he tells me. 'But I was also scared.'

The conditions in the over-filled camp were atrocious. A constant lack of water for showering meant people would wait to bathe in the rain, and the toilets were filthy and swarming with flies. The food mostly consisted of stale meat and mouldy rice, which led to waves of diarrhoea frequently ripping through the camp, exacerbated by the cramped and poorly ventilated accommodation. Nearly every resident suffered from rashes and other skin infections brought about by dehydration, the constant heat and humidity, and the plagues of mosquitos that descended at dusk.

Aside from the horror of the living conditions, Abbas and the other residents also had to deal with the psychological impact of suffocating uncertainty. Their lives were in limbo. Like the others, Abbas was subjected to interminable rounds of interviews and background-checks, all of which ended in the same gridlock. He was told that it was safe to return to his country, but he knew this was not the case. He received letters from his mother telling him that his remaining family had fled to an even more remote region, hoping to escape persecution, and she pleaded with him not to return. The terror over his family's fate loomed over him throughout the endless days. Even the pills they gave him barely allowed him a glimpse of sleep.

Although there were many Hazaras like Abbas going through a similar ordeal, he found it difficult to find community. Firstly, the camp was mainly women and children, and the few men were either too far gone to converse with, or else they were aggressive towards strangers. However, there was one young man, a former engineering student, as well as a hobbyist poet, who he became friends with. They tested each other on their English vocabulary, and practiced by writing poems together, passing a piece of paper back and forth for an entire day, taking turns one line at a time.

When this young man cut his wrists open with a sliver of wire that he had snapped off the fence, he left a note that said only this:

there is no 'I' in freedom, nor without it

Abbas tells me that he has been haunted by this forever after. Not by the man's decision to end his life, this he understood, but by how that line's perfection left no possibility for the next.

*

We've stopped now, stretching our legs on a park bench high up in the hills, the glittering bowl of Adelaide laid out before us. I think I know why Abbas has paused at this point in the story. The tale of his journey from Afghanistan to Nauru has been told before. Told by me, in fact, in an article based on a short interview I had with Abbas a decade ago. I can still remember writing that article in my old Fairfield apartment, pre-promotion, flicking through pages of notes from the interview, my web browser crowded with tabs: Google maps, Google images, Wikipedia entries on Quetta, Jakarta and Nauru. The piece had done reasonably well, but my editor and I had both been unsatisfied with it. There was another part of Abbas' experience that he had been

unwilling to speak about in any detail. For roughly nine months he had lain in that hospital bed, hooked up to the DGS. What had he seen? What had his life been like inside that sculpted fantasy of his mind? How had the sudden rupture of that life affected the one he was living now? These were the questions that I was most interested in. Ten years ago, in our previous interview, he had told me only one small, but telling detail: in there, his family had still been alive.

‘OK,’ he says, jogging on the spot. ‘I’m ready.’

*

A month or so after his friend’s suicide, the entire camp was herded into the mess hall by the guards. At the front of the room were a number of men and women in white lab coats. One of them, a balding man, stepped forward with unexpectedly good news.

‘You are all going to be settled in Australia.’

Abbas tells me that people began cheering and crying, hugging people who five minutes previous they may have disliked. Finally, the man in the lab coat calmed them down.

‘Before you can be settled, you need to be given vaccines so that you do not infect the general population.’

Of course, no one had any objection to this. A few needles were never going to stand in the way of long sought-after freedom. For the next few hours, the detainees were called out of the mess hall by their identification number. Abbas says that he was one of the last remaining when his number was called, but he did not think it was strange that no one was returning to the mess hall after their shot. He assumed they were going through some next step of processing. Besides which, all he could think about was telling his family that he was safe, and that he would be bringing them over to join him as soon as he could.

He followed a guard out of the mess hall and over to a recently constructed building that the detainees had previously been forbidden from entering. They entered a plain concrete corridor, and then turned left into a small room with nothing inside but a single chair. A woman in a white lab coat was waiting next to the chair, a syringe already poised in her blue-gloved hand.

As he sat down, Abbas, ever the curious medical student, asked the woman which vaccine they were administering. She didn't reply.

*

Unless you were living under a rock ten years ago, you probably know what happened next.

An unconscious Abbas was carried into a room full of similarly unconscious detainees, and placed in a hospital bed, where he was kept in an induced coma via a regular supply of barbiturates. To keep him alive, he was also hooked up to a ventilator and an IV drip, and he was twice daily given a dose of liquid nutrients through a nasogastric tube. He was also injected with a drug called G-CSF, most often used by cancer patients recovering from chemotherapy, to boost his immune system by stimulating bone marrow to ramp up its production of white blood cells. Finally, the electrodes of a Sony-brand DGS machine were placed on his scalp, and the dream parameters were set to deliver him a dreamscape based on the keywords of 'happiness', 'freedom' and 'success'. Abbas lay in this state for forty-eight hours while Serco staff took blood tests for a gamut of transmittable diseases. When he was cleared, they began drawing plasma from his body.

*

Although the procedure has now been almost completely debunked, there was a period when blood transfusions from the young to the old were being touted as science's answer to the mythical fountain of youth. The craze began in the wake of a Stanford University experiment in which pairs of old and young rodents were sewed together in parabiosis. The results seemed to suggest that the circulation of blood from the young mice to the old fought back the effects of ageing, with the older mice outperforming their control group in a range of spatial-memory tests. Despite no evidence that the results of this experiment could be transferred to human subjects, a bunch of start-ups quickly formed and began enlisting desperate older clients in trials whose entry fees often reached six-figures. Before long, one of the biggest companies in the world had joined in on the con: Serco. Like the other companies, Serco promised that regular infusions of its plasma could do everything from smoothing out wrinkles to staving off cancer. Serco's product, however, came with a twist: the plasma it used was only drawn from truly, deeply happy subjects. Referencing a number of legitimate studies linking happiness to lower blood pressure and stronger immune systems, Serco claimed that its patented 'Bliss Plasma' was a hundred times more potent than the standard transfusions offered by its competitors and was therefore worth the significantly higher price they demanded. The 'Serco Papers', released by *The Guardian* a few months after I first broke the story, showed that the company's exclusive clientele could certainly afford this premium price. Unlike other companies who spruiked their products publicly at glitzy health and ageing symposiums, Serco targeted only elderly members of the ultra-wealthy, and their presentations were always conducted in secret and protected by extensive NDAs. Before long, a global coterie of oligarchs, techno-billionaires and world leaders were all sinking their fangs into Serco's pool of young, happy dreamers, and the governments of Australia and Nauru just took their money and looked the other way.

*

Abbas knew next to nothing about Australia before he fled his home, and so the country he arrived in was a cartoon fantasy assembled from scraps of popular culture and cliché. As part of his ‘settlement’, he was given a two-storey house surround by a large kale-green lawn spotted with koala-clustered Eucalypts. Every morning, Abbas had to beep his car horn to wake the mass of kangaroos lazing in his driveway. At one end of his suburban Sydney street sat the Harbor Bridge. Down the other end: the red hulk of Uluru. He can’t help but smile when he tells me that every single knife in his kitchen drawer was the size of a machete.

Upon settling in this quiet paradise, Abbas immediately enrolled in university, although he tells me that he doesn’t remember ever actually studying, only the moment when he received his Medical diploma in front of a cheering audience.

‘It was like this,’ he says, snapping his fingers. ‘And then I was a doctor’.

Of course, it is not uncommon that a DGS simulation plays around with time in the manner that Abbas describes, editing out the mundane in favour of high impact emotional events. After all, when was the last time you remember peeing in a dream, or sitting down to do your taxes? To the dreamer, skating over these gaps in the narrative feels as logical as having two national landmarks bookend a single street.

Abbas took it in his stride, therefore, when he was suddenly employed at a stately hospital whose mustard-yellow curtains and wood panelled walls he recognized much later as the set of *Ayushman*, an Indian medical drama which was popular in Afghanistan. He remembers feeling a sense of peace and fulfilment as he tended to his patients, Hugh Jackman and Nicole Kidman, the only two Australians he knew. He also remembers the magpies that would fly into the hospital windows again and again and again, little smeared raspberries of their blood left on the panes.

With his cool salary of one million dollars a week, Abbas could soon afford to pay for his family's visas. Bizarrely, they arrived on a seven-tier luxury liner, disembarking on the white gold of Bondi Beach. There were nine of them in total: his mother, two brothers, one sister, his grandmother, and both sets of aunts and uncles. Holding each in his arms, he tells me, was the single great pleasure he has ever experienced. I ask him why he thinks his father couldn't make the journey as well.

'I think it would have been too much joy,' he says. 'The brain can only believe so much before there is a reaction. Take these magpies, for example.'

One of them careens into a streetlight above us, sending down a hail of glass. We brush the shards from our hair and keep running.

Although the events Abbas describes—arriving in Australia, graduating, working, saving his family—may have felt to him like they took place over years, it is more likely that this was all a single cycle of the DGS, taking place over eight hours or so. Mostly likely, Abbas would have gone through this exact same cycle again and again; without the new stimulus that comes from walking around and using one's senses in the world, Abbas would have had nothing to change each cycle's interpretations of the keywords set by Serco. Which is what makes it all the stranger that things *did* change in Abbas' final cycle, the one from which he miraculously awoke.

*

Despite its name, the DGS does not create actual dreams. They are merely simulations, plastered on top of the real dreaming that occurs during REM sleep. Unlike real dreams, which are unpredictable and mostly uncontrollable, DGS simulations are partially preprogramed according to a set of keywords—i.e. 'happiness', 'sexy', 'exciting'—from which the brain

creates a personalized fantasy. DGS simulations can be just as scary or upsetting as real dreams, but only if the user chooses them to be (I once did a feature on the surprisingly large subset of sadomasochistic DGS users who intentionally undergo torture every single night). Any events that go against the chosen keywords simply should not occur, but there are occasional reports of glitches that leave users with bizarre simulation experiences. Analysis of these reports shows that these instances usually occur when the brain takes the chosen keyword more seriously than intended and tries to manifest it *beyond* the simulation. For example, if a user chooses ‘happiness’ as a keyword, but their subconscious recognizes how deeply unhappy their addiction to DGS simulations is making them, they might well find their simulations to be so unexpectedly horrific that they are scared off of them for good. DGS programmers have done remarkably well to limit this sort of glitch, but at the end of the day they are working with the human brain, whose mysterious, untapped depths make the Mariana Trench look like a kiddie pool. In Abbas’ case, I think it fairly clear which keyword wreaked havoc on his simulation, destroying his fantasy and terrifying him to the extent that it managed to jolt him awake against all the odds.

Freedom.

*

The glitch started with Nicole Kidman. She was recuperating in hospital after surgery to remove an adenoma, which had been pressing against her pituitary gland and throwing her hormones into wild flux. Abbas, who had been planning to specialize in endocrinology at Kabul Medical, was checking up with her post-op.

‘Your levels are low at the moment,’ he said. ‘How do you feel?’

‘m still feelng dizzy’, she told him. ‘Lke the room s spnnng’.

At first, he thought she was having a stroke, which was always a danger after a major operation. He was well-versed in the warning signs: a drooping face or arm, sudden dizziness, confusion, and, most of all, inexplicably slurred speech. Without hesitation, he slammed the emergency alarm affixed to the wall behind her bed, and he started to guide her down into a supine position on the bed, in case the emergency team needed to do CPR.

‘What are you doing?’ she asked, looking at him strangely, and pushing back against his palm with surprising strength.

‘s alright. Le down. The doctor s coming.’

When he heard the garble of his own words, he froze.

‘What s happenng’, he said. ‘What s ths?’

Nicole looked up at him with terrified eyes. Her irises were a cerulean blue. They seemed to expand until they encompassed the entire room and Abbas watched from the shoreline as the boat carrying his family loomed into view. The sand was hot beneath his bare feet. Nearby, a flock of magpies were squabbling over an old pair of grey and lime green running shoes. They scattered when the huge ship ran aground onto the beach, carving a valley in the wet sand. A gangplank unfurled from the ship like a giant tongue and Abbas’ family began walking down towards him. He hurried over, the earlier uneasiness at the hospital fading as he focused on the joy of finally holding his mother in his arms. But when he reached the bottom of the gangplank, his heart sunk. Between the arch of his mother’s brow and the nub of her nose was a void of blank skin. Behind her, the others were the same, and all of them had their arms wagging about in front of them in the manner of the blind. His mother’s hands found his face and at first, they gently stroked his cheek and he began to calm, but then she screamed and began to claw at his eyes, and he understood that she meant to take his vision from him forever. He turned and began to run. He ran for what seemed like hours and yet he made no progress, the same stretch of beach looping before him again and again. Gradually,

he began to understand that his hope of escape was not to move into the distance but to move *behind* it. The world he saw was a pretence that could be scraped aside as easily as wet paper. He stopped running. The world went suddenly black. He scratched out at the darkness; he could feel it gathering beneath his fingernails like dirt, and he kept going until there two small eyeholes through which a bright light shone, and when he put his eyes up against these holes, he was staring up at a concrete ceiling and there was a tube up his nose.

*

By the time we return to the front of Abbas' apartment complex it is deep night and my lungs are ragged. I can barely gather up enough air to thank Abbas for his time and tell him that I'll see him tomorrow.

'Be careful,' he says, shaking my hand. 'They'll be out in force after a talk like that.'

He's right. All the way home, the magpies dive-bomb the car, appearing suddenly in the beam of my lights and whumping up against the grill. They also fill the lobby and hallways of the hotel and I can't help but step on them as I pass by, their wing bones snapping beneath my feet like dry twigs. I rush into my room. I have to pee badly, but I find that there is no toilet in the bathroom and then there is no bathroom and then I don't have to go anymore. Instead, I lie in bed and turn on the news. A reporter is walking down a carpeted hallway, passing old people in wheelchairs.

'Despite being granted free tuition to whichever university he chose,' says the reporter, 'Abbas never attempted to complete his medical training. Instead, he has spent the last decade getting drained at this aged care home. Which begs the question: why did he give up on his dreams? Why is he such a fucking coward? And what will finally wake him up? Let's ask the man himself.'

Abbas fills the screen. He looks pale and anaemic, just like he did when I first found him in that closet. There is a wet, smacking sound. An old man is munching on Abbas' wrist. A drop of blood falls onto the old man's shirt, landing right beneath the 'o'.

'Is it true,' asks the reporter, 'that you're too chickenshit to even attempt being happy?'

Abbas tries to reply, but he's too weak.

'Pathetic,' says the reporter, turning to face me. 'And what about you then? Do you think this man is beyond help?'

'Leave him alone,' I say. 'You don't know what he's gone through.'

The reporter starts laughing. So does the old man. He's toothless, pools of blood jiggling in the shallow indents of his gums.

'Run, Abbas,' I shout. 'Get out of there. It's not too late.'

'Oh, here we go again,' says Claire, stretching up on her tiptoes to reach the reporter's microphone. 'Sissy Stevie is on the run.'

*

I meet Abbas outside the church. He's a waif, practically translucent, and I have to carry him inside. Under the harsh lights of the backroom, arrivals are clustered around a plastic fold-out table, pouring coffee from an urn and piling glazed donuts and danishes onto small paper plates. I sit us down and wait for the others to settle into the circle of chairs. How many of these have I been to? A hundred? A thousand? More? They never did me any good, but that doesn't mean it's too late for Abbas. He has to learn not to be scared, that no matter how hard the real world is, escape is not the answer.

'Well,' says the moderator, once everyone is seated. 'I see a familiar face and a new one, too. Which of you would like to start us off?'

I turn to Abbas, hoping that he'll speak, but he's too far gone. He looks like he's been drawn in pencil and then erased.

'I guess I'll go then,' I say. 'Hi. My name is Steve and I'm a DSG addict.'

'Hi Sissy Stevie,' says the group.

I start to tell them my story. About how I studied journalism, how it had always been my dream to expose the evildoings of the rich and powerful. But after I graduated, the shitty job market had scared me, and I'd ended up doing PR at Serco. A few miserable years later, the first DSG models began arriving on the market.

As I'm talking, the moderator walks over to me and pinches me hard on the cheek. His fingers are sharp and bony, like a bird's beak.

'That's not the fucking story we want, S.S.'

Pain flares in my cheek, and for a second I realize how thin the veil is. If I wanted to, I could simply reach out and scrape everything aside. I sit on my hands.

'That's not important,' I say. 'Come on. I was just a kid.'

The group starts singing in unison: *for the premierships a cakewalk*

'It has no connection to who I am now.'

for good ol' Collingwood

'Guys, I don't want to go there.'

The moderator pinches me again. I see a tear in the veil open up momentarily, white light slicing through.

'O.K., O.K. Jesus. I'll talk about it if that's what you want.'

Abbas sits down on the white chair. I sit down on the black. He pours me a cup of Kahwah, which is obviously a trick. I don't know what fucking Kahwah tastes like. I never did. You can sit in a dark room all you like, but it's never the same dark as a tarp over your head, waiting for the truck to slow, the guns pointing at you in the sudden light.

Cleverly, Abbas has tied my feet together. They'll be no running this time. He watches me silently with his muddy red eyes, feathers glinting in the dying light.

'I was ten years old,' I tell him. 'And I had a crush on a girl named Claire. I used to walk her home, even though it was a bunch of blocks out of my way. This one morning, we're walking to school, and I've decided to tell her I like her. What does that even mean at ten? I don't know, but it seemed serious enough to me at the time. My heart felt like it was detonating. I'm sweating like a pig even though it's only September, barely even Spring. We're turning down the last block to school, this beautiful street all lined up with eucalypts, and I'm thinking, well this is it. Now is the time you say something, and I can actually feel the words rolling up my throat when suddenly there's this black flash at the corner of my vision, and something tugs sharply at my hair. I bolt. I'm two hundred metres down the street in Olympic time before I even think to look back. Claire is huddled up in a little ball, and this gang of magpies, at least four of them, are taking turns to dive bomb her. Every time they make contact, she squeals, and even from a distance I can see the blood starting to drip from her forehead and arms. I know that she needs help. I know that I have to do something. I know all this, and yet I just turn and walk away. I enter the school grounds. I get a drink of water from a fountain. I go to class. It's as if nothing has happened. For an hour and half, I actually manage to convince myself that nothing *did* happen. It's like I've willed amnesia on myself. But then the recess bell rings, and I go outside and there's Claire, blue Band-Aids up and down her arm. She's surrounded by a bunch of kids, and one of them shouts when he sees me, and the whole group turns. They're all staring at me hungrily. I know my life is now hell, but that doesn't even matter. What matters is the look in Claire's eyes.'

*

The veil is in tatters. Abbas' living room is bathed in so much light that it's hard to focus, to see the shape of things. I don't want to go. It makes me feel sick, thinking of what I'll find on the other side. Night after night in those sterile rooms, drinking bad coffee, listening to others dribble on about their sad lives, or worse, listening to yourself. I tell myself that I don't have time for all that. I have a story to file. A man wakes up with a tube down his throat, months of barbiturates in his veins, and he manages to claw his way to safety. After all that, are you really going to abandon him? I close my eyes, blocking out the light. I sink into the darkness. My phone wakes me up, rattling across my bedside table. Still groggy, I pick it up, and look at the screen. I don't recognize the number. But I do recognize the country code.

PROPOSITION **1** **REPEALS BAN ON PASSAGE THROUGH INTER-U.S.A. TUNNEL. INITIATIVE CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT.**

OFFICIAL TITLE AND SUMMARY

PREPARED BY THE ATTORNEY GENERAL

The text of this measure can be found on the Secretary of State's website at <http://voterguide.usa2.gov>.

- Adds a thirty-second amendment to the U.S.A-2 Constitution that repeals the twenty-eighth amendment and authorizes human passage through the Inter-U.S.A. Tunnel.
- Allows for certain citizens of U.S.A.-1 to claim asylum in U.S.A.-2.
- Authorizes new tunnels for transportation of renewable energy waste to U.S.A.-1.

SUMMARY OF LEGISLATIVE ANALYST'S ESTIMATE OF GOVERNMENT FISCAL IMPACT:

- Resettlement and welfare costs for 25 million refugees is expected to cost around three trillion USD. Cost to be borne by a 'Repatriation Tax' for asylum seekers and their descendants, as well as government savings on renewable energy waste storage.

ANALYSIS BY LEGISLATIVE ANALYST

BACKGROUND

U.S.A.-1 Is in Trouble

Recent transmissions from U.S.A.-1 indicate a country and world in full ecological meltdown. The annual average temperature has risen by 7°F over the last half century. Due to rapidly elevating sea levels and near-constant hurricanes, the East Coast is mostly lost. The Midwest is a perpetual blizzard; the Southwest is unbearably hot; and a state-wide forest fire has devastated California. Most of the survivors have decamped to the relatively unaffected Pacific North-West, but resource tensions have provoked gang-like factions into attacking one another.

Federal and state governments appear to have largely been dissolved.

The 28th Amendment Bans Human Passage

The Centre for U.S.A.-1 Relations has received over thirty million requests for asylum in U.S.A.-2. However, the 28th Amendment to the Constitution bans all human passage through the Inter-U.S.A. Tunnel. The Great Split Pact required both countries to make this amendment to their respective constitutions. Currently, the U.S.A.-2 side of the tunnel is shut to everything but electromagnetic transmissions and opening it would require a constitutional amendment.

Green Technology is Difficult to Store
U.S.A.-2's successful transition to renewable energy has created a storage problem for used technology, such as solar panels, lithium-ion batteries and wind turbine blades. Safe storage of this waste is costly and available space is increasingly difficult to find.

PROPOSAL

Amends the Constitution

The 28th Constitutional amendment stipulates that 'no human, animal, or otherwise physical object shall pass through the Inter-U.S.A. Tunnel without exception'. Proposition 1, also known as the SOS (Save Our Sisters) Act would introduce a 32nd amendment that repeals this, although the ban on animals will remain.

Offers Asylum to U.S.A.-1 Citizens

The SOS Act also authorizes citizens of U.S.A.-1 to claim asylum in U.S.A.-2 via the same Form I-589 application process currently in use for other refugees. However, the act sets limits on who can claim asylum from U.S.A.-1. Only applicants who were minors (seventeen years of age or younger) at the time of the Great Split may apply. Those who were adults (eighteen years of age or older) are not eligible. Successful applicants would be required to complete a 're-education' program prior to gaining citizenship.

Authorizes Waste Storage on U.S.A.-1

Under the act, U.S.A.-2 would be authorized to store renewable energy waste on U.S.A.-1, most likely in the uninhabitable Southwest region. To transport this waste efficiently, the act allows for new 'vertical' Inter-U.S.A. tunnels to be created over the designated storage region. The lack of representative government on U.S.A-1 means the act

does not require bilateral ratification to go into effect.

FISCAL IMPACT

Cost of Resettling U.S.A.-1 Refugees

The National Bureau of Economic Research estimates that the resettlement of each refugee will cost \$150,000 USD. This cost includes transportation, housing, universal health care, re-education, trauma therapy and social security payments. With 20 million applicants estimated to be eligible for asylum, the total cost to the government would be \$3 trillion USD.

Repatriation Tax and Storage Savings

The costs of resettling and providing welfare will be offset by a Repatriation Tax on U.S.A.-1 refugees and their descendants. This additional 5% income tax will only kick in once eligible payees have earned over \$50,000 in a financial year. Costs will also be partially offset by storing renewable waste on U.S.A.-1, as it is estimated that a 'vertical tunnel' storage system could save the government up to 12.1 billion USD on storage costs per year.

If you desire a copy of the full text of the measure, please call the Secretary of State at (800) 345-VOTE (8683) or you can email feedback@sos.usa2.gov and a copy will be mailed at no cost to you.



How Does an Initiative Constitutional Amendment Work?

The recent abolishment of states in U.S.A-2 means that changes to the national constitution can now be made directly by the people.

An Initiative Constitutional Amendment requires:

- ✓ 8,744,976 voter signatures (4% of all votes in the last Presidential election) to go on the ballot.
- ✓ A simple majority (50%) to pass

★ ARGUMENT IN FAVOR PROPOSITION 1 ★

YES on Prop. 1 means healing the wound that opened the day of the Great Split.

YES on 1 proves that the citizens of U.S.A.-2 are virtuous, compassionate, and on the correct side of history.

YES on 1 vindicates the sacrifices of our brave First Splitters and hospitable Original Twos.

YES on 1 saves innocent lives.

“The children of our former sisters, brothers, cousins, friends, lovers, colleagues, teammates, and fellow American citizens are languishing in hell-on-earth. They are burning in the deserts and drowning on the coasts. Only we can save them.”—Addison Forrest, Prop. 1 Author, Chair, Save Our Sisters Act.

Association

THOSE WHO DID NOT CHOOSE

Prop. 1 only rescues those who were minors at the time of the Great Split. These are Americans who did not choose to stay on U.S.A.-1. These are Americans who were locked in a death-trap against their will. What kind of country would we be to condemn such children to starvation, murder, or worse?

THE DEBT WILL BE REPAYED

Prop. 1 has been carefully designed to ensure that the resettlement of our sisters will not permanently add to the national debt. A Repatriation Tax on refugees and their descendants will offset the initial resettlement costs. Once they are re-educated into the U.S.A.-2 way of life, these new productive citizens will repay their debt *and more*.

GOOD FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

Prop. 1 takes dangerous and costly solar panels, batteries and turbine blades out of U.S.A.-2 and safely transfers them to empty, unusable land.

“We can save lives and purify our soil in one fell swoop”—Betty DuMont, President, Clean Soil Alliance

NOW IS THE TIME to bring people together and crown U.S.A.-2 as the one and only true American future. YES on 1!

www.sosact.org

Addison Forrest, Chair

Save Our Sisters Act Association

Betty DuMont, President

Clean Soil Alliance

★ REBUTTAL TO ARGUMENT IN FAVOR PROPOSITION 1 ★

Proponents of Prop. 1 are playing on your emotions to help advance their agendas.

WHAT CHILDREN?

Those asking for asylum may have been minors at the time of the Great Split now, but they are voting age adults now. What have they done to arrest their country and planet’s decline? The last federal election on U.S.A-1 saw the Caltex-Republican Party win with **93%** of the vote.

What effect will millions of such voters have on our democracy?

WHOSE AGENDA?

Prop. 1 isn’t about saving lives. It’s about changing the constitution to save Big Green Tech money and about gaining more voters for regions who oppose the recent One Society Act. **VOTE NO ON 1!**

Gary Wesley Jr.

★ ARGUMENT AGAINST PROPOSITION 1 ★

Proposition 1 is a wolf in sheep's clothing. It is a canny attempt to subvert recent democratic decisions, such as the abolishment of the states in U.S.A.-2 and the Storage Tax on Big Green Tech, by playing on our heartstrings. DO NOT BE FOOLED!

FACT: Those leading the charge on Prop. 1 are just fronts for powerful figures:

- **Addison Forrest:** Sister-in-Law to former Montana Senator and anti-unification activist James D. Douglass.
- **Betty DuMont:** Wife of Gerald Forrest, the CEO of LG Tech.

FACT: The Unification Act passed with only a small majority. An influx of millions of new *conservative* voters, many of them from previous *over-represented* regions, would put this vitally important legislation in doubt.

LIE: Those currently suffering from U.S.A.-1's collapse are not 'innocent'. Even if they were too young to choose sides at the Great Split, they have since voted time and time again for right-wing policies that have led to their current ruination.

How do you think they will vote here?

LIE: The government will not 'save' billions of dollars by dumping used Green Tech on U.S.A.-1. The government has *already* offset

these costs via a reasonable tax on the producers of these products. These companies are now trying to wriggle out of their responsibilities by tricking us into breaking the Great Split Pact.

WE HAVE SACRIFICED TOO MUCH

When the alt-world was discovered, our First Splitters chose to leave behind a failed democracy that could no longer keep us safe. We shed a dead system infested with big-money lobbyists, gridlocked politics, and suppressed voters. The recent decision to unify our nation and empower our voters is just the latest step U.S.A-2 has taken to save our democracy.

Will we go back to our old ways and risk our own children's' future?

Will we allow disgruntled regional factions and penny-pitching corporations to upend our democracy?

Or will we stand up and protect our home from dangerous invaders within and without?

Protect U.S.A-2. VOTE NO ON PROP. 1!

Gary Wesley Jr. President

United Society Act Association

Andrew Lockheart Chair

Coastal Alliance Group

★ REBUTTAL TO ARGUMENT AGAINST PROPOSITION 1 ★

Those opposed to Prop. 1 are *sexist, heartless, and undemocratic.*

SEXIST: How disgusting to assume that two women with a long career of philanthropic achievement are merely 'fronts'.

HEARTLESS: Their paranoid ramblings about 'secret agendas' are a cover for a sad truth: they do not care about the suffering of

others. *Innocent people are dying, and we alone can save them.* What could be simpler?

UNDEMOCRATIC: The USAA and CAG poured millions of dollars into stopping Prop. 1 from even reaching the ballot. Their own regional interests trump their false democratic ideals.

Why not let the people vote?

Addison Forrest

Should this measure be enacted into law?

YES

NO

