



ONE NATION INDIVISIBLE

Election Day: 2020



We love looking into the future. Most of the Brick Moon anthologies ponder the big “what if’s” that loom over our society. Over the past few years, it seems that the future is closing in faster and faster to the point we’ve seen headlines that match our so-called fictional short stories. So we figured, let’s not be subtle about this one. Regardless of whatever tribe you call your own, it’s impossible not to see how divisive things are in society and everyone is wondering whether or not we’ll save ourselves, or descend into chaos. So with this anthology, we asked our writers to take a peek into the future of America, specifically Election Day 2020. Here’s what they came up with.

One Nation ~~In~~Divisible: Election Day 2020

From Brick Moon Fiction
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Moonlight Sonata

by Jack Moody

“He’s a fucking despot,” Lauren muttered. “There’s no way this will happen. There’s no way. We’re better than this.”

“Are we?” the third chair cellist barked from the back of the room. “Maybe this is the guy we deserve.”

“Don’t even talk like that.”

Martha Brooks watched the television in silence, unable to contribute to the vitriol bubbling up in the living room of her Hyde Park home. CNN cut to the graphic of the United States, filling up with a stark yellow across every border more and more with each minute passed. He’d taken Florida, Idaho, New York, Massachusetts. The yellow stretched across the south, crawling over through the Midwest towards the west coast, giving Martha the unsettling feeling like she was witnessing the outbreak of a deadly airborne pathogen spreading across her country in real time.

“He even took fucking Illinois,” the second chair percussionist declared, slamming his hand against Martha’s early 19th-century mahogany coffee table. “Did any of you even care to vote? This is pathetic.”

The room fell quiet.

“I’m a conscientious abstainer,” one piped up.

“That’s why you’re fifth chair,” another spat. “No passion, no balls. You got no fucking balls. ‘Conscientious abstainer’—ha! What a load of bullshit.”

“Well, did YOU vote?”

“That’s beside the point, Maury.”

Fellow members of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra had congregated at Martha’s home to stroke their upper-class liberal sensibilities and presumably celebrate their by-proxy victory over an evil man running for president of the United States in the year of our lord two thousand and twenty. His meteoric rise to the top of the polls had come on like wildfire, a frightening and confusing development for political analysts, investigative journalists, and ninety percent of the country’s population alike. His policies were not in line with anything any other party in the history of the U.S. had ever seen. Hated by every creed and political affiliation except select and obscure sects of American far-radicals only

interested in the disintegration of the species, conspiracy theories quickly arose claiming that there was something deeper in play. What precisely was deeper in play was up for wide debate and disagreement, but what *was* widely agreed upon was that the democratic process would have no effect on the outcome of this election.

Three hours in, the palpable air of success had fizzled away with the emergence of that sickly yellow burning from sea to shining sea. The table and floor were littered with emptied champagne bottles, the balloons popped, the streamers ripped from the ceiling, lying beside the bottles like dead snakes.

Panic layered the news anchor's words through the television: "We've now gotten word that he's taken Ohio. It appears to be over. We're expecting a concession speech from his opponents any moment now."

"Then that's it," said Lauren, her head sunken into her lap. "We've hit bottom."

The fourth chair violinist leaned over to check if the bottle closest had any left. "Do you think the shit people have been saying is true? About the bombings?"

"That won't happen," said the second chair flutist. "Just angry militants running their mouths. It's 2020; society is too advanced to allow another Civil War. Or at least anything real that wouldn't be squashed out in 24 hours."

"People are angry," Lauren cut in, her face somber and gray. "It's not the same. People are really fucking angry."

The group turned their heads and looked on at the image of their new president, smiling and waving from atop a podium. Confetti fell to the ground around him, catching on the soldiers' fatigues standing on either side with heavy, black M16s pressed against the medals on their chests.

The news ticker below crawled across the screen:

46TH PRESIDENT CONFIRMED. THREATS OF VIOLENCE IN THE THOUSANDS. EMERGENCY LINES BACKLOGGED ACROSS COUNTRY, RESPONSES LIMITED. RETALIATION ATTACKS REPORTED IN NEW YORK CITY, LOS ANGELES, SAN FRANCISCO. DEATH TOLLS AS YET UNKNOWN. NATIONAL GUARD BEING DEPLOYED IN AFFECTED CITIES.

Martha snatched the remote off the table and switched off the screen. "It doesn't matter. Nothing we can do."

"What did that mean, 'retaliation attacks'?" said the violinist, eyes wide and still focused on the static floating off the black screen as if the words were still legible. "Does that mean the bombings? Mass shootings?"

"No," said the flutist, "probably just a few meth-head Klansmen firing off some buck shots to celebrate. The media is Misinformation Central."

Lauren stood and pulled away the curtains, looking out the window with a clear view of the Chicago skyline. “Those were major cities they listed. That’s not a couple rednecks with shotguns in the woods. And even the KKK came out against him. Couldn’t even get the racists’ support. He hates everything on earth equally.”

“Except the rich,” said Martha.

“Right,” Lauren scoffed. “Except the rich.”

It was at that moment that Lauren watched the first detonation in the city of Chicago. First was the disorienting flash of light, then the release of violent and fantastic colors as the Sears Tower collapsed, like someone had hurled a bucket of bright pastel paints out across the night sky. It was beautiful.

Then the sound caught up. A massive boom, dulled and flattened by the distance, shook the foundations of Martha’s home as if an earthquake had hit.

Martha shot up from the couch. “Basement. Basement, now!”

Before the group had time to react, she was at their backs, pushing everyone towards the staircase. More tremors, more explosions erupted outside as they made their way down. She could hear the city alight from within her walls—the faint collective screams, the frantic honks of drivers trapped, helicopters chugging back and forth, combing the skies. The city was descending into chaos.

Once the door shut, Martha reached blindly towards the center of the ceiling, groping until feeling the metal chord connected to the lone light bulb. It flickered twice then glowed orange, bathing her fellow musicians and accentuating the fear dug into the grimaces and clenched teeth.

“What’s happening?” The cellist shouted. “What do we do now?”

“IT’S happening,” cried the violinist. “We’re under attack! That motherfucker! That motherfucker is gonna destroy the country before he even gets into office!”

“We need to stay calm,” said Lauren, eyes darting between the corners of the dusty room. “First of all, does anyone have cell service?”

Just then a shrill, piercing scream grew louder above their heads, gaining in intensity and volume until...

“GET DOWN!” Maury screamed.

As the group dropped to the ground, the explosive went off somewhere above the roof, an apocalyptic bang that brought with it the crash of architecture and nature toppling down over each other in the resulting blast. The walls trembled and a thick layer of dust erupted throughout the basement, filling the room with a translucent brown cloud.

“HOW CLOSE WAS THAT? DID THAT HIT THE HOUSE?” The flutist wailed.

Martha stood, wiped the dust off her cardigan and looked at her phone. "I've got no bars. Anyone else?"

The others slowly gathered themselves, reached into their purses and tuxedo breast pockets.

"I've got nothing."

"Me neither."

"Same over here."

"Well, that's great," she sighed.

Martha began gliding across the room, running her fingers along the film of dust still unshaken from long forgotten objects she'd exiled to the basement years ago: Old boxes of family photographs, records bent out of shape and scratched by the passing of time and neglect, an out of tune violin still lying in wait within its case from her failed attempt at learning the instrument as a child. It just never stuck with her. The music theory was there but the actual execution didn't come. She gave up trying, visited her grandmother's house the next week, and there she discovered the piano. After that moment Martha had never gone longer than 24 hours without feeling the cool touch of ivory against her fingers. Twenty years after that first day in her grandmother's living room, Martha was hailed across the world as perhaps the greatest living pianist, the star of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, world renowned for her almost mystical abilities. She had stumbled upon her true calling. It just came naturally, she would tell the press, eagerly fawning over her world-famous rendition of Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*. That piece just comes out of me. I can't place it.

People would come from around the world to hear her play, would pay upwards of a thousand dollars just for the chance to hear her perform that solitary piece. Saudi Arabian princes, Wall Street billionaires, even her soon-to-be former president asked for a private concert. Some critics would say she might even play Beethoven's work better than the man had himself. Listening to Martha Brooks play the piano was something the ultra-wealthy simply had to experience before they died. She was a commodity of the highest tier.

Martha continued across the walls of the basement, still quivering every few moments from the strength of the blasts still ongoing outside, until coming upon the piano. Her grandmother's piano. It was a parting gift she provided for her granddaughter in the days before her passing. The old woman knew how much it meant to her, and had the great black and white beast shipped to her address, where it was promptly dragged down into the basement and out of sight, a decrepit eyesore compared to the \$130,000 sterling silver Steinway with high polish ebony that was given to her by the king of some foreign country she didn't quite care about. But it was a status symbol. People knew whom she was when they walked into her \$3.4 million home and spotted the shining thing standing proudly in the center of the gallery room.

Standing there now, though, as bombs dropped across the city overhead, Martha wondered why she had never returned to that faithful friend that opened up this beautiful life for her that she reveled in so much. She tapped lightly on the C# key. It pinged and echoed across the basement, turning the heads of her peers who were just before too busy arguing in hushed tones over who had the knowledge necessary to get the aged transistor radio in the corner working again. The old girl was still in tune. After all those years.

“Martha!” Lauren snapped to bring her back to reality. “Do you know how to get this thing working?”

“Change the batteries,” she said, eyes still trained on her hand making the shape of an E chord, pressing softly against the keys, letting the sound ring louder now. She sounded perfect. As if no time had passed since that day at her grandmother’s.

Maury growled and flipped the radio over to pop open the back. “*Change the fucking batteries.* Change the batteries? Shit, I could have thought of that.” He pulled out the old batteries, rummaged around the boxes and drawers until finding four new ones, stuck those back in. “Hey, I got a joke: How many musical geniuses does it take to change the batteries on a radio? A fucking lot, apparently.”

“I hope you’re not including yourself in that equation,” said the percussionist.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Fifth chair, Maury. Fifth chair.”

“HEY, I’M IN THE GODDAMN ORCHESTRA, AREN’T I—WAIT!” With a startling crackle the radio came to life, coughing out a thin frequency of white noise that silenced the room. “It worked!”

Lauren rushed over and sat down next to their beacon of hope, turning the knob through channel after channel of static until a muddled voice came on. “Listen!” she shouted. “We’ve got something.”

Martha looked up from her nostalgic trance.

The voice was difficult to decipher: “*If you’re receiving this...martial law declared...in your homes...stay in your homes...military...I repeat...military rescue operations...remain in your homes until...arrives...I repeat...until military rescue arrives...*”

The transmission then cut out, returning abruptly to static.

“Then that’s it,” said the cellist. “We just have to wait here until help comes. You heard that, right?”

“Yeah,” said Lauren. “So then we wait.”

Martha sat down at the piano and began to play.

24 hours passed before the explosion hit. Bombs and gunfire had been going off nonstop since the night before, but remained safely at a distance, raining down upon the city proper. This explosion was close. Those that were asleep shook awake, disoriented, as the few on watch flew to their feet.

“What was that?”

“It sounded like it came from just above us. More bombs?”

“No. That wasn’t a big enough blast.”

The group froze in place, eyes glued to the ceiling as the light bulb flickered and rocked back and forth. There were screams, then the harsh clang of an object making contact with another object.

“Someone is here! Someone is breaking in!”

“It’s them!” shouted the violinist. “We’re saved!”

Heavy footsteps slammed against the upper level floor, many of them.

More voices.

“Open the door,” the flutist urged. “Let ‘em know we’re here! *HEY! HEY! WE’RE DOWN HERE! DOWNSTAIRS!*”

Maury leapt upon him, tackling him to the ground. “*Shut up!* You don’t know who that is, man.”

Martha rose. “It’s fine, Maury. They’ll find us anyway.” She walked calmly towards the basement door, undid the latch and opened it up to the dim light of her home. “*We’re all down here,*” she called. “*Don’t bother tearing up the place, come down. We’re unarmed.*”

The shuffling of heavy boots on marble floors paused. Then came a deep, gruff voice from one of the men upstairs. “Is this the home of Martha Brooks?”

“*How does he know that?*” the cellist whispered.

“Yes, you’re speaking to her. May I ask whom I’m speaking to?”

Another pause.

“This is Sgt. Michael Conley, ma’am, of the United States National Guard. We’re going to come down now.”

“That’s all right.”

Martha stepped back into the room as the others backed away behind her. The footsteps grew louder and closer until the barrel of an assault rifle poked out around the corner. Then came the soldiers, fanning out into the room. She counted six, all adorned in full military gear. Grenades hung from gray and black urban camouflage uniforms, helmets strapped around their chins, dirt and soot caked across their faces. The unmistakable dark red stains of blood streaked across some of their clothing and boots. For a moment, the musicians and soldiers stood staring at each other hesitantly like indigenous tribes who had never come in contact with other humans.

Then Sgt. Conley spoke: “I wasn’t sure we were going to find you, ma’am.”

“Well, you did.”

The flutist cut in: "What the hell is going on out there, sir?"

He ignored his question. "Ms. Brooks, I need you to come with us."

"What do you mean *she* does?" Lauren asked, stepping forward to stand beside Martha. "Are you getting us out of here?"

The soldiers behind the sergeant stepped forward and raised their weapons.

"You are Martha Brooks, the pianist for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra? The woman who plays *Moonlight Sonata*?"

"Among other things."

"Answer the question please, ma'am."

"Yes. I am Martha Brooks, pianist for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. World-famous performer of the *Moonlight* fucking *Sonata*. What does this have to do with anything? Get us out of here!"

The soldiers clicked the safeties off their weapons.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, we're under strict orders. You need to come with us. The faster you do this, the better it will go."

"*Strict orders?*" she snapped. "Orders from who? You're with the United States military! You work for the country! We're United States citizens, now get us out of here!"

"There's no United States to take orders from any longer, ma'am." Sgt. Conley stated. "Our orders aren't from the government. Your presence has been requested. Now come with us unless you are requiring us to use force."

Maury stepped forward between Martha and the barrels of the soldiers' rifles. "Now, wait a minute. We're *all* musicians here. We all play for the orchestra. That's why you want her, right? Because she plays the piano?"

The soldiers snickered.

"What do you play?" the sergeant asked.

Under the light bulb's glow Martha could make out the long, deep scar running down from Conley's eyebrow to his chin like the bottom of a dried out river.

"Well...I'm the fifth chair percussionist."

"And what do you *play*?"

Maury looked around at his peers. He stammered, "The...cymbals."

Sgt. Conley chuckled, then his eyes lit up, and he released a booming, gravelly laugh. "The cymbals?"

Before Maury could defend his bruised ego, the sergeant raised his rifle up to the chest of the fifth chair percussionist for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, and fired.

The flash of light blinded Martha, the close-proximity discharge deafening the horrified screams of her peers. When her senses returned she was standing

over the lifeless body, leaking a shimmering crimson that pooled out from the gaping hole in Maury's chest.

"JESUS CHRIST!" The words erupted out like they had come from a separate entity within her. "WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?"

Sgt. Conley grasped Martha's arm and pulled her towards the exit. "Now, Ms. Brooks. Let's go." He turned to his subordinates: "Do them once we're out of the house."

"NO NO NO!" Martha kicked and screamed as the sergeant began dragging her. "WHAT'S BEEN HAPPENING OUT THERE? WHAT DID THAT MOTHERFUCKER DO? WHAT DID HE *DO*?"

The soldiers formed a wall behind Martha and her captor, and took aim at the paralyzed survivors.

Then, as Martha's legs crashed against the steps and she lost sight of her friend, came Lauren's panicked voice: "WAIT! HANG ON! JUST WAIT A SECOND. I PLAY THE VIOLIN."

Sgt. Conley stopped, letting Martha's body hang stiff across the steps as his fist gripped her hair. "So what?" he barked.

"I'M THE FIRST CHAIR VIOLINIST IN ONE OF THE MOST PRESTIGIOUS ORCHESTRAS IN THE WORLD. JUST LISTEN TO ME PLAY. PLEASE, THEY'LL WANT ME TOO. JUST LISTEN TO ME PLAY."

Sgt. Conley looked down at Martha.

"It's true, it's true," she sputtered. "Please. I don't know who your bosses are but if they want me, they'll want her. I promise. Please, sir."

There were screams from the group:

"WHAT ABOUT US?"

"FUCK YOU, MARTHA. FUCK YOU."

Followed by the dull thud of rifle butts connecting with flesh, and the suffocated grunts of the victims.

"SHUT UP," the sergeant screamed. He hollered around the corner, still gripping onto Martha. "I don't suppose you have an instrument down there, Miss..."

"LAUREN," she shouted. "MY NAME IS LAUREN MCCALLEN. I KNOW THEY'VE HEARD OF ME. I'M FUCKING FAMOUS, THEY'LL WANT ME."

"Lauren," Martha called out through labored breaths, "there's a violin down there against the wall. Lauren, take it out." She looked up at her captor and pleaded: "She'll play for you, sir, please. She's the best in the world—just listen to her. They'll want her."

He exhaled, and another bomb went off miles away, shaking the floorboards. "Fine. Play something for us."

There were frantic clangs as Lauren scrambled across the room, knocking over Martha's aged relics before finding the decades-old violin. She took it out,

lifted the bow, and rested the instrument between her neck and shoulder. Then silence.

“Well?” Conley shouted. “Play something!”

“*C’mon, Lauren,*” Martha whispered. “*C’mon. Play.*”

Then it came. Through the walls the soft notes of the violin sang and reverberated inside her ears. The room quieted. She had heard her play a thousand times. Listening to Lauren McCallen play the violin was like reading Dostoyevsky. It changed you.

But then something happened. The notes faltered. Screeched. Cried in pain. Something was wrong. The music stopped.

“Wait,” Lauren stammered. “Hang on.”

Something was wrong.

She began again. The first note released like the robin’s chirp on the first day of spring. Like the voice of a dead parent. Then again it fell away. Broke apart.

When it occurred to Martha, it was too late. She had forgotten. The violin was out of tune.

“Wait, wait,” came Lauren’s voice over the silence. “It’s not me, I just need to—”

“I’ve heard enough,” said Sgt. Conley. He tapped on the wall. “Do it.” Martha felt the force of Conley’s strength once again dragging her up the staircase.

“NO, WAIT.” Lauren’s screams shook the walls as much as the blasts decimating the city. “IT’S NOT MY FAULT. IT’S—”

The last thing Martha Brooks heard before being knocked unconscious was the unified burst of gunfire coming from the basement of her \$3.4 million Hyde Park estate.

Martha awoke with her ankles chained to the legs of a piano bench. A man dressed in a black suit stood behind her with a rifle laid across his arms. He wore a black ski mask, allowing no window into his identity but the brown eyes visible through cutout holes. The piano before her was smooth and white and adorned with gold inlay lining the body and impressed deep into the ebony and ivory keys. She sat in the center of a large circular room decorated like the study you’d find tucked away in the back of a 19th-century Victorian mansion. Large hearthrugs stretched across the floors, bookcases fifty feet high stood against the oak wood walls. White pillars rose from the floor to the ceiling, and from them extended long, red drapes decorated with obscure iconography that Martha couldn’t recognize. Two large fireplaces burned at either end of the room. A gilded spiral staircase twisted up in one corner, leading to an ominous black door looming overhead. And within all this sat dozens of men—old white men—reclining in

suede armchairs smoking fat cigars with whiskey glasses held loosely between fat fingers. They talked amongst themselves, ignoring her presence.

Martha jerked her legs, and upon realizing she was awake and this was reality, let out a long, wailing scream. “HELP ME! SOMEBODY HELP ME! GET THESE OFF ME! PLEASE!”

The old men glanced up for a moment, indifferent, then returned to their conversations.

“That’s her, isn’t it?” One said to another.

“Yes, indeed. I saw her perform in Vienna in 2017. Exquisite. You’ll appreciate it, I’m sure.”

When she failed to stifle her cries, the masked man walked up behind her, turned the rifle around, holding it like a spear, and thrust the butt into the back of her head.

“*Play,*” he ordered.

Martha straightened out, tears streaming down her face, the black makeup running down her cheeks, and yelped, “*What do you mean? Please help me.*”

And again the butt of the rifle landed against the back of her skull.

“*Play,*” he repeated. “*Play something. You’re the pianist—figure it out.*”

Martha breathed out, her body trembling, and placed her fingers along the keys. Her hands were shaking so violently she could hardly exert the strength to play the notes. She looked around the room, dumbfounded, hyperventilating.

Then one of the old men chirped, taking the cigar out of his mouth: “Ms. Brooks, play some Chopin, won’t you? Thank you, Ms. Brooks.”

“*IS NO ONE GOING TO—*” Martha stopped herself and flinched.

Wherever she was, this was the situation she was in. There was only one thing she could do to avoid being struck again.

Nocturne Op. 55 No. 1 in F Minor. She played slow and delicate, the notes washing over her, and with each measure completed, a sense of melancholy acceptance began to fill up her body. The trembling subsided. The twisting and swirling within her mind dissipated, and she was now present.

The hushed voices of her audience came into focus, and she could hear the conversation between the two closest as she played:

“*In the hundreds of thousands, is what I’ve heard from the bunker in London.*”

“*Dead?*”

“*That’s right. Millions, though, have been rounded up. Where they’re going I don’t care to know.*”

“*It doesn’t quite matter, does it?*”

“*No, it doesn’t.*”

“*Is it all how it should be?*”

“Yes, yes, no one is the wiser. Red versus blue, black versus white—they’re all fighting a ten-sided civil war without knowing what they’re even fighting about. Poor ignorant fools.”

“Well, that’s quite the point isn’t it? Ha! Poor versus the poor. After all these centuries the simplest idea was our most perfect: Let them do it themselves. What a beautiful idea.”

“And what a beautiful world it will be.”

“Indeed. We’re doing the lord’s work—or we would be if there was one.”

“Three months and the unwashed rabid dogs of the world will do what rabid dogs can only do.”

“And there we will be. A world of brilliant, purebred show dogs. Beautiful.”

“How it should always have been. I’m only sorry those shit-caked devils are too oblivious to understand what monumental progression they’re a part of. Martyrs, almost.”

“Would you consider a rabid dog a martyr for having the sense to put itself down? Well, no matter. Even if we told them all in plain language, they’d hardly understand the significance. Better to let them exterminate themselves in ignorant bliss. Let them fight for what they care to fight for. As long as the outcome is the same, I couldn’t be bothered by it.”

“Is there any reason that he is here? At this base? I’d imagine they’d have hurried him off beneath the African desert at this point. Somewhere more remote.”

“My understanding is that they will.”

“Then why here first? It seems odd, is all.”

“Well, for her. There’s no purpose for artists going forward. I’ve been told he wants to hear the piece once in person before it’s wiped out all together.”

“How fortunate for us, then.”

“Fortunate, yes. We most certainly are.”

Martha stopped playing. She raised her arms high in the air and slammed down on the keys, producing an abrasive, squealing, nonexistent chord. The heads of the audience twisted around and the conversations ceased.

“I’M NOT SOME PERFORMING ANIMAL,” she screamed. “I’M A FUCKING HUMAN BEING. I REFUSE. I REFUSE. YOU’RE SICK. YOU’RE ALL SICK MONSTERS. ALL OF YOU.”

The masked man grabbed the back of Martha’s neck and smashed her head into the piano keys, replicating the harsh sound she’d created in defiance. *“That’s enough!”* he growled. *“Play! Play the fucking songs.”*

“NO. NO, I WON’T. I WON’T DO IT. I’D RATHER YOU KILL ME.”

He grabbed her once more, shoved her face into the cold ivory of her life’s work. **“PLAY IT.”**

“NO!”

Again her head hit the piano. Blood was pouring from out her nose, dripping down onto the pristine white surface. “I SAID, NO!”

“*Goddamnit!*”

The man shouldered his rifle, pressed the barrel against her temple. “I won’t say it again. Play the fucking—”

“*That’s enough.*” The voice had come from overhead.

Martha heard a door close, and craned her neck up to the top of the staircase. The masked man looked up and froze, backing away from Martha, and stood rigid, saluting.

There he was.

The president elect began stepping down the stairs. Slowly he made his way across the room, until stopping at Martha’s side, looking down upon her. He was shorter than she imagined. His eyes were black. Jet black, like opal stones. He appeared inhuman. His shadow elongated and stretched across the floor in the light of the fire.

“There’s no need for that,” he said to the masked man, and waved him off. “I can’t have you damaging the talent.” He smiled at Martha. “I’m a big fan, Ms. Brooks. It’s an honor to be in your presence.”

Martha leaned back and hacked a wad of spit at his face. “Fuck you.”

He only laughed, pulled out a handkerchief from his breast pocket and wiped his cheek. “I have just one request, please, Ms. Brooks. Across the world they talk about your masterpiece—your rendition of the *Moonlight Sonata*. It would be my greatest pleasure to hear you play it here for me. Would you do that for me, Ms. Brooks?”

“You’re fucking evil.”

He tapped the G note lightly with his finger. “I’m not sure why you think that. Because of what’s going on out there? I didn’t do that.”

“Your words...” Martha forced out the sentence through chattering, clenched teeth. “Your words did this.”

“Ha! You act like I’m in charge.”

“You’re about to be the president.”

“Of a country that’s been shattered like a broken mirror. Of a country that no longer exists. In a world that won’t either for much longer. At least in the way you or I know it. We both know I’m simply a talking piece. People have said as much for decades, this couldn’t come as a surprise to you. I’m not running this godforsaken carnival. If it were up to me I’d kill all of us right now. Every single one of us on earth. Drop every nuclear missile on the planet at the same goddamned second. It is the only noble thing to do at this point. But people are too careful, despite their posturing. Most people don’t want to die. Mutually Assured Destruction is a myth. So I have to be creative. There’s no room to be

sloppy in this society. The government can't do it for us. The people have to tear down the banners of their own nations."

"Then who are *these* people? Why protect the rich? Why protect these ASSHOLES"—Martha threw fire with the last word and pointed out toward the passive audience watching in silence—"if we're *all* worthless?"

"Ah, the rich, the rich, the rich," he tittered. "All the rich ever think about is the rich. Do you think you're any better? You wouldn't have a job if it weren't for these people. No one else can afford your talent, Ms. Brooks. You're hardly different from these expiring relics of a '*golden age*'. The men in this room...the men in this room are your true demographic.

"But your question...I align myself with these people not because I agree with them, but because I know they—with that boiling hatred and greed in their hearts—are the only people who can pull this off. With the world in their hands, we can finally achieve the only thing I really want. And *that*, Ms. Brooks, is total and complete annihilation. I don't want power. I don't want money or control. I don't hate one creed or color or religion more than any other. Money is meaningless to me. It's merely a means to get what *I* want. And *I* am a simple man, Ms. Brooks. *I* just want to be there when the world burns.

"Do you think these insulated one percenters can truly turn the world against itself and walk out into the aftermath, step over the rubble, and just own the place? No, this revolution will affect every living thing that populates the planet—I don't even have to make sure of it. Entropy is the guiding light and life force of the entire universe. They will die too. They think they won't—they think they can create a New World Order through chaos. They believe they can live forever in one great, white, rich Elysium. But just because they're powerful does not make them smart. Chaos cannot create Order. Chaos only begets more chaos. They will try anyway, though. And that is what I am counting on. For every living thing on earth to die.

"So please, Ms. Brooks, don't let those shackles fool you—we are all prisoners here. And I am the only one willing to do something about it."

The president elect of the former United States pulled a pistol from out his jacket and pressed the barrel against the side of Martha Brooks' head.

"Now play the fucking song."

Rat, Sharp Tooth, Sky

by Sam French

“The rich! Can’t live with them,” my sister said, mangling up a plastic bottle cap with her formidable teeth. She was only thirteen years old but her teeth were sharper than any teeth I had ever seen. On a human that is. I mean. They were like the teeth of a weasel or a stout. And it felt, at times, when she was laughing, for example, that she had rows and rows of them like a shark or some prehistoric monster that lived deep within the ocean. She mainly used them to chew litter that we found while walking around the world— plastic bottles were her favorite but I’d seen her shred cans of coke and even tear into a nickel— but they weren’t too bad in a fight if it came to that. I don’t remember if they had always been that sharp. I think back to when she took ballet a hundred thousand years ago or when she would visit me in my apartment for dinner, and I can’t remember if she had sharp teeth then. They must have been, right? Somewhat, at least? Everything changed quickly in our lives/the country/the world/the streets/homes/ballet classes/even in our mouths, but teeth don’t just INSTANTLY become weapons, right? Or do they?

As a child and as a girl, she was at war, personally, with seeming weak. We were at war, as a unit, with hunger, homelessness, high winds, feral cats, armored trucks, helicopters, other siblings, other people, rats rats rats (at night), electric lines that had come down but were still live and could get you like a sting ray, sharp pieces of glass, the lack of antibiotics, urban jungles, poorly paved streets, how hard it was to find reliable shoes in my size (12s, popular, always looted quickly and efficiently, everyone knows someone who is a 12, might as well grab a pair of 12s no matter what, you might see them one day and be able to give them those boots), hunger, hunger, jealousy, rage, sunburns, the lack of mirrors or showers, rats, dogs on occasion, each other on occasion but not often, no coffee anywhere, escaped lions, maggots that got in your shoes, can-you-eat-thats, can-you-drink-thats, gum disease, rats, brick walls, armored cars, cab drivers, dusty roads that led onward always onward, the lack of street signs, zookeepers, construction workers, retired NBA basketball players (that was a funny one if I can even remember how it happened), shards of glass, garbage trucks, watering holes, grocery stores, deer, geese, mice, rats, barbed wire, rats—

“The rich! Can’t live with them.” She repeated, she spat out the bottle cap, she looked at me for a response. I mustered up a laugh— or what I thought a laugh should sound like these days— and asked her where she had heard that one. On Oprah Free Oprah, apparently. Oprah Free Oprah is this great television station, I guess inspired by Radio Free Europe, run by a bunch of anonymous squatters and drifters who had taken possession of one of the tv studios that used to broadcast Oprah shows. They all wore these terrific Oprah masks so you wouldn’t know who they were and like Facebook couldn’t tell you who they were. They wore these terrific Oprah masks and if you were able to tune in at the right time, they could tell you really valuable paths of travel, or places to find food, or just like great jokes about fucking rich people that made you laugh a little bit. Once they actually captured a rich person (who knows how) and executed her live on tv but neither me or my sister had been tuning in at that time. We watched a lot of replays of it on ESPN later that week, though.

You sort of have to hate rich people these days. When the whole thing went to hell after the elections, they started looting with us side by side. But when things really started catching fire, they just disappeared. You’d look for them everywhere— I mean, obviously it’s not like they’re wearing monocles or something, you can’t just look at someone and go “Oh hey! There’s a rich person!”— but you would only see really, really hungry people. People who had a look in their eyes like they could stab with their own broken collar bones. People who *would* try to stab you with their own broken collar bones. And then we started hearing about the bunkers. And then we started finding them. And then we started being told to go away. It didn’t matter who you were— a mom in labor, a grandfather with dementia, a thirteen year old girl with sharp teeth and her older brother— you were told to go away. And unless you had some way of getting through those steel walls, several feet thick, you had to listen. Or else you’d just be picked off by vultures. The helicopters and the real birds of prey would just outwait you. You couldn’t win. So you had to hate rich people because they were cowards and because they were the enemy.

My little sister was spoiled, a long time ago. She hadn’t been told no very often in life before the riots. She had these massive temper tantrums— before the riots— that were kind of like sand storms on a foreign planet, or what I imagine those would be like. They were unchartable, untrackable, and you could get lost within them, her limbs flailing and her torso writhing like a snake in a sewer. My parents had spoiled her. They didn’t know the end of the world was coming, of course. So they gave her everything and didn’t teach her how to be without. Which made things extra difficult for her at first. But then it almost seemed to help. Because even when things are at the worst— when we haven’t eaten in a few days or haven’t slept this month or had to trade a toe to a pawn shop in order to get a couple of bucks— she has this deep-seeded belief that she is entitled to have

more and faith that, if she fights hard enough, she will get that *more*. I don't really have that faith that things will get better, and I think that's what will ultimately kill me. So I guess it's good that my parents spoiled her because I don't think she's going to turn into rat meat like me and just about everyone else we know. She's going to find a way out, a way to get what she wants.

Our parents died very quickly after the rioting began. They had been firm believers that something like "that" couldn't happen, they trusted in bureaucracy, the system, whatever, so that when it finally toppled over, they toppled with it. I remember calling my mom from across the country, trying to convince her to go into hiding, and she just wouldn't. She even went to her "job" the next day. She kept trying to fit into a world that had vanished, and so she slid through the hole where it had been. I think she had a heart attack. I think Dad was stabbed by a pre-school teacher. I hope maggots ate their bodies and not humans. When my sister and I had a funeral for them, we used two old mop heads to stand in for their bodies. The handles of the mop had been sharpened and traded for a bouquet of wildflowers. I think those wildflowers were the last good smelling thing I can remember.

We have an older brother, too, but we don't talk about him a lot. We looked for him a bit in real life, when everything first happened, but the minute our cell phones stopped working it became hopeless. But I still I look for him in my dreams— I fly over the entire country, sometimes the entire universe, trying to spot him with an eagle eye. But the problem is that, even in a fantasy world where I can fly, I don't have access to those bunkers. And my sister and I decided a long time ago that that is where we think he ended up, where we think he must be. He's not in an alleyway or a tent-city or a dirt road or a converted semi-truck or always on the move or trading blow jobs for a water-bed in the basement of some suburban motel. He was always good at staying warm, and he had money. He didn't have a lot of compassion for the world, either. So he's probably comfortable, somewhere, eating well, pissing gold, sleeping in tanning beds and being fed fresh fruit. My sister would likely bite him if she saw him but, and I've thought about this a lot, I think I would just pretend I didn't recognize him. I'd stare through him. I'd let him see that he became nothing, that he didn't preserve anything by hiding, because he's already a corpse, he's already empty carbs, he's already just dust waiting to be swept up. Even if he's warmer than we are, he's less.

After we had shot the shit for a while and told a few more jokes that we had heard on Oprah Free Oprah, we had to go find some food because our stomachs were singing sad songs to us. My sister had heard that Amazon was going to be dropping some cans of soup into a neutral zone and that seemed worth the risk. You can't bring weapons into neutral zones or Amazon will snipe you from above but you can still get in fights. We were on the smaller side and

travelled as just a pair which made us pretty good targets but we were also quick. We drew up a plan in the dirt, almost like a football play, for us to sweep in and out with hopefully no blood spilled. We also hoped they would have chicken noodle but it was usually just tomato.

While we walked to the neutral zone we whisper-played one of our favorite games: Law and Order Bunker Style. Law and Order Bunker Style was a game my sister had come up with where you get to fantasize about how you would punish rich people for their crimes if you ever had the chance to. Would you have mercy? If they actively turned someone away would they get the death penalty? What if they had just pretended not to hear the knocking or the screaming? My sister was in a rare mood on the walk and she was being a tough judge. She came up with a great punishment. She said if you had ever seen a person in need of help and turned a blind eye, you would have those eyes gouged out. If you had ever heard them, and done nothing, you would have your ears chopped up. Same with your nose and your hands. She also found reasons to strip them of their genitalia, nipples, and pinky toes. After that, they were free to go— but only into the real world, outside of their bunkers. She spoke eloquently and feverishly about what that would look like— a caravan of dickless, faceless sacks of flesh limping in the dust, their blood creating the freshest river since the Mississippi went toxic.

When we got to the neutral zone the air was thick with drones. Some of them were massive, the size of strip malls, but a lot of them were microscopic and you could only sense them when you accidentally walked through a cloud of them. Those tiny drones were dangerous because sometimes they'd be there to deliver bacteria but sometimes they were there to deliver antibiotics so you just didn't know how to react to them. I tended to just swat at them like they were gnats and pretend that's what they were. We didn't see any soup or really any food at all and we didn't see anyone else. Which was strange. Usually when a rumor got out about food in the neutral zone, you'd see at least 50,000 people. At least. But it was just us and a dark sky of drones. They were like stars. They made constellations. But they blocked out light. And we were still hungry. It smelled like a trap but I couldn't even see anyone who could trap us.

I asked my little sister where she had heard the rumor about the cans of soup and she just shrugged and said around. She picked up a broken drone wing from the black ground and gnawed on it like a bone, thinking, tossing her tongue around her own teeth and the shiny sharp black metal of the fallen angel. She sat on the ground and just chewed it and I actually thought she looked like an animal for a moment. I always called her shark mouth, jungle cat, little lion, dragon spawn, rabid dog, mangey cat, but I never thought she actually was an animal. The floor was really dirty but I couldn't tell where she began and it ended. The sound of the wing collapsing under her mouth's pressure was like a lot of gunshots, muddled underwater. She was a wolf, I think. Or maybe she was a

small bear.

I was staring down at her so I didn't notice all of the drones clear out of the sky, but I saw the sunlight hit her brown hair and transform her back into a human child. Both of us looked skyward to see a brilliant blue, totally empty. This was strange. There were always vultures. There were always drones. There were always helicopters. There were always blood comets or shooting stars or eclipses to make you believe that something would change. But there was just blue sky now and a strong sun beating down on us. I let myself feel hopeful for a moment even though I was desperately hungry and I still smelled a trap on the air. My sister looked like a child and she even stopped chewing on the blade for a moment.

And then we saw a helicopter. And then we saw it land nearby. And then my sister didn't run, even though I was screaming at her to run, begging her to run or to get ready to bite and chew, screaming at her to become an animal, to be an animal, to let herself be wild and savage and feral and rabid because we were going to need to fight because there were people coming out of the helicopter and they weren't wearing monocles but they had bulletproof vests on and guns (guns!) and even the rats were running away from them.

The rats were running away but my sister was standing up and walking towards the helicopter. And then she was hugging one of the men in the bulletproof vests, she was going limp in his arms, she was hanging onto him like she was being rescued, like she had finally made it home. And then she looked back at me and tried to smile but it didn't look right because her teeth were so sharp and it didn't look right because she hadn't smiled in several years and had forgotten how and it didn't look right because our brother was next to her and he wasn't supposed to make her smile and it didn't look right because she was also very sad or at least I thought she looked sad or guilty. And then her smile was gone because she was gone because the helicopter had taken her away.

And the drones came back. And the rats came back. And I was still hungry. And I didn't have sharp teeth. And I was alone.

Cancer Kids
by Lauren A. Forry

Kim grabbed the remote and turned off the TV before any of the other parents could stop her.

“Hey!”

“Come on!”

“Not fair.”

Sticky hands with dirty fingernails grabbed for her, but Kim leapt on top of a chair and held the remote above her head, revealing her underarm sweat stains.

“Excuse me, but some of us were watching that.” Gina, headscarf stained from the sweat of her scalp, stood at the front of the group. Her fingernails, the red nail polish chipped, looked like bloody claws.

“That’s all we’ve been doing for the last five days,” Kim said. “Watching. We need a break. The kids need a break.”

“All Mia needs is a charger for her Kindle,” Gina said. “We need to know what’s going on. All the train stations are shut. Gangs are setting up roadblocks all over the city. The mayor is about to declare martial law. But you need a break? Yeah, okay.”

The others muttered their agreement.

Kim nodded to the nurses’ station on the other side of the glass. “You think they won’t tell us? You think they haven’t been stuck here, too? That they’re not watching the news twenty-four seven? Something happens? We’ll know. You want to keep watching the news?” She tossed the remote to Gina who, not expecting it, let it bounce off her shoulder and onto the floor where it slid to a stop by yesterday’s dried coffee stain. “Fine. But give me a half hour. Please. A half an hour of silence. That’s all I’m asking.”

Gina picked up the remote, tapped her sharp red fingernail against it, then returned it to the table in the center of the lounge.

“Half an hour.” She returned to the ward and, one by one, the other parents followed, settling back into the chairs by their children’s beds.

Kim climbed down and, while no one was looking, swiped the remote and removed the batteries. As she slipped the two double-As in her pocket, she spotted Dr. Bledsoe watching her through the glass. He waved for her to come

out. Kim checked that Chase was still safe in his bed then went out to meet the doctor.

The hallway outside Pediatric Oncology Ward Two smelled of urine that had been poorly wiped up with a spray of Lysol, different than the fecal smell that had eked into the ward these last few days or the rotting meat smell of the cafeteria. The whole hospital was turning sour, like a gallon of milk. From the outside it looked fine, but within it was going bad. She could see it in Dr. Bledsoe, too. His under eye circles were darker than yesterday and a new brown stain that may have been dried blood flecked the lapel of his white coat.

“Mrs. Lewis, good afternoon. Have you been able to get in touch with your husband?”

“Not yet. But I’ve been trying every hour. His phone keeps going right to voicemail. I’m really worried, Doctor.” She made a point of looking at the computer where the nurses were streaming CNN. Part of Detroit, read the chyron, was on fire.

“I understand. Of course. Yes.”

Kim could hear the *but* in his voice.

“But even in these extraordinary times, hospital beds must be kept for those who need them.”

“Chase is...”

“Chase is in remission. You can both go home. You both have to go home.”

“I would love to, Dr. Bledsoe, if I knew how to get him safely from here all the way to Lehigh County.”

“I know it’s a few miles, but it’s not a long...”

“And if I knew our home would be there when we got there.”

“I’m sure it...”

“My neighbor told me that the volunteer fire department was requisitioning the houses on our block.”

Dr. Bledsoe rubbed the stubble that flecked his normally clean-shaven chin and wouldn’t meet her eye. “We need the bed, Mrs. Lewis. You and Chase can’t stay here anymore. I’m sorry.”

Kim grabbed his coat sleeve. “Can you at least give us two days? Three? To figure something out? My husband took the car when he left. We don’t even...” She mustered tears. Made sure he saw them.

Dr. Bledsoe sighed. “I can give you two. Max.” Before she could get any further reassurances, he was gone.

Gina was waiting for her in the ward. Kim made a point of not reaching in her pocket for the batteries, but Gina hadn’t noticed they were missing.

“Dr. Bledsoe cutting back Chase’s treatments?” Gina asked. “He told me yesterday Mia would be missing her chemo today. Mia was thrilled. I didn’t want to tell her that it would make her leukemia happy, too.”

“Yeah. You think they’d be doing more to help us. I mean cancer kids, right?” She kept on walking, the batteries rattling in her pocket.

Back in their little rectangle of the ward, Chase was still glued to his Nintendo Switch, the volume turned up loud. No one minded. The whole unit was filled with the bleeps and bloops of video games from the kids who were well enough to focus on a screen. Until the ward-agreed “lights off” time of 8:30pm, they let the kids be as loud on their toys as they wanted. Kim slumped into her chair and pulled out her phone. Emails from her PR firm that didn’t matter anymore. Dozens of new Facebook alerts. Friends and co-workers marking themselves safe from one of the thousands of incidents going on coast to coast. People checking up on her and Chase so much, she turned the phrase “still at the hospital” into an autocorrect quick text until she stopped responding all together and they stopped bothering to ask. She scrolled through Facebook, pausing to watch a video a high school classmate posted of their local Walmart being looted.

“Mom, can we go?”

A mob knocked down an elderly man in the soup aisle. He got up once, face covered in blood, before falling again. She stopped the video and returned her phone to her pocket.

“Chase. Hey Chase. Look at me. We need to pretend you’re still sick, okay?”

“Dr. Bledsoe said...”

“I know but...”

“If I’m better why can’t we go?”

“Anybody have a Snickers? Mrs. Walsh? Do you have a Snickers? No? Mr. Guarini? I’m looking for a Snickers bar. Thanks anyway.” Penny Salter, her hair combed in a neat ponytail, in a clean shirt washed out in the bathroom and dried with a hairdryer borrowed from one of the nurses, made her way up the ward, hands outstretched like a beggar.

“Mom?”

“We will,” Kim answered. “Soon. But right now...Chase, you know how oatmeal always makes you sick?”

“You mean throw up?”

“I’m going down to the cafeteria to get you some oatmeal. And you have to eat it, okay?”

“Mom!”

“Don’t argue.”

“Ugh,” Chase grunted and went back to his game.

Kim stood up. And bumped right into Penny.

“I’m so sorry, Kimberly! I didn’t see you there.”

“It’s nothing. I’m fine.” She tried to keep walking, but Penny stepped in front of her.

“You wouldn’t happen to have a Snickers, would you?”

“Sorry.” Kim pretended to get a text but Penny kept talking.

“I’ve tried the vending machines in ICU and maternity. There must be one somewhere, but the nurses won’t let me in the other building. Can you believe it? It’s like this place is in lockdown but they won’t actually call it a lockdown.”

“I saw a Hershey bar in the cafeteria this morning.”

“Parker doesn’t eat Hershey’s chocolate. And he really wants a Snickers. They’re his favorite. Are you sure you don’t have one?”

At the far end of the ward, the emaciated boy in the green knit cap looked like he couldn’t eat a piece of ice without throwing up, let alone a Snickers.

“Sorry, Penny. Wish I could help, but I can’t. If I see any, I’ll be sure to let you know.”

“Thanks, Kimberly. That’s so sweet of you.” Penny glanced into Kim’s open backpack as if expecting to catch a glimpse of a candy bar wrapper, didn’t see what she was looking for, and left with a smile.

When Kim was sure Penny wasn’t going to double-back, she tried again to leave and got as far as the ward entrance when a commotion in the hall stopped her.

Everyone’s attention was focused on the elevators. Someone coding? Armed looters? Then Kim heard the laughter, saw the smiles.

Gina appeared at Kim’s side, flicking more polish off her nails. “I can’t believe he showed up.”

“I don’t know if he’s noble or stupid.”

“Did you see that one-handed catch he made against Dallas two weeks ago?” Gina asked. “Before they postponed the season? I’m telling you, Tatum Trask is the greatest wide receiver in the history of the NFL. Not to mention he’s fine as hell.” Gina craned her neck to catch a glimpse. “Even my husband says so.”

“I’m not really into football, but he seems like a decent enough guy,” Kim shrugged. “Certainly cheers up Parker every time he visits.”

They both looked down the ward to where Penny, anticipating the meet and greet, was trying to help Parker to sit up.

“I don’t know whether to feel sorry for the boy that his end is near or jealous that he won’t have to live through whatever happens next,” Gina said. Mia called for her mother, sitting up on her knees and waving her hands. Chase had finally put down his Nintendo.

Gina and Kim retreated to their children’s beds as shouts of “TT! Over here, TT! Hey, TT!” filled the ward.

The six foot eight football star went through the ward giving out high fives with his massive hands and flashing his bright white smile. He wore his usual designer jacket and jeans but his large diamond studs and gold chains were

nowhere to be seen. Instead, he carried an extra pair of bodyguards the size of tanks. He stopped at Mia's bed and gave her a new My Little Pony, a crate of books, plus a few jars of peanut butter, Mia's favorite food. Initially blocked from view by the bodyguards were carts of gifts – toys, clothes, sports equipment and, most of all, food. Not just candy and cookies, but non-refrigerated ready meals, bottles of water and Gatorade, cans of soup. And he was giving them out like Santa Clause on Christmas Eve. When he reached Chase's bed, even Kim couldn't resist his charisma and smiled at her son's enthusiasm.

"Hey, little man. How you doing?" He gave Chase a handshake and a high five.

"Hey TT! Guess what? I'm in remission! I found out two days ago!"

"That is awesome, brother! You guys hear that?" he asked his bodyguards. "Congratulations, man. And you, too, Mrs. Lewis."

"Thank you, Tatum," she kept smiling but looked around the ward to see who had heard. Gina stared at her, eyebrows raised.

"Yo, get my man here something special from the cart."

TT set an entire crate of food by the side of Chase's bed then layered on a new sweatshirt and sweatpants and let Chase pick out a new game for his Nintendo Switch. He gave Chase a final high five and continued down the ward, greeting the other kids and parents, handing out gifts.

"Did you see that, Mom? Check it out. There's a whole box of Reese's in here! And mac and cheese!" Chase kept rambling while Kim kept her eyes on TT. The extra hugs and high fives. The gracious gifts. The food that would last a long time and could be made in just a microwave, or eaten cold if necessary.

"He's not coming back," she whispered.

"What, Mom?"

"That's great, baby." She patted Chase on the knee.

TT reached the last bed in the ward – Parker's – and sat in a chair next to Penny. Parker was having one of his bad days. Kim could tell by the way he was already flagging when a visit from Tatum Trask usually fueled him for hours. The last week hadn't been good for Parker. At first she thought this was why TT had chosen to take a seat, but Kim kept watching. While the rest of the ward distracted themselves with their gifts, Kim saw TT whisper in Penny's ear and nod to the door at the rear of the ward. Penny got up and followed him while the two new bodyguards posted themselves at the door.

"I'll be right back," Kim said, not caring if anyone actually heard her, and exited through the ward's main entrance. The nurses, clinging to one another, remained glued to CNN. Kim followed the hall alongside the ward and soon came to the place where the secondary door came out. TT and Penny stood around the corner, TT's voice low and serious.

“...getting the van ready now. Tomorrow night, our doctors are gonna wheel him out like they’re taking him for a test, okay?”

Penny nodded.

“You come with, but leave your jacket there and whatever else you normally would. Like if you usually leave your purse, then take out the important stuff and sneak it into your pockets, but leave the purse.”

She nodded again.

“We have everything you and Parker will need. Clean clothes, food, water, medical equipment. The drive’s about four hours, but we’ll make it comfortable for both of you, okay?”

“Tatum, I can’t even...There’s no way we can thank you for this.” She started to cry.

Trask pulled her into a hug.

“Hey, it’s okay. It’s going to get worse out there, and I can’t leave you two out here while all this goes down. Parker’s my good luck charm.” He stepped back and squeezed her shoulders. “I’ve got to finish making my rounds, but I’ll see you guys in the van tomorrow, okay?”

“Okay,” Penny nodded and wiped her tears away.

Kim pressed herself against a wall as Tatum and Penny returned to the ward through the secondary door. When she heard the door click, Kim relaxed but didn’t move. She looked down the hall to the nurses’ station where, even from here, she could see on the screen someone being beaten to death.

“Son of a bitch,” she whispered.

Kim returned through the main entrance to the ward and watched Trask say his final goodbyes to the kids and their families. He was as good an actor as he was a football player. He told the kids how he’d see them next month, didn’t show Parker or Penny any special attention, not even a wink. He kept to his same routine. Which meant Kim knew what he would do next.

“Chase, I’m gonna go get you that oatmeal.”

Chase, engrossed in his new game, didn’t say anything.

Rather than wait for the elevator, Kim used the stairs to get to the second floor then ran down to the single, unisex handicapped bathroom. Five nights of reheated chicken nugget dinners and sleeping in a plastic chair made it so she was already out of breath as she ducked inside and hid behind the door. She covered her mouth with her sleeve to conceal her breathing. They arrived not long after.

“Yo, I’ll just be a minute.”

Trask entered without checking behind the door. Kim waited until he had unzipped his pants before standing up and saying, “Hello.”

“Shit!”

He jumped, urine spraying the ceiling before he managed to get himself under control. Someone knocked on the door.

“*You okay in there, TT?*”

Kim pressed her finger to her lips then mouthed, *please*.

“Yeah,” he replied, maintaining eye contact with her. “Someone forgot to flush, that’s all.” He dropped his voice. “What are you doing in here? You want an autograph or something?”

Kim kept her voice to a whisper. “I want to know why Parker gets a free ride out of here and where exactly that ride is taking him.”

Trask didn’t even try to bluff.

“So you heard that, huh?” He smiled and continued urinating into the bowl. “Look, I’ve known Parker’s family since the poor kid was diagnosed in 2017. They followed me in college. We got a special bond.” He finished and zipped his jeans. “Sorry but I had to choose.”

“How about my second question? Where are you taking him?”

Trask shrugged. “Friend out of state. A place where we can lay low for a while. Ride this thing out.”

He turned on the tap.

“This thing? You mean the rioting and looting? The martial law? Where do you ride out something like this?”

He soaped up his hands. “A safe place.”

“You mean like a safe house? A bunker?”

Trask dried his hands without answering.

“You’ve got room in a bunker and you want to waste it on Parker? He’s terminal. The doctors gave him three months at most. You’re wasting resources.”

“So you want me to do what? Take you and your kid instead?”

“My kid’s in remission.”

Trask tossed the crumpled paper towel onto the overflowing pile in the trashcan and stepped up to Kim, towering over her. He had almost two feet on her and hands big enough to strangle her with just one.

“So yeah,” she continued, her voice lacking its usual conviction. “That’s exactly what I’m saying.”

Trask leaned down so they were eye to eye.

“I like your honesty, Mrs. Lewis, so I’m gonna be honest with you. The reason I’m taking Parker is *because* he’s terminal. Like you said, docs gave him three months. Probably less outside a hospital, no matter how nice our place is. And it is very nice. Should be for the money I paid to get in. And because he’ll die quick, he’ll use less resources.”

“Then why take him at all? What do you get out of it?”

Trask straightened up. “Time’s coming when whoever’s left will form their own seat of power. Will be lots of fighting. Lots of upheaval. A new world’s

coming and loyalty will be important. People might be loyal to you now, but they'll forget what you did on the field when sports don't matter anymore. But everyone loves a guy that rescued cancer kids."

"I guess even in this new world a black man will need whatever leg up he can get, right?"

The flashy smile disappeared from his face.

"I mean," she said, "I'm guessing most of the people who bought bunkers like yours are old, rich white guys, right? Probably some with hoods and MAGA hats in the back of their closets?"

Trask laughed then went for the door. "See Mrs. Lewis? You already knew the answers. Why even ask?"

He slammed the door behind him, too fast for his entourage to glimpse Kim inside.

She had twenty-four hours. Then the van would be here to whisk Parker and Penny away to Never Never Land. Kim sat by Chase's bed as he played his new game. Her first idea had been to ambush Parker and Penny on their way to the parking garage. But that would never work. She couldn't pass herself and Chase off as Penny and Parker because Trask himself was going to be in the van. She thought of pleading her case to Penny, convince her to let her and Chase go instead, appeal to her as a mother. But that wouldn't work either. This was a woman who had refused to accept Parker's latest prognosis. Had screamed at the doctors that her son was going to live no matter what. She wasn't going to give up her spot on the raft. If Kim wanted her and Chase on that van, she needed others.

Gina stood in the lounge, smacking the TV remote, trying to get it to work. Kim went and sat next to her, surreptitiously removing the batteries from her pocket and holding them out to Gina.

"So," she whispered, "Guess what I heard TT saying to Parker's mom."

Kim got through the night and the next morning the same way she had got through the last five nights and the last five mornings. She remained calm, stayed by Chase's side, and planned for the next day. Like whispers down the lane, her news about Parker and Penny travelled from Gina to the other parents while Penny and Parker sat at the end of the ward, oblivious to the pointed glances in their direction.

As the hour drew nearer, Penny fiddled with her purse, removing items and slipping them into the pocket of a sweatshirt one of the orderlies had gifted her. One of the fathers paced while another glared at Penny so much that one of the mothers elbowed him in the side to get him to stop. Kim remained in her chair, Chase's backpack hidden under his bed.

Every time the elevator dinged or a nurse entered to check someone's vitals or give meds, everyone's heads turned. No one watched the muted news or read a book or checked their phones.

At five o'clock, two unfamiliar doctors in white coats entered the ward side by side, walking in sync, heading directly for Parker. With each bed they passed, the parent beside it rose, so that by the time they had reached Penny, the entire ward was on its feet. For the first time in days, the room was deathly quiet, so quiet that everyone heard the one man announce, "Mrs. Salter? We're here to take Parker for some tests."

Penny rose then froze halfway when she saw every parent standing and staring. The doctors, if that was what they were, turned to see what she had already noticed.

"It's just some tests," the first doctor smiled.

"No it's not," Kim said.

Gina and the other parents joined in with comments of "Yeah, we know, we heard, it's not fair."

Penny gripped the rail of Parker's bed.

"If Trask can afford to take her and Parker," Kim continued, "he can afford to take all of us."

Voices filled the ward. "Yeah! Yes! My son deserves to go. My daughter..."

"Now hang on," said the second doctor.

"What do you think we've been doing?" Someone shouted.

"I don't know what you thought you heard..."

"Trask is taking them to safety," Gina said. "And leaving the rest of us to fend for ourselves. Isn't that right, Penny?"

Penny looked like she'd been caught on stage unable to remember her lines. "I...I..." but she couldn't get any further.

The crowd of parents pressed in. The doctors held up their hands, trying to appease them.

"We don't care if Penny and Parker go," said one mother.

"Not if we all get to," said another.

"He's got to have a few more vans."

"He must have plenty of room in that bunker."

"He's going to let my child die here?"

Penny had gone mute. The doctors tried to answer their questions, but they were not the answers these parents wanted to hear.

"There's not enough room...There's only one van...It's not his bunker...No one wants your child to die...We have to get going...Please let Parker through..."

It was one of the fathers that threw the first punch.

That was Kim's cue. As the parents descended, she grabbed the backpack with one hand, Chase with the other, and ran.

Nurses came at them from the opposite direction, desperate to get into the ward while Kim pushed her way out. She and Chase snuck through the crush of bodies that blocked the exit.

“Remember what I said,” she told Chase as they entered the stairwell. “It’s just like your videogame.”

But though her son was in remission, his body hadn’t yet fully recovered from his illness. He was tired and out of breath halfway down. Kim threw on the backpack and picked Chase up, telling him to cling to her like a monkey. She continued carefully but quickly down the remaining sets of stairs to the first level of the subterranean parking garage.

When she got there, she realized what an idiot she was. The garage was three levels deep with eight sections per level, and she had no idea where the van would be waiting. Chase’s cheek pressed to hers, she held back an F-bomb and started scanning the garage. Parker would’ve been brought down in his bed or transferred to a wheelchair. He was too ill to walk or be carried, so they would’ve had to use an elevator. But the A-elevators or B-elevators? She closed her eyes and pictured the ward. Which would be the fastest path from pediatric oncology to the parking garage? She opened her eyes and ran for the A-elevators. But there was no van in sight.

“Shit. Shit!”

“Bad word, Mom.”

“Sorry, baby,” she said automatically, focused on the parking garage, hoping she had missed seeing the van. That it was here. But it wasn’t. She would have to check Level 2 then Level 3. And in the meantime, would anyone notice she was missing? Would Penny and Parker somehow manage to get out? She started back for the stairs then stopped and cursed again.

“Mom!”

But this time she didn’t apologize. She had lost her sense of direction in the parking garage. The A-elevators weren’t closest to the ward. The B-elevators were. She ran in the opposite direction. As the B-elevators came into view, so did a large silver Mercedes van, its back doors open, awaiting passengers.

As soon as Kim approached, Trask himself appeared in the back.

“Hell no, Mrs. Lewis. No extra room.”

“They’re not coming.” She let Chase slide from her arms, made sure TT could see his tired face, and held out her phone. The recording started when TT’s doctors entered the ward and ended with the first punch.

“They’re not coming,” Kim repeated. “But your noble ass can still save a cancer kid.”

“Mom...”

“Shh, baby. Please, TT. You want to take charge in that bunker? You want to be one of the leaders when we eventually get out? You need more than a PR ploy. You need a PR professional. Which I just happen to be. And like it or not, it’ll help your case with all those rich white men that I’m white, too.”

“Mom.”

“You know what’ll happen after Parker dies? People will forget about him. Just like they’ll forget about your one-handed catch against Dallas two weeks ago. People always forget. You want your heroism to be at the forefront of people’s minds for the next few months? Years? You need a living, breathing relic of everything you accomplished during this tumultuous and tragic time. Not a fucking picture and a scattered-brained mother of a dead kid.”

She could see him considering. He looked from her to Chase then whispered to the other men in the van.

“*Mom.*”

“What, Chase?” she hissed, squeezing his hand.

“Is Mia coming, too?”

She looked down at Chase then followed his line sight across the parking garage. Gina was running towards them, dragging Mia behind her with one hand, a purse slung over her other shoulder.

“*Stop! Wait!*” Gina’s voice bounced through the concrete garage.

TT was about to close the doors on them all, but Kim shoved Chase into the van before he could.

“I didn’t invite her,” Kim glared, guessing what was on Trask’s mind. TT took one more look at Chase then helped him the rest of the way inside.

“PR, huh?”

Then he held out his hand and helped Kim in as Gina, screaming, got closer. Once Kim was inside, TT yanked her towards him and whispered in her ear. “But you work for me. From now until the end of the world. Whenever that is. Understood?”

Gina was only twenty yards away.

“Understood.” Kim closed the doors herself.

“*You bitch!*”

The back of the van was windowless, sheets of steel covering where the windows would’ve been. But the seats were soft black leather, like the inside of a limo. Near the front was a recliner with an attached IV stand that must’ve been meant for Parker. Kim strapped Chase in as the unseen van driver backed out of the space. They could still hear Gina screaming. She cursed Kim and Trask from here to hell and back. Kim saw the tears on Chase’s face.

“It’s going to be okay, baby. We’re on our way home, just like you wanted.”

Fists pounded on the outside of the van as the driver maneuvered out of the space.

“What about Mia?” Chase asked.

Suddenly, the van lurched and the passengers were shunted forward as a thump sounded from underneath the tires. A heavy silence descended. Kim kept her eyes locked on Chase. Remembered how to breathe.

A wailing sounded outside the van. The van reversed. Kim put on a smile.

“Mia is going to be fine. Do you want your Nintendo?”

Chase shook his head no. The wailing diminished only because the van sped on, weaving up the ramps to the surface level.

TT and his entourage, silent, buckled themselves into the seats, but Kim stayed crouched by Chase, squeezing his hand and brushing her fingers through his hair. She wanted to tell him about all the wonderful things that would be at their new home. An X-Box and a PS4. Doritos and Reese’s Peanut Butter Cups. As much root beer as he could drink. And his own room that he could decorate however he wanted. But all she could think about was the bump under the tires and the silence that had followed.

Until the van slowed to a stop fifteen minutes later.

TT pressed an intercom button and spoke to the driver.

“Beau? Why are we stopping?”

“Roadblock up ahead.”

“There wasn’t supposed to be a roadblock here.”

“I know that, T.”

“Then go around. Find another route.”

There was a pronounced pause before the driver spoke again.

“I can’t go around, T.”

Trask ran his hand over his head, bounced his knee. His entourage exchanged glances.

Kim closed her eyes and held Chase’s hand as the van began to rock, fists hitting it like hail.

She pulled Chase close and whispered, “Pretend you’re sick.”

The Gods Below

by J.B. Toner

We've all been to Hell a time or two. It's the place without hope, that's all. Toss in a lake of sulphur if you like; doesn't make it any worse. 'Matter of fact, I expect any one of us can think of a time we would've welcomed a three-headed wolf or a geyser of flame, just to give us something else to feel.

I held my baby girl the night she starved to death. The crying was bad, the screaming was worse; the clawing, the thrashing, all of that was rough. But when the first grey light started slinking up the street and she got quiet—that was when the Black Gates opened. She looked me right in the eye the whole time: *why don't you feed me, Daddy?* Whether Satan's real or not, he's superfluous after that night.

Anyway, we've got plenty of petty, obese devils right up here. Ever heard of a Billionaire Bunker? I hadn't. Apparently it's just what it sounds like, some kind of underground fortress where the ultra-rich can squirrel away their wealthy nuts until the rioting stops. When they took everyone's 401K, I got mad; when they sold all the soup kitchens, I got furious. But at this point, with everyone howling about those bastards in their Bunkers, I'm too tired to be angry anymore. It's like squandering rage on a pig for getting itself dirty all the time: at the end of the day, a creature just follows its nature. And you can put a pig in a \$15,000 tux, but it's still gonna roll in shit.

My name's John Ember. I'm a beat cop in Detroit. You want to talk about Hell? The last few weeks, I've seen things that vault right over the squiggly demarcations between desperation and plain old-fashioned Evil. Mug a guy if you must. Don't lash him to a lamppost and drive around town with his entrails zip-tied to your bumper. These are the things we'd be doing to The One Percent, if only we could get our hands on them. Instead, we thin our own herd: we do their work for them, just like we always do.

"Yo, Ember!"

My partner, Dave Albion. He was younger than me, and smaller; but also smarter, and no less tough. He ambled toward me with a steaming Styrofoam cup in either hand. (Oh yes, we still have java. Back in November, Captain Renfield

personally gutshot a looter that tried to lay hands on Mr. Coffee, and word got around fast. Some things remain sacred in this world.)

“Mornin’, Dave.” I took my coffee and nodded my thanks.

“So what’s on the docket for today?”

Raised a shoulder. “See if we can prevent one or two of the five hundred murders that’ll take place by sundown.”

“I like our odds.”

A thin sleet was sifting down from lugubrious morning clouds, and all the streetlights were dead. We headed east on foot, past the vaporous husks of automobiles and the pieces of people in garbage cans. Lounging on the corner a few blocks up was a loose congregation of visibly armed teenagers in dark blue hoodies, smoking.

I hoisted my coffee at them. “Hiya, fellas.”

“Officer Ember,” said one of the older boys. “I feel safer already.”

“Well, Safety’s my middle name.”

“Good thing you grew up to be a cop, then! Imagine if you’d gone into weapons manufacture.”

“Good thing.” I held his gaze, and he gave me the good-natured eye-roll that meant he was prepared to back-burner the banter for the nonce. “Listen, we’re heading north from here. Is there anything we oughtta know about? Any big turf wars going on today, or suchlike?”

Jason Morley, my adolescent hoodlum quasi-friend, shook his head. “Things’ve been quiet up that way, last week or so. We hear most of the action’s down by the docks.”

“Yeah, we’ve got armored divisions to handle that stuff. Me and my partner just want to keep an eye on—”

I trailed off. A man was coming toward our little gathering: a man who looked profoundly out of place. Morley & Co. reached casually into their jackets and produced an array of Glocks and Tech-9s that could have slowed down a Canadian grizzly bear—or, at the very least, *really* pissed it off.

“The hell’s this guy?” Dave muttered, his hand twitching toward his sidearm.

“Steady, kid. It’s still legal to walk down the street.”

The stranger was gaunt, almost spectral, and pale as the smog-lit autumn sky. He looked to be at least eighty, and yellow teeth gleamed dully in his bobbling skull. On his head was a black fedora; over all his straw-man limbs was a black duster, and a black suit and tie underneath. He wore tinted spectacles that, anywhere else, would have been merely an average pair of shades—but on that cryptic face, they somehow took away the clue of the soul’s windows and left him a ghoulish enigma. Even I had to stop myself from unholstering my weapon at the sight of him.

“Jason Morley?” he grinned.

Morley glanced at me, and I shrugged. “Yeah,” he said, thumbing back the hammer of his automatic. “Who’re you?”

“Wolver is my name. Mordecai Wolver. I bear glad tidings, Mr. Morley. Tidings of great joy.”

“My socks are turning brown as we speak. Do tell me what I’m so overjoyed about.”

“Why, the Choosing, of course. As you know, the Ultimate Elite have withdrawn from society into their Bunkers until the current imbecilic frothings of the hoi polloi subside—”

“Mister, you’re fixin’ to get yourself shot.”

“Until the socioeconomic climate stabilizes, let us say. But, as that process may chance to take some few years or decades, the Elite in their magnanimity have seen fit to choose a few honored personages from among the common folk to join them in the Bunkers.”

A beat went by in silence.

“Yo, Morley,” one of the younger kids stage-whispered. “You just won the lotto, dog!”

“Nah, nah, hold up. What’s the catch, they hunt us for sport or somethin’?”

The stranger chuckled through his yellow grin. “What a quaint fancy! No, dear boy, they merely wish to share their good fortune with the poor souls lost in the world above. Sadly, resources are limited, and so they can only invite a tiny handful of folk. But happily, the name of Morley came out of the hat, and so here we are. It’s the chance of a thousand lifetimes.”

“And you expect me to just follow you into some dark alley.”

“Heavens, no. That would hardly be prudent.” He raised one sallow hand and snapped his fingers. “Behold, sir.”

And the earth opened up.

*

A sleek white room. Deep, plush antiseptic chairs around a table whose surface both kept the lattes warm and functioned as a touchscreen hypercomputer. Fat white men, impeccably tailored, sat around the table chatting jovially as they sipped their drinks.

“Charles!” one of the fat men called. “What time is it in Hong Kong?”

One of the white-coated servingmen checked his watch. “10:17 P.M., sir.”

“Cocktail hour!” said the fat man, and the other fat men guffawed. The servingmen brought out Cointreaus, Cristals, Glengoolies, in diamond-crusted goblets, and placed them on the table.

“Now,” said one of the fat men, “what about the day’s entertainment?”

“Coming on now, sir,” said one of the servingmen.

The tabletop became a movie screen. Cadaverous, mordant Wolver and vivacious, intelligent Morley: would the boy have the sense to walk away? It made no difference, of course; at least a few of them would take the bait.

“That cop fellow there,” said one of the fat men. “He looks tough. I’ll bet he makes it the farthest.”

“Too noble!” said another fat man. “Look at that jaw. He’ll get bogged down trying to carry the weak ones. I’ll wager a hundred thousand.”

Gallons, not dollars. Down here, the wealth was in water.

*

Right at the edge of our feet, the sidewalk dropped away like a trapdoor. A clean steel platform rose from the darkness underneath and snapped into place with a well-oiled click. On this dust-swept street corner, surrounded by bottles and needles and butts, next to a gutter where two rats were fucking in the crimson mud, it looked like the hilt of Excalibur protruding from a rack of dildos.

Guy that called himself Wolver stepped onto the platform. “Right this way, if you please. It’s quite safe, I assure you.”

“Oh, well, if you assure me, then by all means.”

“Plenty of room on that platform,” I said. “Why don’t Officer Albion and I accompany Jason down and verify that everything’s safe. After that, he can make whatever decision he wants about staying or leaving.”

“Yo, hold up,” said one of the others. “I wanna see too!”

Chorus of me too’s and y’all gotta be trippin’s.

“Gentlemen, gentlemen, please!” Wolver raised his hands for silence; and, caught in some eddy of the day’s surreality, we all stopped to listen. “If Mr. Morley so desires, anyone can accompany us to the front door of the Bunkers. Under no circumstances, however, may anyone else step inside. Is that understood?”

“What happens if we do?” demanded a pugnacious kid with a goatee and machete.

“I sorrow to say that, in order to maintain the integrity of the premises, there are armed men watching the entrance at all times. I’m afraid no exception can be made to the pain-of-death policy.”

“Well,” Dave said quietly, “an exception is about to be made. If you’ve got private security with firearms down there, Officer Ember and I are going to need to see their licenses to carry. Being underneath the city doesn’t mean you’re outside our jurisdiction.”

“Naturally, Officer, we have all the proper documents in order, and they will be presented on request. It will not require your entering the Bunker.”

“So what do you say, Jase?” I asked. “Might be the smart play to walk away now.”

“No doubt,” he said, and smiled. “But couldn’t none of us live with ourselves if we did that, could we?”

“S’pose not.”

“All right then, all aboard. Nobody jostle me, now, I’m the Chosen One.”

With Wolver, Dave, and myself, there were about ten of us on the platform. It descended swiftly and silently, and the sidewalk swung back into place above us. Calming azure lights came on, level by level, as we dropped. The kid with the machete started humming “Puttin’ on the Ritz.” Hope for this generation after all.

Twenty levels down, we came to a halt in a broad open space. The floor was cool, clean concrete; the lights, soft non-flickering LEDs. Over by one wall was a drinking fountain and two doors marked with a figure in pants and a figure in a skirt. By another wall, a Coke machine and a still-functioning antediluvian Pac-Man game. Place could’ve been built while Reagan was playing Soviet Roulette with ICBMs, except for one thing: no dust. It was eerily meticulous in here.

“If you’ll step this way, my friends,” grinned our grey-skinned tour guide, “the door is lightly camouflaged.” We followed him toward another wall, and we could see on closer inspection that part of it was scored. He pressed his palm to a particular spot, and the scored segment of wall slid aside to reveal a simple metal surface, unmarked. “Beyond!” he cried suddenly, and we all jumped. “Beyond is the Garden of Earthly Paradise. Happy are they who tread there. But no power, short of the most advanced military ordnance yet devised, can force this aperture. It answers only to the Will of the Elite.” You could just hear the capital letters. “The time of decision is at hand, Mr. Morley. Will you cross the threshold?”

“Whoa, whoa, hold on,” I said. “The deal was, we all get to see what’s inside, *then* he makes his decision.”

“To gaze upon the splendors within and then return to the squalors above. . .” Wolver shuddered. “I would not wish that upon you. But if you will have it so, then so be it. Remember my words! Unauthorized entry is the bailiwick of those who covet doom.”

“We should write that on Mr. Coffee,” Dave murmured.

Wolver snapped his fingers again. The door swung open.

*

Breakfast was served in the white room. The servingmen bore vast platters of Himalayan boar meat, steaming in the special sauce harvested from rare indigenous herbs of the Amazon. The omelettes were carefully made from the

eggs of wild albatross, incubated to the point of developing the softest meat and bone, then succulently cracked into titanium/platinum frying pans. Mimosas: Dom Perignon, of course, and the sweetest juices of Valmont Grove, a tiny island so subtropically pure and idyllic that a keen-eyed native could almost see Antarctica with the naked eye.

One of the fat men lit a cigar. "I think we've got a good group today! They're showing wit, chutzpah, even solidarity."

"That won't last," another fat man grunted. "They don't have a leader. Can't have solidarity without a leader."

"Still got my eye on this Ember fellow. You mark my words, he's made of harder stuff."

"Not as hard as that Trevinsky maniac last month, I hope!" one of the fat men chuckled.

"Good Lord, no. He almost made it to one of the reservoirs."

"Well, there're new measures in place now. Try some of the omelet, it's not bad this morning."

"They waited too long to crack this one, I think. I can see a bit of tongue in there."

"Well, how about that? It's the snack that tastes you back!"

The fat men guffawed.

*

Beyond was, indeed, a garden. A huge cavern stretched away into the shadows in all directions, filled with hydroponic trees and flowers from seemingly every continent. Nearby was a rugged-looking ATV for exploring the terrain; a silver motorboat floated at the brink of a sparkling blue river a few hundred yards beyond. Up on a hilltop were hang-gliders and parasails for the enterprising airman. Tucked into the nooks of oaks and willows, half-hidden by shrubbery, were doors marked with labels like "SPA," "THEATER," and "HAREM."

There was a long silence.

"Behold your future, Mr. Morley. If you choose it."

"I mean—can I go back up to visit my friends and stuff?"

"Never. Once you pass this door, the Bunker is your world."

"I dunno about this."

I nudged Dave and pointed with my chin: up in the boughs of a nearby tree, the glint of a sniper-scope. He nodded tightly.

"Yo Morley, you gotta do it, bro," said one of the kids. "This is every man's dream!"

"Jakes, we don't know what's going on behind the scenes here. This could be a God-damn cult for all we know."

“So what? Better’n livin’ up there in the shit!”

Wolver stepped very casually across the threshold and went several paces into the forbidden garden. Then he turned and smiled with half his face. “Perhaps I should have mentioned this earlier, but there is an alternative. If Mr. Morley does not wish to enter the Bunker, he does have the option to choose one person to take his place.” And with that, he turned and strolled away into the foliage.

Jakes turned and gave Morley the stare of a sociopath. “Arright, Morley. You already made your choice. You don’t wanna go in, fine. *I’m goin’.*”

Goatee kid’s machete rose slowly, gleaming in the artificial light. “Bullshit you’re goin’, Jakes. I been runnin’ with Morley twice as long as you.”

“Hey!” Morley shouted. “No one’s givin’ me orders here.”

“Guys,” Dave said, raising his hands, “let’s not—”

It happened. Jakes shoved Morley, Goatee shoved Jakes, and the tip of Jakes’ ratty sneaker touched the grass beyond the threshold. A flash and a pop from the tree, and Jakes’ lungs were blown out through his spine.

“You motherfuckers!” Morley screamed, charging into the garden with Goatee right behind him. At the same moment, another hidden section of wall slid open behind us. Shock troops with body armor and MP5s came out, already firing. Three of the boys were cut down before the rest of us could return fire. There was no other cover: we all fled into the Bunker.

Morley and Goatee were sprinting in the direction of the first sniper, firing wildly with their handguns. They had about the same chance of hitting him as they did of getting chosen to live in a Billionaire Bunker. A second gunman, off to the right, fired a single shot, and Goatee’s brainstem burst like a watermelon.

“Morley, the spa!” I bellowed. He, Dave, and I lunged for the nearest tree-portal. Dave threw a spectacular flying back spin kick and smashed the door off its hinges. I flicked out my empty magazine and reloaded as we half-ran, half-tumbled down the stairs beyond. Pool—showers—jacuzzi. We kept on running. No one else was behind us; the rest of the gang must’ve already bought it.

“Where the hell are we going?” Dave shouted.

“There’s gotta be a control room somewhere,” I panted. “A radio, maybe some better weapons.”

Down a long fluorescent hallway. Two black-suits materialized from around a corner, and gunfire chaos roared. The suits flopped against a wall and came to rest in a tangle of one another’s riddled limbs. Morley clutched at his chest and said, “Goodness—this won’t do at all.” Then he slumped into Dave’s arms, and his weapon clattered to the floor.

We knelt there in the corridor, my partner and I. Our breath rasping in our throats, our eyes dark with inevitability.

“We’re not getting outta here, Johnny.”

I shook my head.

“We’re gonna kill as many of these bastards as we can before they end us.”
I nodded.

Moving quickly now, we gathered the sidearms and sub-machines from the two black-suits. Our destination no longer signified, so we simply went straight down the hall. Doors began to open on either side. These men were good: well-armed, well-trained, and cautious. But we were good too, and we had one infinite advantage.

Blood and smoke and viscera. Shell casings tinkling on the floor, shrieks of agony echoing. We were almost at the end of the hall now. Treading on corpses, bleeding from a dozen holes. A burst of rapid fire from behind us, and Dave went down. I turned in time to kill his killer, but he killed me too. I didn’t feel the round hit my neck, but I heard the smack and I knew what it meant. I kept going. At the end of the hall was a single white door. Come this far, might as well see what was behind it. But my legs gave out, and I fell. Crawled a few feet, right to the threshold. A dozen cooling bodies behind me. Just another day at the office.

When she died, my Hannah, I couldn’t think what to say. My sweet girl, I couldn’t think what to say to you. I just held you and whispered, “It’s okay, it’s okay, it’s okay.” My Hannah. My girl. I love you.

It’s okay. It’s okay.

The door opened.

*

“Well, Officer Ember, you won me a hundred thousand gallons today! It was one hell of a show. Congrats.”

The dying man peered upward, looking puzzled. “Wh. . . wh. . .”

“Why?” said the fat man. “Well heck, why not. There’s not much else to do down here, you know.”

The other fat men smiled down at him benevolently. “Not many have made it this far,” one of them said. “I hope you can die proud, son.”

“Hope,” said Ember, drooling blood. “You don’t—you don’t hope. This is—Hell. You’re all in Hell.” He exhaled, and the spurting little rivulet in his shoulder blade dribbled to a halt.

One of the fat men consulted his watch. “Criminy, look at the time! It’s past 11 in Hong Kong.”

Another fat man beamed. “Time for dessert!”

Cell Service

by A.M. Justice

The principal's announcement gurgled over wailing sirens. "Follow your teachers to the gym. We are sheltering in place until further notice."

Brian raised his hand. "Ms. Tuttle, is this a soft lockdown, or a hard lockdown?"

"Shut up, Brian," Mallory murmured, her eyes fixed on a helicopter hovering outside.

Kiera sniggered and elbowed Mallory before raising her hand. "Ms. Tuttle, should we take our coats?"

Their teacher's eyes darted between faces. Her hands shook. "I guess—wait, no. No, you can go to your lockers later." She gripped her elbows. "It's not a lockdown, Brian. We're sheltering in place. In the gym. In the basement, where we'll be safer—safe. Principal Ramirez will explain. Follow me."

Outside, a firetruck horn blew, loud short bursts like a fog horn.

"My parents are coming," Yasamin said, eyes on her phone. "They want me to meet them downstairs."

Ms. Tuttle shook her head. "The principal wants everyone in the gym. We're sheltering in place. Come with me."

More phones buzzed, and everyone looked at text messages. Mallory's said:

STAY AT SCHOOL. DAD OR I WILL COME GET YOU WHEN IT'S SAFE.

She showed it to Kiera, and her friend's eyes flicked to the helicopter. "I've got you," she whispered.

"That's not yours, is it?"

Kiera squeezed her hand. "No, that's a news copter. Ours is red."

"Quiet, Mallory," Ms. Tuttle said.

"Bitch," Kiera hissed as they lined up behind the others. "I was the one talking."

"Quiet! Everyone follow me."

Kiera's phone buzzed, and she showed Mallory the message:

JEFF WILL PICK YOU UP. LOVE, MOM

"Jeff?"

“You know, my mom’s assistant.”

Mallory’s shoulders crept toward her ears, and her spine itched the way it did when Kiera talked like it was normal to have personal assistants, or helicopters, or Swiss ski chalets, or any of the other stuff her family had. She went to MS 199 because her parents were big believers in public school, she said, but it was still weird to know her, and weirder to be best friends with her.

Chatter, shouts, and buzzing phones echoed through the stairwell as they walked to the basement. Mr. Fonseca’s voice boomed over the noise, calling for quiet. For about thirty seconds, there was just the shuffle of feet on the stairs, and then the chatter bubbled up again.

Kiera held up an Instagram video of a woman eating honeycomb. “Oooh, watch this.”

“Ahhh,” Mallory said, “it’s so nice.”

“Oh, I love her ASMR.” Emma pushed between them. “Turn it up.”

“Can’t,” Kiera said, slipping the phone into her pocket as they filed into the gym. The bleachers were already full of sixth and seventh graders, and the vice principals were directing the eighth grade to sit on the floor.

“We should get the bleachers,” Emma complained as they swiped at the dust and settled cross-legged into jagged rows.

The doors banged shut, and Ms. Jackson stood in front of the exit, fists on hips.

“She looks right at home,” Emma sneered. “I heard she used to work at Rikers.”

“I heard she used to *be* at Rikers,” one of Emma’s cronies tittered. “Like, she was an inmate.”

“OMG, that girl is so fake,” Kiera whispered to Mallory.

“Yeah, so fake. And dumb.”

A whine and squeak pierced their ears, and Ms. Ramirez cleared her throat into the microphone. The murmurs died. Above, a light tube crackled and flickered.

“The mayor has declared a state of emergency, and the superintendent has ordered all school children to shelter in place until law enforcement can secure the streets and subways. Our first priority is your safety, so we’re all going to stay here until further notice.”

Hands shot into the air while the tap-tap of text messages rattled through the students.

“We’ve already gotten a lot of calls from parents,” Ms. Ramirez said. “Right now, we’re not letting anyone out of the building—”

“My parents are outside,” Yasamin shouted. Other kids echoed her.

“If you need the restroom, use the ones in the locker rooms,” Ms. Ramirez continued. “Now, we’ve brought some board games down with us, and Ms.

Jackson will pass out some basketballs. You can talk with your friends but keep the court clear for those who want to play.”

Mallory followed Kiera to a corner with Yasamin and Emma. A few other girls clustered around.

“Should we get a game?” Mallory asked, glancing at her phone—no new messages.

“Eww, gross,” Kiera said. “Those games are so trash.”

“Yeah, they’re all missing pieces,” Emma said.

Yasamin chewed on her lip. “My texts aren’t going through, and my parents are outside right now.”

“Just go tell Ms. Ramirez. She probably didn’t hear you,” Mallory said.

Yasamin frowned at the students clustered around the principal. The vice principals patrolled the room, shaking their heads at kids who asked questions.

“Do you want me to go over there with you?” Mallory asked.

“She’s not going to let you go,” Kiera said. “She already said parents were calling, and they’re not letting anyone out until the police say it’s safe.”

“But my parents—”

“I’m sure they’re OK,” Mallory said. “They probably went home and will come back later, when the police let them through.”

“Look at this cute puppy!” Kiera showed them all a dog in a pirate costume.

“Mine says ‘no service,’” Emma said.

There was a chorus of “mine too.”

“What’s your provider?” Mallory asked as the last bar on her phone disappeared.

Kiera shrugged. “Jeff set it up. Hey, look, ASMR.” She pulled up the honeycomb cruncher and sat on the floor. The other girls knelt and oohed over the video, but Yasamin danced from foot to foot, then dodged through the basketball shooters to join the group surrounding Ms. Ramirez. Mallory shook her phone, hoping the bars would come back, but ‘No Service’ was still stuck there.

“On Nine Eleven,” Emma said, “my cousin’s class moved three times. Her parents didn’t even know where she was.”

“My parents thought we’d be safe here in the city,” Mallory said. “All the militias were supposed to be in Texas and Oklahoma and places like that.”

“Remember people cried after the election when we were in fifth grade?”

“Ms. Tuttle was crying last Wednesday.”

Kiera rolled her eyes. “She’s so emotional.” She opened TikTok and tapped the plus button.

“You’re doing a Musical.ly now?” Mallory asked.

“I’m bored. Do it with me, Mal.”

“Me first!” Emma squeaked, wedging herself between them. Kiera started to protest, but Mallory shrugged it off.

“It’s OK. Let Emma do it.”

They lip synched and made faces to various songs while the other girls giggled and suggested different effects. Mallory watched Ms. Ramirez listening to each kid, looking concerned and nodding, and then sending each one to the bleachers or the knots of students scattered round the court.

Yasamin came back and slumped down the wall. “She won’t let us go. She says the police have blocked off the street outside for ‘our protection.’” She made quote marks with her fingers.

The doors banged open, and a bunch of army people marched inside with rifles. Everybody froze. A basketball bounced across the floor, the hollow bangs dribbling together into a hum as the ball rolled into a corner.

“Who’s in charge here?” asked a woman with her hair tucked into a camo baseball cap. She was carrying a clipboard instead of a rifle, but she wore a gun in a holster.

“You can’t come in here,” Ms. Jackson said, striding up to the army woman.

“I’m the principal.” Ms. Ramirez said as she laid a hand on Ms. Jackson’s arm.

“Here’s the list, ma’am.” The army woman handed over the clipboard.

Ms. Ramirez scanned it and retrieved her microphone. “Children, if you hear your name, please line up over here.” She waved at the other side of the basketball court.

Questions erupted while the vice principals shooed the kids toward the bleachers. Wringing her hands, Ms. Tuttle backed into the corner with a bunch of other teachers. Everyone looked confused and worried.

“What the hell is going on?” Ms. Jackson asked. “What’s that list for?”

Ms. Ramirez tapped on her microphone; knocks boomed over the speakers. “Everyone just needs to be calm. If you hear your name, these National Guardspeople will escort you to your parents.”

“They’re not National Guard,” Ms. Jackson said. “Those uniforms—”

“Ms. Jackson,” Ms. Ramirez snapped, “they’re here to help keep order. We’re going to reunite these children with their families, and we’re going to do it safely.”

“Why is there a list?”

“Their parents are in custody—”

“Custody?”

The army woman signaled, and a couple of burly guys grabbed Ms. Jackson. She was big and strong and kicked and yelled, but they hustled her outside while kids shouted and cried.

“Everybody settle down!” Ms. Ramirez ordered. “I repeat: these National Guards are here to take you to your parents.”

“What did you mean they’re in custody?” Mr. Fonseca asked.

“I meant protective custody. There’s a lot of trouble in the streets and people haven’t been able to get home. If you hear your name, line up over here. Horatio Abeyta, Francois Aristide, Yasamin Avesta...”

Eyes wide, Yasamin looked at Mallory and Kiera. “Should I go?”

“They’re going to take you to your parents,” Kiera said.

Yasamin crossed the gym with small steps, her shoulders hunched. Students sifted across like sand passing through an hourglass, slowly draining one side of the room and filling the other. Mallory looked between the two groups, noticing all the dark hair on one side, the predominance of lighter heads on the other.

“Kiera, look, all the kids over there are people of color.”

“You’re so racist!” Emma said.

“I’m not. Look at the way they’re dividing us.”

“Yasamin and Allan are white.”

“Yasamin’s Iranian and Allan’s dad is from Bosnia. They’re both Muslim,” said Kiera.

“Don’t be stupid,” said Emma. “Would Ms. Ramirez be helping those guys if they were white supremacists?”

“I don’t know, maybe,” said Mallory. “What if it’s like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*?”

“Those were slaves. Geez, Mallory.”

“What about Ms. Jackson? She said they weren’t real National Guard.”

“What does Rikers lady know? How could anything sketchy be going on? This is America. This is Brooklyn.”

“The militia attacked people in Times Square last week, and who knows what’s going on outside right now.”

“That’s why the army is here: to keep us safe.”

“Then why aren’t they calling any of the white kids to take them home?”

“And Xavier Villanueva. That’s it for now,” Ms. Ramirez announced.

“There are buses outside to take you to your parents.”

Everybody was silent while the kids filed out. The soldiers flanked them, almost like chaperones on a field trip, except with guns. Half the Guardsmen stayed behind, positioning themselves in front of the doors. A few teachers went up to the officer with the clipboard and seemed to be arguing with her, but all they could hear were hissed whispers.

Brian stood up.

“Back in your seat, McCleary,” barked a vice principal.

“I have to go to the bathroom.”

Ms. Ramirez came over. “Go ahead, young man. Children, there’s no need to be frightened, but you should know there’s a soldier on duty in each restroom now. They’re there for your protection.”

“I feel like Ginny during the last year at Hogwarts,” Mallory hissed. “This isn’t right.”

Kiera said, “I know, but there’s nothing we can do right now.”

“Have you heard from your mom?” Kiera’s mother was friends with lots of famous people—she’d gotten to see *Avengers: Endgame* before anybody else. Kiera had been mad that her mom hadn’t taken her to the super-secret screening.

Kiera checked her phone. “No.”

“Let’s do another Musical.ly,” Emma said.

“Kiera!” Mallory cried as her friend tapped her TikTok app.

“What else are we going to do?” Kiera said.

The gym door opened for a young man in a suit. Flashing an ID at the soldiers, he strode toward the bleachers, scanning the kids. Kiera stood and waved while the principal hurried toward them.

“Who are you?” she asked. “You can’t be in here.”

He showed Ms. Ramirez his ID. “Kiera’s mother sent me to pick her up.”

“Do you know this man?” Ms. Ramirez asked.

“He’s my mom’s assistant. She told me he was coming.” Kiera showed Ms. Ramirez the text from her mother.

“I’m authorized to pick her up,” Jeff added. “Check your records.”

The principal waved her hand. “No, it’s all right. Kiera, you can go.”

“I need to stop at my locker,” Kiera said to Jeff. “Ms. Tuttle wouldn’t let us take our coats.”

“Did you let the other kids go to their lockers?” Mallory asked Ms. Ramirez.

“Don’t worry about the other children. Goodbye, Kiera. Get home safely.”

Kiera glanced back at Mallory and stopped. “Mallory’s coming too.”

Jeff’s eyebrows popped.

“Oh, no,” Ms. Ramirez said. “Mallory needs to go home with her parents.”

Kiera grabbed Mallory’s hand. “She’s coming with me.”

“I’m not authorized—” Jeff said.

“Get authorized.”

Scowling, Jeff stepped away and called somebody.

Emma pouted. “I wanna come.”

Kiera shook her head. “Just Mallory. Her parents said it was OK.”

Mallory stared between the other girls. “What? No—”

“They did, remember?” Kiera said. “Over the weekend?”

“You guys got together without me?”

“Don’t be a baby,” Kiera said.

“All right, Mallory, you can come with me.” Ignoring Ms. Ramirez’s protests, Jeff strode past the soldiers. Kiera dragged Mallory after, and they banged through the gym doors and rushed upstairs. Jeff kept looking at his watch while they collected their coats and backpacks. Outside, sirens wailed. Something popped and cracked like fireworks, and there were distant screams, like in an amusement park, but without the laughter.

“What is that?” Mallory asked, her stomach going twisty.

“Up to the roof,” Jeff said. “Now.”

He pushed them toward the stairwell, where they dashed up the flights. Gasping, her calves aching, Mallory tugged herself along on the bannisters and followed Kiera out onto the pebbly roof. Blades spun slowly and steadily, like a ceiling fan, over a glossy red helicopter. The engines whined as they came closer, and their hair whipped about. Jeff opened the door, and Mallory climbed in after Kiera. Settling opposite them, he passed out headsets.

“Just like in the movies, right?” Kiera’s voice came through the earmuff part.

The rotors spun faster, and the helicopter jolted off the roof.

Around them, black smoke spun in thick columns from burning buildings. Fire trucks, army trucks, and police cars clogged the intersections, where light flashes popped like sparklers. Fireworks noise murmured through the roar of the helicopter engine.

“Are people shooting at each other?” Mallory asked.

“You’re safe,” Jeff said.

“Kiera, I want to go home. If you land in Prospect Park, I can walk from there.”

“Can’t do that,” Jeff said.

The helicopter sped over Brooklyn Heights and turned up the East River. It zoomed past Brooklyn’s three bridges, the Queensborough and RFK bridges, then headed across the Bronx to the Hudson. The parking lot of Yankee Stadium was filled with army vehicles and fenced areas filled with people.

“Where are we going?” Mallory asked, her hands flat on the window panes as the apartment buildings melted into houses. Her phone still read ‘No Service.’

“Do you want to watch something?” Kiera pulled a monitor out of the armrest between their seats. “How about *Riverdale*?”

“Where are we going?”

“A safe place. In the mountains.”

“The Catskills?”

“More like the Rockies.”

Mallory’s heart leapt to her throat. “My parents can’t come get me in the Rockies!”

Kiera’s nose turned red, her eyes brimming with tears. “It’s safe there.”

“I want to go home, Kiera!”

“We’ll be landing at the airfield in ten minutes,” Jeff said. “Kiera, your mother is on the jet.”

The helicopter flew over woods and fields and big houses with bigger yards. “I need to call my mom.” Mallory needed to get home.

“It’s super safe where we’re going,” Kiera said, her voice thick. “There are tons of books and movies and games, and even a swimming pool. You can wear one of my suits.”

“I want to call my mom!”

“All right.” A tear dripped off Kiera’s chin as she plugged her phone into the monitor and tapped out the number Mallory gave her. Kiera pressed a button to make the call go to Mallory’s headset. Her mother answered on the second ring.

“Hi Mom.”

“Mallory, did you get my text?”

“I got it. I’m with Kiera. This is her phone.”

“She has cell service? Anyway, I’m so glad you’re OK. We were worried because they’re not answering the phone at your school. Dad will come get you as soon as the mayor lets people move around again. Do you have enough food there? I think you may have to spend the night. You can use your coat as a blanket, OK?”

Mallory’s face cracked, and a sob broke loose. “Something weird happened. These army people came, and they took away half the kids, the ones whose parents were from other countries. They took Yasamin. I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t say anything or try to stop them. Nobody did, except Ms. Jackson, and they took her away too. Ms. Ramirez helped them—she called out the kids’ names, and they took them.”

“Oh my God. But you’re safe? You’re with Kiera? You’re still at school, right?”

“I’m in Kiera’s helicopter.” They crossed some train tracks and circled above a big X painted on the asphalt next to an airplane hangar. The helicopter dropped toward the ground.

“You’re where?”

A plane zoomed down the runway. Other small planes crawled forward, waiting their turn to take off. Inside the hangar waited a private jet with a door that hung upside down, forming stairs that led up into the fuselage. “We’re landing at an airport. I think it’s in Westchester.” Kiera nodded. “Do you want me to stay here until you can come get me?”

Kiera whispered, “You can’t stay here.”

“Or I can take a train back to the city. I saw some tracks.”

“Oh, honey, they’ve stopped train service. Why would Kiera take you out of the city? Where are you, exactly? There’s got to be a motel where you can stay until we can get up there.”

Jeff climbed out of the helicopter and motioned them to follow.

“Mrs. Fabruzzi, we have to call you back,” Kiera said into Mallory’s headset and cut off the call.

“Why’d you do that?”

“We need to be in the air before the FAA prohibits any more takeoffs,” Jeff said, waving at the jet inside the hangar.

Mallory shook her head. “I can’t go with you.”

Kiera grabbed her hand. “But you’ll be safe with us!”

Kiera’s mother tottered down the plane’s stairs in very high heels. “Come on, Mallory. We need to go.”

Mallory’s chest was tight; she couldn’t breathe very easily. “I need to go home, Ms. Westfall. I want my parents.”

“Of course you do, honey. You can call your mother from the plane.”

Mallory yanked her hand free of Kiera’s. “Why did you bring me here?”

“Because it’s not safe in the city! You saw what it was like.”

“I can’t leave my family, Kiera.”

“Ma’am,” Jeff said, looking at his phone, “we need to leave, now. The FAA is about to ground all flights.”

Small planes raced down the runway, not even waiting for the ones in front to make it into the air.

Kiera’s mother took her arm and pulled her toward the plane. Jeff dashed ahead and ducked into the fuselage. The jet’s engines blurred, the roar filling the hangar.

“Mallory, come with us!” Kiera cried, her face red and wet.

Mallory stared between her friend and the planes zooming into the air, but all she could see was her mother sitting in her office, staring at the phone that had gone dead in her hand.

Ms. Westfall climbed the stairs, her hand still tight around Kiera’s arm. Sobbing, Kiera stumbled and banged her shin on the steps. Ms. Westfall hauled her up and dragged her through the door, which began to rise into the plane.

“Wait!” Mallory sprinted toward them.

Kiera batted at her mother and poked her head out of the fuselage. She smiled. “You’re coming?”

Her nose stuffed with snot and tears, Mallory sucked a breath in through her mouth. “Give me your phone. I need to call my mom.”

“You can call her from the plane.”

“You have to go. Give me your phone so I can call my mom, Kiera. I’m going to wait here for her, and she needs to know where I am.”

“You have to come!”

“Give her your phone!” Ms. Westfall swiped the phone out of Kiera’s pocket and tossed it out of the plane. Mallory lunged; it slipped through her fingers and bounced on the ground. The door snapped shut, and the plane rolled forward. Mallory had to dodge under the wing.

Heart in her mouth, she watched the wheels grind forward. They just missed the phone, and she scrambled over and swiped it up. “Please don’t be cracked.”

The touchpad was intact, but she stared at it, realizing she didn’t know Kiera’s code. Desperately, she looked at the jet. They had stopped. All the other planes were gone. Kiera waved frantically from a window, and Mallory ran closer. Kiera slapped a paper against the glass. It read:

0 9 1 9 0 6

“My birthday!” Tears streaming, Mallory typed in the code and raised the phone, showing the home screen. Kiera gave a thumbs up, and the jet hurtled down the runway and into the sky.

Eva and Adolf's Last Mixtape

by Eric Del Carlo

No more Flatout. Now it's sharps, jags, fang-teeth everywhere I look, and the nerves skip and pull, and when they jerk like *that*--yeah--it's another toothy spike in the readout of my reality. Like I said, Flatout is over. I'm Spiky Mikey again. Miss me?

But with everything jumping, with me seeing in the way I'm supposed to see, something is pretty gosh-fucked obvious: the whole world is leaping along with me this time. I come back to the me--the *me* me--and find the day-to-day all jumbled and psycho. People and things are jaggng all over the place. It's not just me seeing 'em that way. They *are* like that. Even if I shut my eyes and hold my breath and grab my dick, everything is going to keep on bouncing.

Even if--*EVEN IF*--I went back to Flatout, this shit would still go on rumbling. Because it's really happening, in the "real" way the doctors told me about over and over and over and over--

Fuck 'em. I couldn't Flatout if I wanted to now. Or--let's be serious here, huh?--if my family wanted me in Flatout, it couldn't be done. The pharmacy doesn't have my meds anymore. The pharmacy's been looted all to hell. It got hit even before the banks. The other pharmacies in town too. Drugs over money. What a jag! What a crazy-fuck spike!

I'm absorbing the world-crazy shit through tv and social media. Dad-Person is sitting in front of the flatscreen in the living room. His jaw hangs, and his eyes are bloodshot with festive red squiggles. He keeps muttering, "I don't believe this, don't *believe* it..."

I could give him some advice about how reality doesn't give a maroon flying ass-fuck whether or not you believe in it. It's going to chug right on up the cliff face to the tippy-top, before gravity grabs it and yanks it back down. Or...maybe this time it'll go right over the far edge, into whatever abyss has been waiting there all along.

TRAVESTY. That's the big buzz word that keeps coming out of the tv. Travesty. "Scott, this repudiation of the election's lawful results is a *travesty*--" And, "America, this presidential contest is an unparalleled *travesty* of fraud and tampering. We cannot--must not!--accept these grotesquely tainted results--"

There are two sides. They're using the same rhetorical tools to argue. It's noisy, so very noisy. Animated faces, not the cool bland miens newscasters are supposed to have. Graphics behind them, live footage, helicopter sweeps, hand-held street level filming. Raucous audio. Screaming. Lots of it. In streets--many, many streets. Maybe all the way across the country. I don't remember what an "election" is. I probably did when I was Flatout, but I wouldn't have cared about it, whatever it was. My medication quieted me until I was empty sleeves, vacant eyes, a dull ringing in the ears.

I stand behind Dad-Person and watch the jags on the big screen. BOOM! An explosion. It gets shown again and again, for ten straight minutes, while voices bubble and babble, until a newer, even more exciting loop of real-time carnage replaces it.

"I don't believe this..."

Dad-Person goes on disbelieving and watching. Mom-Person is elsewhere in the house, bustling, pulling cans out of cupboards and hauling camping gear from closets. I saw a gun on the kitchen table earlier. She hastily threw a dishtowel over it and told me, unconvincingly, that everything was okay.

I look *into* the broadcasts on the television set. The stronger, deeper patterns are there, the real story. I can see the spikes again, and I can understand them once more. They look like a cardiac feed of someone in the throes of myocardial infarction. Jag jag jag. Spike spike spike. But gaze deeper, see *beyond* the forest of crags and sharpened points.

There's something behind the mayhem, peeking out now and then, eyeing the wreckage aloofly, a cold mirth on the lips, a gleam of privileged cruelty in the eyes.

Dad-Person is changing channels, rapidly, like he's trying to get ahead of it all. The local station is running a test pattern. On another channel a man with blazing eyes on the stage of an arena-epic megachurch shouts, "Rise up! Rise up, brothers and sisters! Fight! *FIGHT!*" On yet another channel there is finally calm. It's a sitcom rerun. I watched this when I was Flatout. It only takes two lines of dialogue for me to realize the profound depth of the show's mediocrity.

But the ordinariness of the sitcom, interspersed with a predictable regimen of banal commercials, seems to unnerve Dad-Person even more. He jumps back to the news. Something is happening at the news studio itself. Confusion. Commotion. Gunshots ring out. They sound hollow and fake. The blood that spatters a camera lens looks phony too. That's funny. That's very funny.

"Michael, calm down! Just calm down!" Dad-Person is yelling at me in a not very calm manner himself.

Mom-Person has come into the living room. She quiets Dad-Person first before turning her attention to me. I think I've been laughing. Or swearing. I can

really swear. But I've stopped now. Mom-Person is peering cautiously at me. She knows I'm Spiky Mikey again. That makes her sad. And frightened.

"Michael...honey...maybe you want to go rest in your room, okay? Okay? We might be taking a trip today-- You know, never mind about that. A little rest now. Okay? Okay?" Her hands are open. She is gently backing me out of the living room. I nod to her, but the movement feels spastic, so I stop it. I can go to my room. I can show her I can do that. Mom-Person and Dad-Person never really had to worry about me so much.

The grilles were removed from my bedroom windows when I'd been Flatout for a good long while. Mom-Person used to find me staring at them for hours on end. She thought they made me sad. They didn't. Flatout didn't let me be sad. I was probably just looking at the sky. The bars didn't make any difference. If anything, I bet the grilles made *her* sad.

But nobody's thought to put them back up since my Flatout ended. Can't blame Mom-Person and Dad-Person. Things seem awfully busy around here.

I look out my windows. Partly cloudy day. Smoke in the air, giving everything a sepia tone, like an old-timey photograph. A daguerreotype. That's the word for old-timey photo. So much vocabulary has come back, despite the new gaps. So much insight. So many perceptions now that I'm no longer Flatout.

Outside, the jags are there, nakedly visible to me. Perceivable too are the forces, the entities, who are behind the tumult. Two sides contend, yes, but a secret powerful body orchestrates. It has manipulated. It has caused all this.

I want to see that body.

I believe it will reveal itself to me. I will find the manipulators.

But not if I stay here. And not if I go with Mom-Person and Dad-Person on their trip. I must go *out* there. Alone.

The window, shut so long, fights me some, but I get it to open. I have not grown so big during my atrophic Flatout and adolescence that I'd can't fit through. Out I go.

* * *

Familiar grid of streets. The occasional suburban cul-de-sac. Our house is in a nondescript residential patch of the town, single-story dwellings, vehicles in the driveways, brittle autumnal leaves along the gutters.

I walk in the center of the street, crunching in broken glass now and then. Some homes are boarded up. Some are in the process of being boarded up. Whine of power tools. Hammers ring on nail heads. The people doing the barricading turn to watch me as I pass. Suspicious gazes, faces brimming with fear. Some of these people have guns on their person or guns nearby. They pause in their fortifying, lift the weapons. Gunmetal gleams. Oiled stocks. Magazines stuffed with urgent bullets.

I don't vary my pace. I pass on by. There must be people living side by side

with those who are on the opposite side of this great calamity. Neighbors. Now enemies. Enemies in individualized armed encampments.

Gunshots in the distance. They sound slightly less fake than the ones on the tv. I look up into the scudding November sky. I count one, two, three, five, seven different aircraft up there, single-engine prop planes mostly. There's an airstrip outside the town limits. People are taking to the skies, then. Fleeing the land. Get up in the clouds. Stay there. Not a bad plan. Have to touch down once in a while for fuel. But birds on the wing don't get eaten by cats and foxes.

An engine guns behind me. An SUV is barreling down, not swerving, not slowing. The driver'll take it straight through me. I step out of the way. The roof of the vehicle is strapped with a haphazard mound of goods. A suitcase tumbles free of the spider web of bungee cords as it passes. The brake lights never flash.

I come to a street where every parked car has had its windows starred or broken out entirely. Glass is everywhere in a crystalline spray of shatterfrost.

On the next block I see my first burning house.

On the block after that I find my first dead body. He's crumpled and undignified, balled up on the sidewalk in a still spreading pond of blood. The blood doesn't quite look real. It's a little too matte. But it has a quality which tv and movie blood never have: I can smell this stuff. It's like hot pennies, with a vague organic undertone. I know for certain this is a corpse because enough of the head is missing and the rest is ragged streamers that no life can be there anymore.

I see my first police at an intersection, but it's just the fire-skeletonized remains of a prowl car. A shirtless man is urinating on the smoking front grille. He holds a baseball bat aloft. He's a jag, a jerking jump in the readout, fleshy representation of the greater whole. His violence has been gifted to him. His barbarity has been coaxed to the surface.

Manipulators...

They are above all this. Immune. Insulated. They must be. They would never endanger--or even discomfit--themselves. But they've got no qualms about unleashing upheaval on the rest of the country, maybe even on the world. This "election" was being closely watched by other nations. I knew that even when I was Flatout, but the concept of other nations held no interest for me. Reality was dull where I was. It would be dull elsewhere. Just leave Flatout Michael alone, and he'll quietly watch his tv programs.

I've reached a commercial street. There's been a lot of activity here. Shopfronts are busted open, even those which were cautiously boarded up ahead of looting and rioting. No police. Why would they be here? Police are people. They're dad-persons and wife-persons, and they've got families of their own to worry about.

People are still going in and out of the violated stores. I eye the

movements. I seek the deeper meaning. Something tickles in my brain. I am sensing the outline of the code, the parameters of the silhouette. My jaw suddenly aches. I'm grinning. Grinning in a way that would probably frighten Mom-Person.

On a concrete wall words have been spray-painted: find & eat the 1%.

The number captivates me. One. *One*. Yes. A minor percentage. Vanishingly small but invested with vast power, capable of great malignant influence. Self-servers, to the core. Manipulators of the first order.

The tickling again, growing more intense. My mind doesn't work like the minds of most people. I know that. But it has its ways, its rules, its habits. I wait it out.

The Flatout has been going away over the course of a number of days, ever since the last of my now irreplaceable meds got used up. I've been absorbing since that process started. My brain drawing in data, in its own manner, rejecting some points, embracing and enhancing others. I've been seeing the world again, like I hadn't in a very long while.

As Flatout left me, this new outside chaos has been emerging and swelling. I've seen it on tv, on social media. At first it was dull intelligence, stuff I wasn't interested in. But the information came to me nonetheless. I assimilated it, on some level.

Billionaire bunkers. It was a term that got a lot of play, before the crisis became more immediate, more personal, and people stopped caring so much about anything even a little bit abstract.

Billionaire bunkers. Rumors, urban legends? No. There was proof. Fortress-like preserves, where the richest of the rich could retreat in complete safety during times of maelstrom. Billionaire bunker. An alliterative term. Easy to remember, easy to have feelings about, like "deadbeat dad." Billionaire bunkers were for the effete, the aristocrats, where they could go to get away from...

From all that they had caused.

Find & eat the 1%.

That sounds like a good idea.

* * *

I see the limo. It's an armor-plated affair, and the two overturned gun-turret humvees must have been escorting it. The scene is fairly easy to reconstruct. A city bus blocked the street, maybe rolled out at the last second as a trap. The two military vehicles are badly scorched. Molotov cocktails, my guess. The mob--it must have taken a *lot* of people--had to have rained the improvised bombs down on the humvees, enough to smoke out the personnel inside. They came out guns blazing, but the crowd had guns too. They Second Amended the shit out of the privately paid soldiers. Then they flipped the vehicles onto their sides, just for giggling shits.

Special attention was given to the black stretch limo. It was a symbol. Gruesome affluence, the chariot of the aristocracy. Every centimeter of the body has been hammered. The damage is evident despite the armor plating. Bulletproof windows have been shattered. That must have taken some effort of will. But the mob wanted its fun.

They got inside the limousine. They pulled every door open, tore two off their hinges. The interior is ravaged. Upholstery ripped out, dashboard smashed.

The driver's corpse is relatively intact. He is a rag pile on the street. The other two occupants--two, I estimate, by the quantity of blood--were simply shredded. Flesh was skinned from bone, appendages sawn off. Skulls crushed, the insides scooped out and flung about. The mob's red footprints tell of the bloody scrum. I follow the movements. I see the pieces scattered, the fleshy chunks here and there. It may well be that some among the crowd took the spray-painted advice I saw earlier. Some of that flesh may indeed have gotten eaten.

Now the area is deserted. The street the small caravan was on leads out of town, to the westward greenlands, the slowly rolling rural hillsides and sweeping valleys. Privately owned land. Vast acreages. A few wineries. Rich land, for rich people.

A good place for a bunker.

But so much territory out there, so many places to secretly excavate, to haul in supplies and luxuries. Even if I found the mob responsible for this carnage and led them west on a search-and-destroy, it wouldn't do any good. The billionaire bunker would be in full lockdown. We wouldn't have the access codes.

It's something of a shame that the two limo occupants were slaughtered. Now, don't get me wrong--*fuck* those two, whoever they were. They were wealthy on a conspicuous and grotesque level. They earned their deaths.

But they would have known the codes, the way in. How sweet it would have been to get inside, to find the other one-percenters no doubt ensconced there. It would have been worth rallying the mob for that, whipping up the fervor, focusing it. We could have taken our time with the bunker people, let them really know what was happening, let them really *feel* it as their deaths came for them.

The spikes and jags jerk my body, muscles snapping and jumping. I grab onto the battered top of the limo. I lean inside, letting the spasms run their course. After a time my vision clears.

The limousine carried goods as well as passengers. Luggage lies in tatters, the contents mostly carried off. I reach for something on the floor of the vehicle, among the torn up carpeting. It's a hand-held device, a high-end gaming gadget. I got a much cheaper one of these as a reward for sticking to my meds, but in Flatout I had no interest in the games.

I look around the murder scene. I find the desecrated remains of the two heads. The size of the jawbones tells me that these were both adults, probably a

woman and a man. A mom-person and dad-person. And they had a child, probably someone around my age.

And he was in the car. But he somehow got away.

I back up. I take it all in. My perceptions are white-hot now, almost in overload. I might have another fit soon, but my brain is whirling in that special way, freed from all restriction.

Circling the scene. Drinking it all in. I have it.

I check the limo's interior again. One of the seats rocks forward on tracks. There's a cubbyhole behind it. The child hid there when the attack started. He stayed in the hidey hole while his parents were torn apart. Then, finally, he emerged. He saw what had happened. He panicked. And fled.

There. His footprints, in his parents' blood. A straight line away from the scene. Running. Just the toeprints showing.

I grin, until it becomes painful, jaws aching, throat muscles straining. I have to massage my jawline to get everything to relax again.

I start after my quarry.

A child of pure privilege, born to be corporate royalty. Something delayed the family, kept them from reaching the bunker in a timely manner, forcing them to make this desperate run. They surely thought they would make it. Their mercenaries in the armored vehicles would see them through. They, after all, were untouchable.

Now they're scraps. And their scion is all alone.

The houses thin out along this westward street. There are weedy lots, a few broken-down homes, a trailer or two. The toeprints have vanished, the blood worn off. No one else is around. The houses aren't even occupied. This is the last condemned stretch of the town before the majestic bucolic sprawl of entitled greenery.

I stop. I look around again, studying, seeing deep.

The door on a trailer isn't quite closed. I move toward it on its dusty lot. It's a weathered thing, permanently beached here. The windows are dark with cobwebs. I pause outside the door. I hear a tinny sound. It's music, something with a heavy bass line.

I pull open the door and step up into the trailer's interior. It hasn't been occupied for a long time. It's occupied now, but not by a resident. This is a fugitive. A refugee. He is huddled at the far end of the empty and disused mobile home. He sits on the floor, his head down, rocking slowly forward and back. He left behind his gaming device but took his earbuds and music player. He is solacing himself with that music. Maybe it's a personal playlist.

He doesn't see me. Doesn't hear me. His parents didn't make it to the bunker. He might, though. I might keep him alive for when I gather the mob and lead them west. He could be useful. Or it might just be fun to have him along, to

prolong his suffering, to let him share in some of the agony that his kind has inflicted on everyone else for so long.

Maybe Mom-Person and Dad-Person were right to worry about me, after all. Or worry about themselves, really. I know I can make this boy talk. I know I can get the access codes, whatever they are, out of him. He'll be reluctant at first. But I'll be persuasive.

I might even listen to his music while I do my work.

Grinning, I start toward him down the hollow of the abandoned trailer.

The Bunker
by Jason D'Aprile

“I used to be like you. Well, I used to believe I was, but I really wasn't, was I.”

As he spoke, the man knelt down to look at the other, staring into his eyes. He watched the old man's head shaking, his body quivering with fear, the sweat pouring from his face. Hands tied behind the back of the chair, ankles strapped to the legs, and duct tape over his mouth, the old man was terrified and confused.

His captor was younger in comparison. Middle-aged, maybe a bit too heavy, salt and pepper hair. The man wore jeans, a button-up flannel shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and held a very large adjustable wrench the color of rust and wet blood tightly in his left hand. He stared, unblinking at the tied, tired old man, until the old bastard closed his eyes and turned his head away.

“And no,” the first man said, standing again. “You don't know me.” He turned around. The room was larger than any apartment he'd had. Almost as big as the old house. There was a wall of windows to one side. At least he thought they were windows, but they must have been elaborate video screens. At one end was the steel door he'd come through and on the ground, the bodies of two security guards.

He knew their names, where they lived, what they did for money. They weren't Secret Service as he'd first thought when he started planning all this, before the world went insane. The old man was the money behind politicians, but didn't warrant government security. After a few weeks of scouting, researching, and investing in new skills, he stopped wondering why someone like the old man hired sketchy off-the-books security. He looked back at his captive, meeting his eyes for a second before his victim turned away, stifled whimpers under the tape. He had even stopped referring to his quarry by a name. Now, he was just the Old Man or worse. Barely even human.

“No, you don’t know me,” he said. “But I’m probably more like you now than I ever was back then.” One step. Two steps. The Old Man cried a little more loudly, seeing the Angry Man raise the wrench up.

“Like you, I’m a dead man who was too stupid to even realize it.” He looked down at the whimpering man while feeling the weight of the wrench, wondering how long he could resist using it. “I bet you’d like to know why.”

There was an awkward silence for a moment before the Old Man started nodding emphatically and mumbling something. “Yea, I bet. I’m the villain, right? I should tell you my whole mad plan. That’s how they do in the movies.” He smiled. “You can call me Bob, by the way.” He laughed and shook his head, and then stopped.

Bob’s eyes locked on the door at the end of the room, at something in front of the door. It was her, again. He stifled a gasp. She stood between the two bodies, staring back at him. Carly. 12 years old, wearing a flower-emblazoned spring dress. “Daddy,” she said in a voice that carried over like a breeze. “What are you doing?”

“What needs to be done,” he answered. The Old Man looked confused as he turned back to him, but Bob didn’t care.

She was still there, now on the opposite end of the room. Older, about 19. Second year of college, wearing baggy jeans and a hoodie. He remembered it was what she’d been wearing over break when she came home. Came home with her girlfriend. She just sprang it on him and her mother. No warning, no time to ramp up.

Bob had taken a wrong turn somewhere. Too many lost chances and no one to blame but himself. But in the face of dealing with his failures head on, he did what most men did at that crossroads: he found others to take the blame. Didn’t matter who. So, he listened to the hate. He watched it, soaked it up, and believed it. By the time Carly came home, he’d been in full-blown right-wing propaganda mode.

Hate spread by people like this Old Man. Bob could remember nodding along to their pathetic rants, laughing at the jokes about how they’d ‘like to hang them all’. He’d started believing the endless repetition of hellfire and brimstone, even if he’d only believed in a god in the most casual and empty way. Staring at Carly now, at what he knew was just another part of his irrevocably fractured mind, he felt nothing but shame.

There'd been a thing that night, of course. His fault. A fight. His fault. Janice knew of course. She had the good sense and decency to understand their daughter was her own person, not some product of parental expectations. He'd been so furious at both of them, accusing them of conspiring against him, of helping to pervert the country. He'd said a lot of things, all terrible, all idiotic, all hurtful.

It had a landslide effect, tainting the next few years. He stopped talking to his own child. His beautiful little girl and he'd just thrown her out like trash. His wife had enough soon after. Whoever he used to be, she'd said, was gone and in his place was someone no one should put up with. So, she didn't.

He'd quietly checked on her just last week. She was living in New Mexico now, remarried to an accountant who really loved to garden (or, at least, take pictures of gardens). He seemed nice enough and she looked happier than she had in years. It was good. She deserved some escape from the nightmares.

The night Carly died still echoed through Bob's head. He didn't even know she was in Florida when he heard about the shooting. It was just another in a numbingly endless line of shootings, but this time a gay nightclub. He just started to scan the other channels while the news still flowed through the preview box in the corner of the TV. Bob tried to not listen or care, but a terrible dread clung to him. Overwhelmed, he just let the remote fall and sat unmoving with his eyes locked on the images of violence and suffering. Then, the phone rang.

Bob blinked and she was gone again. He sighed and looked down at the Old Man. "I bet this place cost your idiot sheep a lot," he said, shaking his head. "I bet it cost some of them everything--those desperate old women who believed you could get them into heaven." Bob tapped the old man on the knee with the wrench, making the man cry out pathetically.

"What's it like to blatantly lie every day of your life? Sucking up the hopes and dreams and money of people desperate for some kind of meaning and purpose?" Bob's eyes never strayed from the Old Man's. "I bet it's fun. Right? Maybe when you started, you had some tiny voice in your head saying it was wrong. But then the money started coming in and you discovered they'd believe anything you said."

Bob laughed. "Ya know, I almost fell for it too. Almost sent you money. Almost believed that god wanted you to have a private jet!" He shook his head and

grunted in amusement. “I mean, fuck it, right? If they’re stupid enough to believe it, why not take them for all they’re worth?”

The Old Man started shaking his head and protesting, as if trying to defend his own honor. “Honestly,” Bob continued. “I wouldn’t give two shits about that if you just kept it at that. But you didn’t. You had to get political, start collecting politicians to push your own agenda. And you had to start spreading hate on people who never did shit to you.”

Bob sighed. He knew it didn’t matter. People like this didn’t change. Money was power and hate sells. He’d been planning this for so long, fueled by hate and rage, and then the election happened. The results came out and the melting pot of the entire country hit the boiling point. America exploded. He had to either move or not. He chose to move, to do it just because he wanted to. This wasn’t about sending a message or helping anyone else. It wasn’t to honor the dead or protect the living.

It was violent vindictive revenge and Bob decided just before he got through the bunker’s main entrance that he was ok with that. Now, it was time to end it. He liked the idea of going past the point of no return. All he could do was follow the plan to the end. He didn’t leave a note. No explanations. What savings and valuables, he’d made sure would go to people who could use it: those sons and daughters who, like his own baby girl, needed the most support but were cursed with parents like him.

He especially liked the idea that the Old Man would die with only the knowledge that he was hated. No ridiculous diatribes. No explanations. He’d burn away and the last thing he’d see was Bob’s face, and not know why.

Bob walked away from the Old Man as if he weren’t even there. Opening the entrance door, a thick steel reinforced security door with unfinished locks, he passed into the long concrete tunnel that lead to the surface. The bags were right where he left them; thick pale and stained canvas bags he used to carry his tools in on construction sites. Beside those sat two five-gallon red plastic gas canisters.

When the riots started, the Old Man immediately fled to the bunker. Didn’t stop. Didn’t pass go. Didn’t collect \$200. He didn’t even bother trying to get his latest wife or mistress, or call his kids. All their panicked calls to him just went to voicemail until the cell signals became so clogged, nothing got through. The bunker wasn’t quite ready. It had supplies, working gas and electricity, but the

security system wasn't up yet and the utility closets were still wide open and in disarray.

It was a huge boon for Bob, as it gave him easy access to what he needed to burn the place in on itself. Shouldering each bag in turn, with a grunt of effort from their weight, he knelt slightly and grabbed a gas can in each hand before walking back to the entrance room. The Old Man watched in horror, but Bob didn't stop or look at the man. He went through an open entryway, following the map he'd memorized from construction diagrams.

The main utility closet was a mess of pipe and electrical, coaxial, and networking cables. The touch screen interface hung limply as if its installation had been interrupted. "Why?" her voiced asked. She sounded as if she were crying, but he didn't look as he set the cans and then the bags down and reached into one. Pulling out a cordless drill and a few other tools, he peered into the mess of pipes and cables, nodding to himself when he found the proper intake.

"Daddy," she whispered again. "Why are you doing this?"

Bob sighed loudly, pushing the drill through gaps in the piping to reach the right spot. "You remember," he started, grunting again and hitting his head trying to angle his view. "You remember when I tried to teach you to ride a bike? You weren't ready yet. Too scared of losing your balance and falling. I pushed." He pulled the drill's trigger and ran it through the metal pipe, before pausing. "I pushed and pushed until you got so upset that you ran back inside."

He leaned out, looking up at her. She must've been around nine now. His hand searched around for something in the bag, but failing that, he slowly turned and looked into the bag, rifling through it and pulling out some smaller parts and a large roll of duct tape. He set those down on the floor of the closet near where he'd drilled and reached into the other bag, pulling out thick blocks of a green putty-like substance, along with several black, cigarette-sized sticks.

He looked up at Carly and smiled. "You weren't ready and I didn't listen. I got mad at you because I was an asshole. I was never worthy of being your father. Never able to see beyond what I wanted, instead of what you needed." He stuck his head back into the piping area, banging things inadvertently the whole time.

"I don't care if you're just my imagination, Carly," he said, still working. "Even this is better than what life was after you died. It's more than I deserve, but I'll take even just an illusion of you."

He let a satisfied murmur slide out slowly. Looking up at her--now around 18--he nodded at her and smiled. "I was a shit father," he said. "But damn if I can't rig gas lines to blow up real nice."

Carly was crying, shifting ages and positions around him. "But why?" she cried again.

Bob stood up, wiping his hands on his pants. There were new cuts and scratches on them. A line of blood dripped off his knuckles. "Well," he said, staring at her. "I lost you twice. I lost your mother. And it was all on me. It was all my fault."

He turned, nodding, and looking down into the tool bag. Bob bent down and grabbed a small black rectangle with a metal switch on it. "I'm not proud, Carly," he went on. "But I don't want to live anymore and I thought, just this once, I'd try to do something right. So, here I am. No one will know. No one will miss me or that horrible bastard. For the first time in years, I feel good and sure about my life."

Bob picked up the gas cans. He turned and started to walk away, but stopped. Looking back at her, flickering like old photos in the hall, he smiled. "Goodbye, baby girl. I love you."

Carly's visage stopped shifting as he walked out, stuck in the moment of that night when she'd come out to her parents. An expression of despair on her face, her hands moving up in slow motion to cover her mouth. Sounds of liquid sloshing and muffled cries came from the other room, then a strange hissing sound followed by intense screaming and a barely audible click.

The utility closet exploded out, engulfing Carly's image in fire and shrapnel. Fire started erupting through the lines, blowing out of the walls through the entire complex. The flames raged upwards and worked through the ceiling panels, eating everything in their way. The structure simply folded in on itself, as tons of dirt from above poured down.

When all the dust had settled outside, when the police and military backed down against their own citizens, when some semblance of peace eventually came to pass, almost no one even noticed the indent of rough ground in rural Virginia. It was weeks before anyone even really noticed the Old Man was missing and outside the spotlight, those who did didn't shed any tears.

It was almost two years before anyone investigated the site. Excavators eventually found four bodies, charred and crushed. One belonged to a television evangelist who had been under active investigation by the FBI for several years for a laundry list of fraud and tax-related crimes. Two of the bodies came back with a litany of international warrants, from Central America to the Ukraine, mostly involving murder, extortion, and kidnapping. The fourth body was never identified. No criminal records, no matches in any DNA databases.

It was determined to be a kidnapping attempt gone very wrong.

“Reality exists in the ██████████ mind, and nowhere else.”
— George Orwell, 1984

2020

by Bryan Aiello

The owner of Pappy’s Clown Palace sits at the bar trying to get drunk. He never will. His name is Dwight and he stares at the Zenith over beer taps capped with giant clown heads; he did not pick them, he bought ‘em just like that. The clown heads laugh their obscene laugh with red mouths stretched wide as he waits for a news show to return from commercial break. The bartender wipes down bottles ignoring him and the murmur of a half dozen other drunks is reassuring, but still he waits. He hates waiting. He knows he should stop torturing himself since nothing else can be done. Go to bed, the mantra continues. He holds out hope though for widespread voting irregularities or maybe Deputy Dog and the rest of the right swinging bastards in Congress might do some legislative voodoo and make their boy president for life, just like the media always joked they would.

The “Make America a Dictatorship” campaign fizzled into three fat men in a Montana outhouse. They suppose that The United States Dictator in Chief is a nice sounding hereditary title, with their one hope being the president's power gets handed down to his daughter. They had it all worked out. Wrong, but worked out, and as history shows, even whispers turn into shouts.

Worthless fantasies now.

Presidential power is at the lowest it could go. Virtually, the man is under arrest in the White House. Every second of intellectual thought seems devoted to what they say amounted to a monumental failure in his attempt to lead. His brand bankrupted decades of political clout. Clout started with the assassination

of JFK, that even recovered from Nixon's hubris, and the impossibility of Carter's near miss with utopia. It was looking good again after Clinton, til Obama put his foot in the door. Four years with the current leader and they set up what history should call the great failure of the Republican party.

He wonders if the disappointment he feels is like dying.

Dwight hatched so long ago and around a star so far away that the idea of him as anything but an everlasting sentient makes no sense. He's confident he'll live forever, he has zero doubt. Yet he also thought his kind had more control here, and control means survival. Dwight doesn't want to survive though, they didn't come here to survive, they came here to profit. He and his ilk need to continue farming this planet down to a nub so they can reap their investment of the eons of pain and suffering they wrought here. Maybe soon they will bleed the joint dry and be forced to find a new planet. If so the plan would be to take a choice thirty thousand or so of the best humans going along to seed their efforts as they begin the strip.

Some grumble to cut the humans in, but most felt that was like giving the dog an allowance.

It's been such a struggle keeping these primates on the straight and narrow that they might reconsider humans as a species. Yes, they work hard and are smart, but too smart, always finding cracks to wiggle through. They could have finished this job long ago but every time, it was the human's meddling that gummed up the works.

They almost finished at the beginning of the twentieth century. One more giant push, they had decided, but the humans pushed back, collected their resources and broke the back of the industrial model they built in Germany. So much effort destroyed because one Duke wouldn't sign his people into slavery, or give up his cushy seat for a spot at the assembly line.

That war gave humans freedom and more importantly it gave them massive advancements in technology.

And now they are in space. With monkey tech. Laughable in execution, but functional and sturdy. They don't know it but their DNA, tweaked with Dwight's DNA, makes them capable of existing beyond their planet's atmosphere.

Fast the humans were becoming competition though not for a planet-sized queen almost a billion years old; no, for themselves.

He hates the idea of it, but soon they may need to escape with what they got already before the primates discover their secret and turn on them.

Dwight knows it's over for his people here when there is nothing left to take and they finally suck all the oxygen from the air, or they can no longer hide and do their work. Now things are going to be harder. He can read the writing on the wall. They all can. Humans are putting grievances aside and standing up for one another. The IGC's bullying had the opposite effect making them go from

tribal infighting and blessed resource collection to standing back and desiring a more minimalist approach.

Less not more.

Fuck. Destruction created atoms. Atoms build universes. Universes feed the queen.

Day by day, through the manipulation of the great apes as they seek the stars, the IGC's riches dwindle. Fast they find themselves being okay with escaping with what little they can keep their scaly hands on.

Like this, they have survived on different worlds waiting for the void or a god, or the long-dormant queen to tell them it's time to do something else.

He raises a rocks glass filled with sloshing whiskey, remnants from his third bottle, and salutes the TV changing from commercial break back to the Cable News Channel's pundit show he had been leering at before being forced to watch ads for ten minutes. The primates love showing off what little baubles and doohickies they have for sale. Been the same since the beginning and, if they have been keeping count, and they have, it's been 4,020 trips around this little yellow star as a manager in the great corporate monstrosity sucking her dry. To many years on this desolate ore-mine of a planet in the middle of nowhere.

Earth has always been a surprise. They found traces of their own DNA in the long-dead lizards that trundled over the surface so many millions of orbits ago. How is still a mystery, but some theorize that long ago one of their ancestors seeded this planet. Maybe it didn't take, or the planet simply stopped their machinations before they could finish. The attempt is not in the histories, or it could have been purged. He knows the story of the asteroid knocking out the planet's ecosystem is true because that's how they come, in the veil of a comet they crash into the surface to change the climate. Millions of years later they arrive to do the work of breaking it all down. One day there will be too much carbon dioxide here again and it's fast going back in that direction, perfect for dense forest and giant lizards, but not for primates, and the monkeys were the effort behind their little planet stripping apparatus after all.

All they can really do is hope for the best, because in the end both them and the humans are at the whim of the systematic chaos and function of the universe.

Tomorrow the queen could die, or be dead already and none of this matters.

To bolster his strength, he throws the brown liquid down his throat in one solid regretful swallow.

He coughs as the Cable News host appears and says, good morning with much more vehemence than necessary, even under the circumstances.

"November 3rd, 2020 came and went and it wasn't even a contest," the blonde sits on a little chair in a dress made for activating imaginations. She

crosses her legs. The sight is marvelous. Dwight doesn't know how she passes. Real humans just don't look like that. She is one of his kind and just as irked that on January 2021, the incumbent, ochre-boy is off the throne.

The goody-two-shoes asshole that won is live in a tiny box in the right hand corner above the anchor with the words, "president-elect to speak soon," flashing under it. The victor is shaking hands in a large crowd. One at a time, hardy shakes, lots of eye contact and Dwight can imagine the stench of rotting teeth and skin teeming with funky smelling bacteria. So much life to humans. Disgusting, disgusting life. This affable human infatuated the United States and quite frankly, the world, as the worst example of altruism possible. Sacrifice is a disease that just refuses to be bred out of their human slaves, especially when the sacrifice goes against their efforts. Sacrifice creates hope, hope that the effort will be worth it. Hope is what they want to strangle out of modern society. It's dangerous and no rational creature should ever have it.

They've joked in the bar about this inevitable conclusion. The bartender always standing up for the limp-wristed left. Some of the guys say they are ready to do what's needed. Humans though are usually all talk and little action, with action only coming from necessity or insanity.

It has happened before, JFK and Lincoln were both killed at the hands of fanatics, fanatics who loved the misery service to them gave. They failed to kill Teddy R. multiple times, killing him would have helped erase all the natural land he saved through his parks programs. Caesar, Jesus, they liked it when the primates kill their best. The best were the ones that usually got in the way. Presidents buy bullets with good ideas that stop or slow down their plans, but the hard part is the reaction to these deaths is now never-ending. It's no longer God's smiting. Now there is reason, and reason dictates a logical Earthbound explanation for things that always seems to point back to interdimensional beings from space, eventually. The scrutiny threatens to uncover them. Oswald murdering JFK almost did them in. It slowed all their efforts by a decade. Still today, whispers of lizardmen involvement working the levers of society won't cease. Lizards, of all things. He guesses maybe they look vaguely lizard-like under the right lighting, but that's deep under their human skin. Birthed by a human female like all other humans, just with one of them along for the ride as consciousness. So no, they have no choice but to let this go its course and hope no one takes a shot. There is always corruption and the hope the human self-destructs, wait for their past to come and claim them, because it always does, or his primate instincts to collect shiny things overcomes his strict morality code. Strict morality codes tend to lead to boredom and a desire for change when freedom allows. In four years, they will try again and if told no, then in eight years, sixteen or a thousand.

They can wait forever, because time is and always will be their greatest resource.

They don't need to go away. Just wait. Either way, in the end, they win.

The good news is some ideas never die.

Life is not special.

Death for profit is the point.

Freedom, like anything close to the definition, actually exists.

He wishes they could tell humans how vast and complicated life in the Universe is, that they are more weed than something special. Humans wouldn't be able to handle it. Their egos would shatter. There would be violence, well more violence than the little primate workers normally got up to, anyway.

So ultimately, history taught the Intergalactic Mining Cooperation over and over again to have a backup plan. A plan in which they can self-correct the leadership decisions of the primates when they get an Obama or a Carter or the potential of an Alexander Hamilton, or even the sizzle and fade of a MacArthur.

If Hamilton hadn't been shot in Weehawken, he would have flipped the script on human society through banking. Humans never did fully recover from his half-carried out ideas. Ideas that were implemented in spirit but lacked fully fleshed out checks and balances. He envisioned economy and government running seamlessly. Instead, because Burr was a jealous monkey with no ingenious plans of his own, he hated the more famous Bermudian to death and humans got a plan for the future that allowed only a select few to benefit from economic traffic.

They needed men like Napoleon and Hitler to unite human efforts in mining the planet. Humans do not like being grouped together. They prefer the individualism of lines drawn on maps and addresses denoted on mailboxes. Spasms of messing with lines cause revolt and war. And wars slow things down. Four-thousand years they've have manipulated humans. Into helping them move out from their landing spot in the middle of the Sahara. Real innovation came from how to force them to accept control and trick them into thinking they had it.

Media was the solution. Mass media then social media, both gave humans a thirst for knowledge. IMC simply provides the content and pipeline for delivery and things have been easier ever since.

Just small hiccups like lost elections.

The image on TV switches from the idolized human-perfection called host to a smug toad-like person, very much a human, probably sitting in a room far away from his pristine, fake skin-covered colleague. The human-like toad chortles, "the nation overwhelmingly voted in the challenger over an incumbent on his way to prison."

And because he hates truth that stings, Dwight slams his newly empty glass on the bar. The bartender turns and glares. Dwight stares back because this

is his bar. Dwight realizes they haven't acknowledged each other up until this point with anything other than a grunt when the bartender arrived to start opening the place. There is a disgust in the bartender's eyes that goes beyond political differences. With the white-knight's victory, he must feel emboldened, Dwight decides. Emboldened, he must feel disgusted by all the principals that Dwight and his people feel make for an orderly atom strip.

God, country, family and for all of them, sacrifice.

The bartender wears a blue shirt and Dwight wonders if that's an attack.

Primates love their meaningful colors.

Through the TV's aging speaker, the beautiful fake-skinned goddess laughs maniacally, as if the idea of the orange-blob of humanity spending a single moment in prison was ridiculous, despite the fact he has already been indicted by a grand jury and a trial date has been set for July in New York City to answer state charges.

No one thinks he is showing up and the second he can, he'll be on a jet to Russia.

Another voice chimes in and the program's director switches to a bottle blonde with an ill-fitting mask. She mocks, "Jesus, how could Americans vote for this scout out to earn a good citizen merit badge?" Dwight is disappointed she looks so bad. It's embarrassing. When they have to send one of their kind in like this on the spur of the moment into human civilization, making a visually pleasing-mask for them is a time-consuming, decades-long process that starts with DNA manipulation. That's where this mask falls apart. The woman has a weak chin and vaguely serpent-like eyes, her veiny jowls quiver. She actually looks like a human lizard. Dwight swears he can see the shadow of what humans will call her poison gland just above her sharp bicuspid every time she pulls back her upper lip to say a word.

The humans are good at picking up on the uglier masks and this is one of the ugliest yet. As the show fades once again to a commercial, he is certain tomorrow an image of it will be all over the conspiracy sites.

At every turn, they have been stymied by the very creatures they created to do their dirty work. That's always the danger if the workers discover the universe is not just a *God's* wishes but cold, hard science and fact.

Digging holes and lighting candles are never activities that conjure thoughts of how the universe works. Building rockets, however, does.

They never intended humans to get rockets, but they did because IMC cheated to get back on schedule after World War I and bet everything on a super-powered and moral free industrialized Germany and as a repercussion humans got better tech and access to the wonderful void called space.

Once accessible to humans, they couldn't help themselves and have been reaching up ever since. The IMC never introduced a species to the stars before.

They always squash attempts with stories of vengeful Gods and the promise of smiting. They failed this time. It made the human population think survival was an option after all, and it didn't have to include a God or a heaven. It was fact, reason and science that made the whole thing work.

When the pundit show returns, the fake-skinned beauty-goddess stares into the camera. She is ice cold and Dwight loves her. He would fertilize her eggs if their species did things that way. Hasn't been a new birth in millions of years, won't be either until the queen feels a need. Maybe she sleeps, maybe she's dead. Dwight guesses it doesn't matter in the end because entropy guarantees they all fade away eventually.

“Welcome back. For those just joining, the tragedy of Tuesday is over and today we work to recover. While the majority wrongly celebrate, the intelligent mourn what we will become. Those that mourn lost a way of life,” the host, who seems to be holding in rage, emotes each word as if being held back by decency, her perfect cheeks splotchy and her nails digging into the upholstery of her chair.

They all get like this when they lose. They don't like humans trying to take control or changing their plans. This has resulted in some of the worst bloodbaths in history: the Hundred Years War, the Spanish Inquisition, the Bolsheviks, 9/11 and the resulting war on terror. He is so bad at losing, he takes it personally when the Diamondbacks don't make the World Series year after year.

Now on TV, the studio erupts. The pundits fight back and forth. They hurl insults. The noise hurts his head but he allows the bartender to keep the TV on. He sat in the dark most of the morning thinking, but no thoughts have really come. Just reminiscing on what existence means.

Pain.

Dwight squeezes his empty rocks glass and it creaks in protest.

Ultimately, he will decide there is nothing to mourn here, it's just an election. They'll try harder next time. He has voted for a losing candidate in the past. At least in ancient Sumeria, he had the luxury of watching the loser be shunned from society, eaten by the 'Gods.' He misses being a God.

They always have more fun in the beginning.

“The loser of this election deserves to see a prison cell, but probably won't, which is too bad.” The voice is shrill and Dwight doesn't know which female said it. His people set prisons up. They are the perfect torture for monkeys. Confined space and no freedom, illusion or otherwise.

The cuck-prince was a wild card. Used because for eight years a full-on war was being waged against altruism and that was going to rocket to 16 with the brain trust behind Bill Clinton finally getting her due. And after her? They did not know and not knowing was bad. They feared this meant they would be unable to control the future. There was too much risk that the economics of the planet were going to change and prevent them from continue the break down and leave with

their haul of a planets worth of material atoms. They would be stuck looking for a reset and a reset meant 4,000 more trips around this dinky little piss ant star, if the humans did not nuke it and ruin everything they worked towards first.

If they did, then what? Another dinky piss-ant star?

Their way of life was just as much a delusion as the one they let the humans think they had.

He wants more whiskey. But the bartender is pretending to be busy dusting a bottle of Jack Daniels. The asshole is deliberately ignoring the needs of a patron. It doesn't get much shittier than a slave who thinks he has won something. He decides to fire Mr. Blue-shirt as soon as tomorrow, so he doesn't have to start pouring his own drinks today. He likes the idea of destroying the man's holiday season. Holidays made for Gods no one believes in anymore. He is a human after all and easily replaced, even here.

Here is a town in Arizona called Wikieup, where the only gas station shares an address with the town's only bar. The original owner of Pappy's Clown Palace and the Shell station had certain ideas of what he thought was allowed in the desert and he did a banging business because others appreciated the business he slung.

(swingers)

Sadly, the state's attorney general stacked charges on him so high, he earned himself enough points to hang out at one of the privately-funded state penitentiaries for a bit.

Dwight, under a banner of altruism, did not hesitate to step in and buy the place from the state at a discounted pre-auction price. His mask since the late seventies has been public servant after all, making it his job to help the community. He set up a more "family friendly" watering hole.

(no swingers)

The original owner wasn't wrong. There were certain "people" who could get away with anything in the desert. Just non-human newcomers publically broadcasting their predilections and making the town stink like lube and anal-sex.

They all thought primates stunk, their copulating just made it worse.

Post-election, Dwight still wears his Mayor costume from yesterday, black suit, white starched shirt, and bolo tie with a turquoise stone setting. The outfit feels right for his mood, somber. Over the breast pocket is the Wikieup sheriff's star. He bought and paid to have it designed a decade ago. He wears a .22 derringer on his hip, up front so he can show it off. His scalp shines because hair is impossible to maintain, but just for pure vanity allows himself a chin beard. If he looks in the mirror he doesn't see a tall doofus with hair that once flamed orange. He sees what he thinks all humans long to be. His most attractive quality

is a law degree printed and handed to him upon request from the adjunct of a prestigious Ivy league school.

He might be ancient, but he hates to wait so he coughs loud and obvious, and the bartender turns to face him. He was drinking McCloister neat, but he drank the bar's reserves of that distillery overnight and instead points to the Jack in the human's hand.

Raised voices turn his attention back to the TV.

"The hope of the nation has turned to end corruption, the bread, and butter of those that just play the middle against itself, shareholders and franchisers."

Opportunists, he thinks, trying to push the televised argument out of his conscious thought. He has already decided after the President-elect's speech he will have his driver take him home. Maybe he will pop a bullet in this mask's skull and crawl underground and not come out again for a few decades.

Their corporations will continue scraping society for profits, they are mainly autonomous now anyway. They course-correct occasionally and keep as much of the human heart and soul out as they can, but nothing short of complete and utter chaos can knock them completely free now.

Just as he is about to remind the bartender to do his job and pour him a belt, the cable news alert flashes across the screen prompting his attention again, the sound accompanying it is a fast pace trumpet blast and Dwight sees something he wishes he hadn't.

Human intervention.

Fuck.

They stare. He and the bartender and the other people drinking away their problems at nine in the morning stare as history transgresses.

Violent and disturbing. Even for his ancient brain. A brain that orchestrated so many moments just like this one.

And then to top it all off, just as the man gives the world its worst moment, he realizes he knows the assassin as one of his deputies.

Ritz Cole aims to take the president-elect's offered hand. He reaches out his titanium arm. The one supplied by the VA outside of Phoenix. His prosthesis is usually tipped in pinchers activated with the remaining functional muscle in his destroyed bicep. Today the appendage is tipped with an apparatus that under scrutiny looks like a fake hand but the legal system will come to define as a pistol. It fires with a loud twang, like a hard plastic rubber band being snapped and Ritz Cole kills the 46th president of the United States of America. In celebration, he empties the entire five-round magazine designed for a semi-automatic 3d-printed nine-millimeter handgun though the first bullet was the kill shot when the molten

carbon exploded in the president elect's heart. The other rounds left a drooping barrel melting under the exertion of being used, so by the time the fifth round fires, it bounces off flesh and dribbles to the ground.

Ritz designed the handgun himself and is a bit disappointed to see the barrel drooping uselessly in a subtle orangey-blue glow. It looks hot because it is hot and now he stands over the body of next president of the United States, unarmed, knowing he should be moving, but doesn't.

Why bother, his old friend whispers. The voice that lives in the back of his head promises the fun part is coming. And he believes it because it's the same voice that made it possible to withstand SEAL training and combat in the desert. That relished death he made with a four-pound pull of his now-gone trigger finger. That wanted this. That wanted to see America burn. To see everything burn. Just like part of him burned on a sun-baked Fallujah street.

The politician fades fast under the awning of the Willard, two blocks from his would-be future home, 1600 Penn, lips curling still in that famous humor-filled smirk suggesting life was always a little bit funny, or maybe it was botox all along. Making the one who couldn't be bought actually as concerned with vanity as everyone else. Ritz is happy with that because it proves the so-called saint is not the blessing to all mankind most think.

Ritz suspected as much and now he feels justified in this course of action. A course of action he never once considered stopping to begin with.

They make eye contact as all life ceases. Ritz can see it. The moment the president-elect's brain no longer gets the blood needed to produce consciousness. He wants to know that pain. He has been shot with metal bullets. He knows what that feels like. Hot metal making things stop working that should, but not the body's reaction to death, that he is intimately curious about. Maybe the pain leading up to the death would be different he decided. Rewarding.

If anything, Ritz is disappointed his weapon failed to eviscerate the victim's heart as intended.

Because that is what's said to be the candidates biggest attribute, his heart, his level of empathy.

The president-elect staggers and the Secret Service react, having no clue the event of their newly assigned boss's death has already taken place. Two agents reach out to steady "The One."

"The One is down. Medevac ASAP!" a secret service agent screams into her cuff.

Ritz was not aware they called they called #46 "The One. It would have made no difference if he had.

A woman near-by, screams, "blood!" and the crowd around her murmurs agreement.

Blood does bloom on the President-Elects white dress shirt in three separate diminishing points. None too bad because the bullets were small and the wounds were worse on the inside.

And Ritz fades back into the crowd as law enforcement deals with the would-be leader's death. In the turmoil, Ritz thinks he might actually escape when suddenly the fake hand at the end of his engineered contraption catches fire.

Black smoke and orange flames erupt from the fibrous printing material he used. The materials are quickly engulfed and Ritz tries to remove the arm from his shoulder. The inferno moves quickly and before even those around him can get to a safe distance, also catch fire and die in little black heaps, anonymous under the circumstances. Ritz finds the conflagration eating hungrily at his greasy skin, skin hardly washed because, why bother.

The crowd spreads away to watch the deaths of their next leader and assassin. The once-human is now simply agony melting under intense heat. Then Ritz Cole breathes for the last time and feels the hot fire mix with the air filling his lungs. Lungs badly scarred by meth smoke, smoke that still lingers as a bright pain when he exhales and is no more.

He would rather have been shot, but dies nonetheless with a cough and bloody stream of char-tinged saliva leaking from the black crust that once was a mouth, on the DC cement.

On TV, the burning body fights against chemistry as it runs in circles. The flames dance in the wind not going anywhere. Dwight witnesses this. The whole world will forever have to live with this. It will be in the history books. The man on fire running in circles around the dead body of the most popular person ever elected president.

It might take a generation for IMC to regain power or even a voice that isn't shouted back into silence. When it comes back on him that he and Ritz are connected, he will be asked to fall on his sword, whether he is willing or not.

He is. Humans have become too volatile for him. Too excitable.

Fucking Ritz was a hardon. A sympathy hire. A Navy SEAL with one arm and lots of war stories, some, if not all, imagined.

He made the news for assaulting a female traffic law breaker.

When the case got tossed to a grand jury to decide if it had legs for trial, he disappeared. That was weeks ago.

The case did have legs. The announcement, he was told, was due soon. Dwight's reaction was, oh well, primates do primate things. It is their downfall. Either reaching for baubles themselves or asking others to do it for them. Given

the spectacular nature of this suicidal gesture, Dwight can imagine the hell Ritz went through for his country.

And now, there he is burned to death in the capital.

And the cameras continue to roll.

They capture the crowd around the burning man getting a sense of what has happened. Yelling and chanting intensifies. Beer bottles fly from the middle of the crowd. Then rocks and side view mirrors of cars.

The yelling fast becomes ugly and violent. Something explodes. Black smoke rolls across what was a pristine park, a park covered in fall foliage.

A cop is dragged, fighting as if his life depends on it. His face, a bloody mask of intensity. He disappears into a crowd that quickly goes to work on his body with fists and feet. A police-issued shotgun is lowered into view of the camera. The barrels are round and clean and deadly and held in the hands of a man who obviously is not a cop, with facial and neck tattoos and a happy leer suggesting a willingness and familiarity with violence.

The TV goes black as shotgun pellets end the feed, but for only a second as the director switches to another shot.

The female host is suddenly on the Zenith. Her face frozen in shock and surprise. Her jaw hanging open, eyes wide with terror, mirrors Dwight's own expression. He knows how she feels because he feels it himself. Exposed and vulnerable. Maybe they could have expected a lone wolf style attack but not the human reaction to seeing their best shot down.

The host says, "Ummm," and the scene she is seeing jumps into the top corner of the screen. It's of the crowd from a new angle as a few of the rioters notice the cameraman and start coming for him.

The feed doesn't go dark this time. This time the camera is hoisted by the rioters and brought into the scrum. Its former operator can briefly be seen getting pummeled by bricks before other men and women are shown being stomped on. If they appear to be in business attire, the crowd seeks their destruction.

The violence is horrid yet it attracts like a magnet.

The roving camera captures a lot of it before its last image is of fast-approaching cement as it is tossed away, its novelty gone.

The next images are of a naked man dead on the ground. His limbs bent at odd angles, his head twisted obscenely on his neck. The blue police Kevlar helmet perched on his head useless against the violence that ended his life.

The crowd is ten thousand strong but growing. People empty the surrounding businesses to rubberneck, or escape, or join in. Some get caught up in the violence and surge into the hotel and other places. Windows break. T-shirts cover faces. Another cop gets pulled into the churning violence. Law enforcement shoot into the crowd to save themselves, but it's tens versus thousands and

though they kill with their bullets, the pure number of angry people just ends them too quickly for it to matter.

And Dwight can't look away. He feels every painful moment as they unfurl with the soundtrack of the host moaning, wow, and, oh no, and, how is this happening. Then the studio erupts into violence. Men storm past the camera. The camera operator tries to dive on one of the intruders and is promptly shot in the head from behind. The camera tilts but manages to capture a bit of the horribleness to come for the host. The director mercifully switches to another feed of an anchor standing by in New York. Already black plumes of smoke pour from the iconic skyline as the city erupts in violence to mirror the capital as a map over his right shoulder shows reports of other violence around the world.

The new anchor tries to recap. Fumbling his words, he says almost nothing, so the News Channel replays the President Elect's murder over his left shoulder. For all the world to see. For the anchor to see and that stops him from making any noise and he ends up just standing there, tears leaking from his eyes until an explosion off-camera jerks his attention from the monitor and into the room as another grenade ends everything.

It's during the replay, but before the first grenade, Dwight hopes he is wrong, but he knows he is not.

He knows the assassin.

Ritz Cole, shitty cop and disabled vet, always hopeful the bar's swinger glory days would come back, but was content with a life as mayoral cape clinger and bully law enforcer. Men in camo and a distinct fondness for combat can only go one of two ways and Ritz was pretty okay being a deputy in his own sheriff's department. Dwight knows weight will be coming for him no matter what.

He moves to climb off the stool and slither for the rocks when the bartender suddenly shifts his face toward him as if seeing a child begin the process of making their parent's day tougher.

"He is one of your cops."

Dwight doesn't say anything right away, nor does he break eye contact to stare at the events unfolding on the TV.

The bartender's face is red with anger and hate. His fists shake with rage at his sides. The whiskey sloshes in its bottle. "...your deputy?" his voice quivers like badly made Jell-O, the Jack Daniels bottle clutched in a tight angry fist.

Dwight would like to reason with him, tell him the truth, that he did not conspire to kill the president-elect, but then realizes he does not know this nothing-person's name. He likely never bothered to learn it in the first place. And fuck him anyway.

His mouth clicks shut as the bartender takes a halting step closer, or just moves his left leg to gain better leverage, or, he chuckles at his own positivity, to aid in pouring a dribble of a drink into Dwight's glass.

Instead, the bartender disappoints him and unscrews the cap and puts the bottle to his own lips. He downs the whiskey, throat pumping at the cold bite of the alcohol before lowering it much more empty. With a deep, satisfied sigh, he stares daggers into Dwight.

Dwight feels fear contract the very human muscles in his stomach. Primitive muscles. Muscles that instinctively want to survive. He won't die, per se, but he'll feel what's about to happen and that always sucks.

Bile and acid and whiskey churn violent in his stomach in anticipation.

He is okay with being murdered, it makes things easier. Dwight wants to fade away. Disappear. Assure the bartender that he doesn't have to worry, he won't be coming back. But he does nothing save sit and watch the bartender and allow the noise from the bar to drift over him as others recognize Ritz also.

"Is that the scrawny, scary dude that comes in an hour before close?"

"Cop who gets drunk and scouts girls? Didn't you go home with him once, Martha?"

"Told me he did stuff with the SEALs." A woman answers back as if staring at a celebrity on a talk show.

"Told all those war stories."

"The special ops guys always end up doing the craziest shit."

The conversation unfolds as does Dwight's survival mechanism. He points to the old Zenith, "Look, He did this on his own"

"I don't believe you," the bartender whispers a flume of hate.

Dwight knows time is the only thing keeping him from having his head bashed in. The longer the bartender deliberates over hurting him, the less likely he will act to do so. Nervously, Dwight squeezes the rocks glass in his hand. Already broken, it shatters under the pressure he puts on it. The shards of glass cut into the human flesh on his hand which bleeds normal human blood, there to disguise the pebbly lizard-like skin underneath.

The green lizard-like pebbly flesh underneath that acts as an environmental suit for the thing he really is, vapor.

Dwight looks up in time to see his employee's survival instinct click over from willing to negotiate to fear-soaked unreasonability.

Wyatt swings the bottle of Jack Daniels as if trying to kill a dangerous bug. The bug just so happens to be a normal looking guy with a bleeding hand covering what plainly is green lizard skin. It's the hand of his boss, the owner of the bar, the sheriff and mayor of this shitty little Arizona town. Wyatt knows about lizard-people that live under the Denver airport, that LBJ actually started the ball rolling on 9/11 back in 1962 in a long-ranging plan to get back at the

North for winning the Civil War. How the Fed was actually owned by the spawn of the devil.

But all it takes to make it all real for some people is a bleeding hand.

When Wyatt hits the mayor with the whiskey bottle, it opens up his head and this just makes things worse, because suddenly a large yellow eye peers back.

The eye is bisected by a jet-black pupil.

A thick green membrane blinks over the orb like a foreskin then folds back to whence it came.

So, Wyatt hits Dwight again and again and again.

Even when the mayor falls face first onto the bar Wyatt keeps hitting him until the man that was is now no more than a pink puddle of goo.

And of course, someone livestreams the event so the rest of humanity got to witness the elected mayor of a small Arizona town being proven an alien in human clothing.

The video goes viral as do the hundreds of other videos that crop up, proving once and for all, life sucks as the world burns for three days.

Three days after being shot, I sit up, breathing plastic-tasting oxygen while frantically trying to find the zipper to get out from inside of what turns out to be a mass casualty body bag. The bag is stiff and see-through as it falls from my once-dead shoulders. I suck greedily at fresh air.

Shivering, as parts of my body are touching cold metal that would normally be wrapped in clothing, I stand and decide to look for answers and walk through a sea of dead bodies on gurneys wrapped in plastic body bags.

I spot tags decorating toes and look down at my own and wiggle the one I find there before reaching down to rip it off. I read the information printed on it annoyed at the weight recorded and that I'm an inch shorter than I tell people.

I aim towards a green glowing exit sign across the gymnasium turned mass morgue cold room. As I move, my chest begins to hurt and I feel short of breath. I touch at my cold flesh and feel the stubble of hasty repair and look down at the bullet wounds still there with the addition of a few small stitches to keep them closed. Shocked doesn't describe it. There is also an incision splitting my chest in two, though sewed closed also. I touch it. It feels colds and my finger tingle with the contact.

Then it comes to me, being killed.

The last face I saw. Angry and unshaved. Eyes bright with insanity and hate. Drugs? The man smelled like crack. I remember what it smells like from law school in the eighties. In Boston, it was everywhere. In my memory, I reach to take the hand stretching toward me, my instinct telling me to run but not doing

so because all Americans deserve respect and then searing pain, and body quitting, lava running through my veins, then nothing until now.

I feel the wounds knitting together. They itch and I want to dig my fingers into them. I look down to see both wounds quickly closing.

My brain decides shock is okay as I gather the strength to keep moving.

I can't decide what to feel, fear or elation. Elation because, though hurting, I am alive and obviously shouldn't be and fear because I really Don't know what's going on.

"You were dead."

I look up at three yellow glowing beings stand in front of me hurting my eyes. They glow so bright I can't look right at them without my eyes watering and shutting. They are like three suns burning.

And I want to look. They are the most beautiful things I have ever seen. I feel my mouth gaping at their visage. Tears spring to my eyes. I want to drop onto my face and prostrate myself to their brilliance. I feel all these emotions except nothing moves in my chest. No beating or pounding. My pulse does not race. "Were?" I ask.

"Usually you only meet one of us in death, but you are needed alive, so now we have all come."

"You have a world to fix."

"And a new reason for being, to start."

"This time we won't make you do it on your own."

"No more mysticism."

One by one, the humanoid-shaped lights dim and ordinary people stand in front of him. A balding man with a somewhat bulbous belly. He could be a high school math teacher right down to the sweater vest and yellow pit stains.

A woman in a purple dress and glasses that become the only feature of her face that's memorable.

And a person that is just that, a person, neither important nor unimportant, female or male, attractive or not, steps forward and says, "and this time I've decided to come myself."

"And what does that make me," I ask fearing their response.

"The chosen," the being pours more love than waters in the ocean. "And for that we are sorry."

The essence that once called itself Dwight comes to and feels the familiar hug of a new environmental suit. He chuckles at the human's need to make it about them. Lizardman. The suit is green and pebbly, but just that, a thing to keep him, for lack of a better word, alive.

The him is a fragile thing that really is best kept in a host body. A mist of consciousness long ago having learned how to aerosol themselves into existence.

This is not the first time he has had to come back from a murder or staged death. He knows the drill. Soon he will feel himself floating in the womb he chose to be birthed from. Money, position, potential were his criteria, yet even as the suit is filled like a peapod with what has always been him in the middle, he does not recall picking a new existence. He remembers nothing from the bottle of Jack Daniels striking him till now. The yellow glowing eyes of the suit become operational and click open and he is shocked to see the inside of their ship's resurrection chamber. The ship they came here in. The ship buried under a mile of sand in the wastes of Western Sahara.

He climbs off the recollection rocks and stumbles onto new knees, "How long?" his voice is at once too loud for his new ears yet feels forced and weak.

Another voice floats through the chamber and he recognizes it as the ship's A.I., "The Mother has decided to wake you after five hundred orbits."

He could point into the night sky and the light from the star that keeps The Mother alive would not reach his finger for millions of years. This is shocking. Why him, he almost asks but instead stutters, "The others?" as if both questions were lodged in his throat.

"Still asleep. She requested only you."

The honor is terrifying. Millions still sleep while he is awake. He knows what this has meant for others of the IMC command. The Mother never addresses anyone else.

"Why was I born here and not in a human host?" He dares question because being born like this feels like failure, like a punishment, like starting life with a disadvantage,

And when she answers, relief does not come.

"A new form of corruption has been hard to find. We have had nothing to exploit, until now. The humans managed to kill all greed before it spread. They treat money hoarding like a disease. We didn't find it prudent to bear any of our kind in humans, or even into a consciousness, they get beaten back too fast to make any inroads. Humans are looking for us. The Mother sees no need for her children to die and feel pain uselessly. Instead, you have been brought back to make the mother's new plan a reality.

The idea of a new plan is somewhat a relief, "Are we traveling?"

"No, the humans have made themselves vulnerable. We will be starting over again here and shall nurture the human's new state of being. We will get Earth's precious atoms through sacrifice."

"How, he asks, thinking how The Mother has used other leaders, Like Ghandi and Khan. Some pleasure mixed with a lifetime of pain and torture.

Nothing is forever, after all, "How will we win?"

“Altruism,” the ship says.

Suddenly the idea of it explodes and he sees a solar system filled with humanity longing to give everything of themselves to the whole of the universe. And he feels the lizard-like face of the mask stretch into a stiff smile. Yes, he decides, he can work with that, and takes the first action to farm everything forever.

ABOUT THE WRITERS

Bryan Aiello hosts weekly podcasts on creativity and speculative fiction and is a writer of Fantasy, Sci-fi and the Macabre. Raised on Florida's Gulf Coast, Bryan served in the Army, graduated from the University of South Florida and now calls Brooklyn home. For more of his fiction and links to his podcasts, visit: www.bryanaiello.com and follow him on Twitter @bryaiello.

Jason D'Aprile has been writing professionally for over 20 years, mostly in non-fiction. You can find his bylines appearing on such sites as Playboy, Paste Magazine, Motherboard, UploadVR, and others. Occasionally, he even lets bits of fiction escape out into the wild. Jason does not Tweet.

Eric Del Carlo has been compulsively, convulsively and propulsively writing fiction for the vast majority of his lifetime. His successes include multiple appearances in such world-renowned science fiction publications as Analog and Asimov's. The anthologies he's appeared in are beginning to crowd his bookshelf. His novels range from sword-and-sorcery (*Wartorn*, written with Robert Asprin) to urban fantasy (*The Golden Gate Is Empty*, written with his father Vic Del Carlo) to his upcoming young adult title *The Vampire Years*. He's written podcasts for Earbud Theater, had his novels released as Russian editions, written scads of erotica, and seen his fiction chosen for a year's-best anthology. He writes because he doesn't know how to stop, and because he's determined to carve out every last worthy word he can while he still walks this world. Also, he's eager to know you. So contact him via Facebook.

Lauren A. Forry was brought up in the woods of Bucks County, Pennsylvania where her FBI agent father and book-loving mother raised her on a diet of The X-Files and RL Stine. After earning her BA in Cinema Studies from New York University, she moved to London where she earned her MFA in Creative Writing from Kingston University. There she was awarded the Faber and Faber Creative Writing MA Prize for her first horror novel, *The Compulsion*. Her short stories have since appeared in multiple sci-fi and horror anthologies. Her debut novel, *ABIGALE HALL*, a psychological thriller, is available now from Black & White Publishing. She currently resides somewhere in the woods.

Sam French is a writer and director located in Brooklyn. Originally from Florida, he is a recent graduate of Carnegie Mellon University. His plays have been produced in Pittsburgh, Florida, Martha's Vineyard, and New York. His short story "A Love Letter to the Boys of Summer" won the Adamson Award for Fiction at CMU. Sam was named a top 20 artist under 25 in the Tampa area by Creative Loafing magazine and has two one-acts published by Baker's Plays.

Jack Moody is a short story writer, poet and freelance journalist from wherever he happens to be at the time. His work has appeared in multiple magazines and

journals, including the Saturday Evening Post. His debut short stories collection *Dancing to Broken Records* is forthcoming, to be published by Beacon Publishing Group. He didn't go to college. He likes his privacy.

J.B. Toner studied Literature at Thomas More College and holds a black belt in Ohana Kilohana Kenpo-Jujitsu. He and his lovely wife just had their first daughter, Ms. Sonya Magdalena Rose. Toner writes when he can, drinks when he can't, and tweets at [@AntiheroCouplet@twitter.com](https://twitter.com/AntiheroCouplet) in between.