

A Gospel of Flies

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ABSTRACT

A Gospel of Flies

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This story follows a family's journey through a post apocalyptic western United States. A father, his wife, their teenage daughter and young son are heading inland from a crowded and dangerous coast. Though the nature of what caused the apocalyptic changes remains enigmatic, the effects on humans are sickness and ultimately death. Early in the novel, the family is captured by a group of former prison inmates who were freed after the apocalyptic events. The former convicts possess a compound, that when mixed with urine and water, can signify if the water is clean and safe to drink. These three convicts, along with their new prisoners, continue heading inland in search of food, shelter, and most importantly, clean water. Flies, which are unaffected by sickness, thrive in this environment, plaguing every step of the group's journey.

A Gospel of Flies intends to explore themes of survival, specifically through adaptation and elements of Stockholm syndrome. The story aims to explore what it takes to survive in the face of rapid change, and what the characters in the story must contend with both internally and externally. The drastic changes to the world and society that the family must contend with seem more easily navigated by former criminals whose previous life of chaos seems to condition them to this harsh new reality.

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Clouds sat heavily in every direction, at some points so low that they seemed to drag on the earth. Although it was likely sometime in the afternoon, little sunlight permeated the clouds. Towards the coast the clouds were so low and dense that any sign of the ocean itself was interrupted by the pinchpoint of cloud and earth. Sound too was dampened; a light breeze rattled the blackened skeletal trees and bushes that surfaced in scattered handfuls on the dusty hillsides. The small trees shivered in the breeze; dead, but still standing, as if waiting for the moment the brittle ground beneath them would crumble away. Only one other sound appeared to ride the breeze. The hum was gentle, constant, and unified. Flies sat in smears against the sky in hundreds or thousands in low patches above the ground. Their buzzing echo moved with the breeze, but also below and above it, sometimes faint, but never fully escapable. Above the swarms of flies, several birds looped against the low clouds. The vultures moved silently, completely undetected except by those who looked skyward, as there wasn't enough sun coming through the clouds for them to cast a shadow. The birds moved in unison, unchanging in their loops, awaiting prey larger than flies. Perhaps a mouse would appear on the hillside, as dusty brown as its surroundings, or the scent of a moist carcass would rise. But for now, there was nothing but the breeze, and the flies, and the clouds. There was nothing beyond the push of the wind and the hum that it carried. The birds circled on.

A ridge extended upwards, away from the invisible coastal lowlands. Etched with ravines and nooks, the ridge crawled upwards under blankets of dust and flies. On the midpoint of the ridge, four figures moved in single file; each of them gradually and carefully stepping over the rocks on a zigzag ascent of the ridge. The leader of the four figures was a man. He carried a

backpack overtop of a dusty black coat that swayed at his waist as he walked. On his head sat a wool hat covering his silvery thinning hair. Against the dusty skin of his face, his pale eyes looked starkly lighter in contrast. Behind him was a woman, younger than he, with dark roots beneath tied blonde hair behind her head. She was about the same height as the man, with a similar skin tone, though also caked with dirt. Her eyes, however, were extremely dark above her exposed high cheekbones. She also carried a backpack overtop of her blue rain jacket that hung open about her shoulders to expose her stained yellow blouse. The third figure in the pack was a much younger woman, very thin, with narrow shoulders supporting a small backpack. She was about the same height as the other two, despite being much thinner and younger, but her hair was much lighter than the woman in front of her. A glinting gold chain was visible sticking out of her sweater, but the rest of it remained tucked out of sight beneath her prominent collarbones. Her legs, long and capable, carried her deftly over the larger pits and boulders that the fourth figure behind her struggled with. He was a young boy with a shaggy mane of dark hair about his shoulders, jutting out in a duck's tail shape behind the blue and black ball cap he was wearing. Although his hair was dark, he had light eyes, similar to the eyes of the group's leader.

“There,” the man spoke, wiping his brow with his sleeve. “There’s something at the top.” The man pointed to the top of the ridge where the spire of a wooden structure poked out.

“What is it, Dad?” The young boy asked.

“I’m not sure,” the man answered, “but maybe there’s a place for us to rest up there. Somewhere with a roof.”

“Are you okay Luke? Are you tired?” The woman turned to the boy, pushing the hair to one side of his face.

“I’m thirsty.” The boy answered.

“Me too.” The young woman spoke up, wiping the grime from her dry lips.

“Okay, it’s settled. We’ll stop up there. Let’s get going then.” The man directed. The group resumed climbing the ridge, their footsteps sending echoing scrapes along the valley behind them. Luke looked back over his shoulder along the valley, but nothing was visible past a sunken low point. The birds in the sky caught his eye. There were three of them; two big ones and a much smaller one. The smaller one was darting and dipping to catch flies from the swarms, while the other two remained in their circling vantage.

The group moved up the ridge’s spine, which was littered with bushes. They approached the crest of the ridge where the pointed structure was now more visible. It was the roof of an information kiosk, but all the shelves were empty and the wood was worn and splintered.

“Huh,” the man sighed, “nothing here.” The tracks of a former road could be seen leading from the kiosk down the gentle slope towards another structure. “Over there.” The man thrust his finger towards the small building.

“What is it, Nathaniel?” The older woman asked, stepping closer to the man.

“I don’t know, dear,” the man answered, “but maybe there’s something inside. Maybe we can stay the night there.” Nathaniel gestured for the others to follow, and the four of them moved down the road towards the weathered structure.

Once they got closer, they could see that it was some kind of tourist shop. There were bookshelves in the window, a rusted ice machine next to the door, and a sign hanging behind the glass that said ‘OPEN’. Nathaniel walked forward and tried the door.

“It’s locked.” Nathaniel frowned, jostling hard against the metal handle.

“We could break it, Dad.” Luke suggested, scanning the area for something to break the window with. Nathaniel slowly nodded, as he also began to scan the area. Luke disappeared around the corner of the building.

“Luke, stay close please,” the older woman called after him.

“Mira,” Nathaniel said bluntly, glancing at her for a moment. He removed his wool hat to itch his scalp, revealing a bald patch at the top of his head surrounded by a copse of black and grey hairs. “He’s fine, dear.”

“Dad,” Luke called as he returned to the others with a brick in his hands. “What about this?”

“Good job, son,” Nathaniel patted Luke on his shoulder, taking the brick from him. “Everyone stand back now,” Nathaniel warned as he raised the brick above his head before hurling it against the glass door. The first strike didn’t break the glass, but only produced a rubbery echoing thump, as the brick fell dustily to the ground. Nathaniel picked it up for another throw, this time making a small web of cracks form in the glass around the metal handle. The echo scraped across the ridge; Mira looked over her shoulder as if to follow the noise’s movement. Nathaniel’s third strike at the door pushed through the webbed crack, leaving a small breach in the glass.

“Got it,” Nathaniel grinned, before using his wool hat over his fist to push away fragments of the glass. He unlocked the door with a metallic click, before jerking it open, the metal door scraping over the brick fragments in front of it. A bookshelf sat propped up in front of the door, which Nathaniel crept carefully around before helping the younger woman through the doorway.

“Careful, Ath, Careful.” Nathaniel advised, reaching for her hand.

“Dad, I’m fine,” Athena glared at her father, before making her way carefully around the jutting bookshelf. Mira and Luke followed in suit, joining the others inside the small shop.

“It looks like a gift shop or something. We must be in a park.” Mira took in the stuffy room. Some shelves had books on them, coffee mugs, and a few stuffed animals, but mostly they were bare.

“A park?” Luke asked excitedly.

“Not that kind of park, dummy.” Athena pushed past him. “There aren’t any parks anymore...”

“Oh hush, Athena!” Mira snapped. Athena rolled her eyes, wheeling around to inspect the store with her father. “It’s like a nature park, honey. You know, where people walk their dogs.” Luke stared at his feet; Mira’s words didn’t appear to comfort him.

“Look here,” Nathaniel called from another room, “I found a vending machine.” Luke scrambled to find his father, with Mira and Athena in tow.

“There’s still a few things left,” Nathaniel grinned. “Luke, go and get Dad that brick.” Athena and her mother studied the machine as Nathaniel wiped the grime away from the glass window. Luke returned shortly with the dusty brick, before handing it to his father, who went to work on the vending machine’s glass front.

As the thumping of the brick against the glass continued, Mira explored the rest of the dark souvenir shop. Behind the desk sat an empty cash register, and a series of opened bare cupboards beneath it. In the corner of one of the cupboards was a package of five batteries, which she quickly scooped up. She unzipped her backpack to pull out a small flashlight, which she then loaded two of the batteries into. A dull yellow light sprang from the small flashlight, which Mira

traced along the dark corner of the room. There was another door marked 'Employees Only', which Mira pushed open. It lead to a small room, not much bigger than a closet, with a small mirror, faucet and basin, and a toilet inside. Mira caught sight of her reflection in the small mirror, gently pushing her ponytail behind her head. She tried the faucet, which squeaked to produce nothing, before she made her way to the toilet. The bowl was empty, but Mira proceeded to lift the lid off the porcelain reservoir above it. She grinned as she discovered that the reservoir was still nearly half full. She shone her flashlight into the water, which was clear enough to see the collected layer of brown muck at the basin's bottom. Just as she did, she heard a crash from the room where Nathaniel was.

"Honey!" Nathaniel screamed, "I got it!" Mira joined the others in the room with Nathaniel as he pulled the fragments of glass away from the front of the machine. He then began to systematically remove the various bags of chips and granola bars from their metal ringed columns. The others began to collect them.

"Hey," Mira consoled, "only have one right now. One each right now." Luke and Athena looked up at her as they sat hunched over the small pile of snacks.

"Your mother's right," Nathaniel said, pulling the last pack of chips from the machine. "Put the rest in your packs."

"Oh, and bring me your bottles too, there's some water in the bathroom." Mira said as she unwrapped a stale granola bar for herself. When her children returned, Mira took their plastic water bottles into the bathroom to fill them. She submerged the first bottle, which gulped back the clear water as if it were alive. The second bottle did the same, but she had to angle it to make sure that it took. By the third bottle she had stirred up some of the muck from the basin's bottom, so

that the final bottle wasn't very clear. She kept that one for herself, before distributing the bottle back to their owners.

"We'll stay here for the night," Nathaniel said, opening his backpack.

"Where are we going?" Luke groaned as he licked the remaining salt out of the silver chip bag in his hands. Nathaniel didn't answer. "Why did we leave the house?" There was an obvious silence; Nathaniel looked to his wife.

"Sweetie, there were too many people there," Mira placed her hand on his shoulder. "We had to go because there wasn't enough food for everyone. There wasn't enough water." Mira took Luke's cap off and stroked his hair. "It's not safe to stay there anymore. It's not safe. We have to find somewhere with food and water."

"And good guys?" Luke looked at his mother. She nodded slowly.

"Yes, Luke." Athena had already begun to unpack her wool blanket, while Nathaniel reorganized his backpack with the newfound snacks before taking a long drag off his replenished water bottle. The family settled in a small circle against one of the walls, removing their shoes and jackets. Nathaniel's chain necklace supported a small cross at its end. He removed it and clasped it in his palms.

"Dear Lord, thank you for protecting and guiding our family through each day and night. Thank you for this bounty of food and water, and this shelter for us on our journey. Please protect us as we rest, and greet us with kindness each morning as we greet you with prayer. Amen." Nathaniel bowed his head.

"Amen," the other three mumbled together.

"Goodnight," Nathaniel said, looking at his two children and wife.

“Goodnight Dad,” Luke said over his shoulder, still clutching the shiny chip bag in his fist. Athena didn’t reply.

“Goodnight dear,” Mira said, before twisting her flashlight to turn it out.

The four of them settled into a sleeping huddle in the gift shop that darkened as the sun went down somewhere behind the clouds. No other light entered the gift shop as the family gradually curled into slumber. Athena was the last one to fall asleep, and lay awake to listen to the sound of the wind against the metal siding of the gift shop. It remained present as a gentle hum, warped through the opening of the broken door, only accompanied by Nathaniel’s wheezing snore. He drew heavy uneven breaths through his mouth mostly, seeming to struggle just to stay asleep. The wind changed direction, and pushed now against the front of the gift shop. The broken glass began to shiver; one fragment of it coming loose and falling to the floor. Mira woke up at the sound of it, but after a quick assessment in the dark, returned to her sleeping position. By this time even Athena had fallen asleep. Mira took one last look at her huddled family before closing her eyes, gently twirling the metal band on her ring finger.

Dawn had arrived gradually, though it remained fairly dark inside the gift shop as the family began to stir. Nathaniel woke first, rolling up his blanket and repacking it before jostling Luke and Athena awake.

“Wake up,” he said. “We should get moving.” Luke joined his father in packing up his belongings while Athena let out a groan, repositioning herself.

“Come on, Ath, you heard your father,” Mira placed her hand on her daughter’s shoulder. Athena drearily sat up, pushing her tangled hair away from her face. Nathaniel left the giftshop to survey the outside while the others finished packing. He

followed the thin road leading away from the giftshop with his eyes on its gradual stretch into the distance. He thought this direction to be more or less east.

“See those buildings over there? That’s where we’ll go.” Nathaniel pointed. Luke squinted to follow his father’s direction. Mira and Athena joined a moment later, their gear already on their backs. Mira took a quick drink from her water bottle, then coughed into her dry sleeve.

“Everyone ready? Let’s march.” Nathaniel led the way with Luke close behind him. Mira and Athena tailed slightly behind them. Their feet kicked over the dusty gravel as a lone bird circled high above them. A small swarm of black flies hung low above a dried up slough behind a collapsed wooden fence at the side of the road. The flies gently buzzed with no wind present to challenge them.

The structures in the distance became more visible as the family got closer. A tall white sign raised against the drab sky like the thumb of a hitchhiker. The sign towered over a small building with two old fuel pumps beside it. It was a gas station; blackened as if burned, with all the windows broken out. The door dangled off one hinge. Nathaniel approached cautiously.

“It looks pretty stripped, Nate. Do you think there’s anything left?” Mira spoke after him. Nathaniel continued his approach with no answer. He pulled back the door, sticking his head inside to look.

“Nothing here,” he called back to the others, his voice echoing across the parking lot.

“Dad,” Athena pointed down the road to another building, “what about that one?” She pointed at a squat, square building with beige walls. Nathaniel nodded as he rejoined the others.

“We’ll have a look, we’re heading that way. I think it’s east.” Nathaniel’s eyes traced up the white sign above him. Two crows sat on the ledge, pecking at their talons. “Let’s go then.” Nathaniel took the lead towards the building in the distance.

Luke was tailing the group now, kicking at stones as he did. His worn black sneakers scraped on the dusty earth with a powdery stomp at each switch. The wind had picked up slightly, carrying a sound that made Luke stop. He stood still, cocking his head to listen.

“What is it, Luke?” Mira called gently to him, noticing that he had stopped walking.

“I...” Luke began, “I heard something just now.” He slowly twisted his head as he listened.

“Heard what, dear?” Mira asked with a concerned tone. Luke quickly snapped his head to his left.

“There,” he spat, “did you hear that? It sounded like a dog bark.” Mira poised herself, trying to listen. She only heard the breeze, and the hum of a cloud of flies not far above them. One of them landed on her cheek, which she swatted away.

“I don’t...” Mira began, but was cut off by Nathaniel’s yell.

“Why are you stopping?” Nathaniel droned. He and Athena had turned around. “Let’s go.”

“Luke said he heard something. A dog barking.” Mira called back to her husband.

“A what?” Nathaniel sounded frustrated, “That’s enough. Keep moving.” Mira walked over to Luke, taking his hand.

“Come now,” she said gently, “listen to your father.”

“But mom,” Luke began to say, but stopped, drooping his head. He peered one more time behind him, but didn’t hear the sound again.

The weathered building came into better view as the four of them approached it. There was an old truck parked in front, covered in thick brown dust with the driver’s side window smashed out. Nathaniel approached the truck first, inspecting the inside. The seats were torn up, as if an animal had clawed at them, and the backseat was cut back, exposing the rusted wire beneath each cushion. Empty beer and food cans littered the backseat. Nathaniel coughed as he pried the door open. His eyes rested on the only thing of interest inside the truck. A hammer was wedged next to the handbrake. He grunted as he pulled the hammer from the truck, holding it in the dusty air.

“Look at that,” he coughed, tethering the hammer to the strap on the side of his backpack. “Not a bad find.” Mira smiled at him, gently coughing into her sleeve.

“I think it’s a store,” Athena said, already approaching the building. It had a glass front, which was mostly caved in. There was no sign of the door.

“Here, Ath,” Nathaniel shuffled over, “I’ll go first.” He cautiously stepped through the cavity; his feet crunching on the debris-strewn floor. It looked like a small grocery store, with tall glass front refrigerators in the back, and several bare shelves in its centre. Some were knocked

over, covered in dusty bits of paper and glass. Nathaniel paced through the store, checking behind the cash register desk. Mira headed towards the bathroom.

“I’ll go check for water,” She called over her shoulder. Athena followed her mother. Luke was examining empty flower pots against a far wall next to garden tools while his father jerked on the drawer to the cash register. Luke turned over an upturned flower pot to find a book of matches. He knelt down to pick them up, the jingle of his father jostling the cash register somewhere behind him. Luke struck one match against the strip, watching it leap to life before dying; the black ash joining the dusty shop floor. He struck another match, listening closely to the satisfying sizzle of the matchhead’s ignition. Meanwhile, Nathaniel retrieved the hammer and began to bash on the cash register. Each blow echoed through the shop, cracking into the distance behind the broken truck. Mira and Athena returned from the bathroom.

“No water here,” Athena frowned at her brother, “no food either. What’cha got there?” Luke handed the book of matches to Athena. She eagerly opened it, plucking a match. Mira approached her husband, who was still whaling against the cash register with his hammer

“Nate,” she placed a hand on his shoulder. “Nate stop. What could possibly be in there?” He violently shrugged her off.

“For heaven’s sake Mira, there could be...” he began, but his eyes caught the flicker from the match Athena had just lit. “Athena, what are you doing?!” Nathaniel growled as he trudged over to his daughter. He snatched the matchbook from her hands, slapping her across the cheek. Athena gasped, falling to the dusty floor, as Luke sprang between his sister and his father.

“Nathaniel!” Mira cried, rushing over to help Athena to her feet. “Are you okay?” Athena rolled onto her hip, clutching the cheek her father had struck.

“Nathaniel, what...” Mira looked up at her husband, who was now inspecting the matchbook.

“Do you see these?” He waved the matchbook in front of Mira, “There’s only four left now. Only four left!” He furiously tucked them into his jacket pocket. “You’re just going to waste them like that? Anything you find, you give to me. Anything you find.” Nate’s voice crackled out of his dry throat, his eyes finally meeting Athena’s. She winced at him, nodding, before lowering her head.

“Dad,” Luke spoke softly.

“Quiet.” Nathaniel cut him off. “You didn’t find any water? Anything to eat?” Mira shook her head while Luke looked at his feet. “Let’s go then.” Nathaniel turned back to retrieve his backpack and hammer. Mira helped Athena to her feet.

“I’m sorry sweetie,” Mira stroked her hair, “your father...” Athena brushed her off, scooping up her backpack before trudging back outside to join her father. Luke and his mother soon followed.

The road became more difficult to see as it had been more exposed to the wind beyond the gutted store. Several black birds swooped above the family as they walked, but there was enough wind to keep the packs of flies from lingering too close. Nathaniel led the group with a discouraged pace. Before long, any trace of the road had disappeared, and they soon found themselves stepping over crumbling brown dirt littered with skeletal bushes. A lonely tree stood down an embankment, its limbs had gathered white and grey plastic bags, and an old blue tarp wrapped around its base like an unravelled towel. The terrain dipped lower beside the tree. The family tried to get out of the dusty wind that hissed against the bare ridge. Rocks came loose beneath their steps, echoing

claps along the cupped ridge beside the lonely tree. The family took careful steps, gasping as they did.

“Can we stop for a rest, Nate?” Mira asked meekly. Her husband nodded over his shoulder, pointing to the tree.

“There.”

The four of them huddled around the base of the tree. Luke and Athena pulled their water bottles out of their backpacks, drawing tepid water into their dry mouths. Luke began to cough.

“Here,” Nathaniel said, tossing a small bag of pretzels to each of them, before handing a granola bar to Mira. They popped the bags open eagerly, crunching on the brittle spindles of salt. Athena let the bag into the wind, watching it bounce further down the ridge. As her eyes followed the bag, she spied something jutting out at the bottom of the small incline. It was enamel in colour, and angular, but was not easy to identify in the dampened unchanging light beneath the cloudy sky.

“Dad,” she stood up, “what’s that thing?” Nathaniel craned his neck to look.

“I don’t know, Ath,” he said over a gulp of water, “I’ll go have a look.” He knelt down to get the hammer from the side of his backpack. “Mira, honey, give me the flashlight.” Mira hastily unzipped her backpack, handing the small flashlight to her husband.

“Nate, I’ll come with you.” She stood up.

“No, you’ll stay back. It could be dangerous.” He directed. Athena shot a worried glance to her brother. “I’ll be okay,” Nathaniel smiled to his son, pulling the chain around his neck out from under his jacket. “See? He’s watching over me.” Nathaniel dangled the small cross at the end of the chain before tucking it back into his jacket. Athena traced her fingers along her own chain,

becoming aware of the heavy cross that hung at the end of hers. Nathaniel took the first cautious steps towards down the embankment.

The three of them watched as Nathaniel carefully plodded downwards. The breeze wasn't as strong here, but was present enough to jostle the plastic bags that hung from the tree next to them. Flies began to land on them as they remained still. Athena swatted at the flies on her shoulders and cheeks, coughing as she did so. Luke took another sip from his water bottle, listening intently into the wind. He heard his father's scuffling steps, the hum of the flies landing on his clothes and skin, the gentle rattle of the tree next to him, and then suddenly, a faint throaty sound like a dog's bark. He looked at his mother, who had her eyes fixated on her husband's dirty coat down the bank. Luke said nothing, scuffing his shoe in the dust.

Nathaniel was close enough to the structure to see that it was a cube van on its side. It looked like it had tumbled down the bank and landed where it was. The siding was warped from the impact that had forced the rear sliding door open. Nathaniel pulled the small flashlight from his pocket, twisting its end to flicker on the dull yellow bulb. He dragged the light across the tight interior of the cube van that had a small crate at its end. He crouched into the dark space, inching himself closer to the plastic crate. He peeled back the crate's lid to see that it had several boxes of instant oats, all of which had been chewed open by some kind of animal. He pushed these aside, digging his hands between the chewed cardboard, where his hand grasped something more solid. He pulled the object to the surface and shone his light on it. It was a small silver can, with the remains of a weathered label on it which read 'Beef Broth'. He gulped dryly, holding the flashlight in his mouth, plunging both hands into the crate. He found four more cans inside, which he placed in his shirt like a sling. Eagerly, he began to hobble back out of the cube van, but dropped the flashlight and all the food cans when he heard shrieking coming from the hillside.

Nathaniel scrambled out of the van. “Mira!” he screamed, croaking as he did. He looked up the hill where his family was. Two figures stood over his family; one was pinning Mira against the tree while the other had his arm wrapped around Athena’s neck from behind. Luke was tugging at the man who pinned his mother, crying as he did. The man turned, swiftly kicking Luke to the ground before turning back to Mira.

“Nate!” Mira cried, her voice muffled by the man pressing his hand over her mouth. She continued screaming from beneath the man, as the other figure had wrestled Athena to the ground. Nathaniel stood motionless, dropping the hammer into the dirt. He felt warmth run down his thigh, and in a reactionary movement, he turned away, stumbling farther down the bank. His family’s cries continued at his back as he wheezed, tripping over the uneven embankment. Another figure appeared from the far side of the cube van, dressed in drab loose clothing. The figure leapt out towards Nathaniel, hissing as he did.

“Running!” The figure screamed, “he’s running!” The figure pursued Nathaniel, swiftly overtaking him and pulling him to the ground. Nathaniel squealed, kicking against the man. The man brandished a metal rod, striking Nathaniel across the shoulder with it. Nathaniel fell gasping in a heap, still trying to crawl down the embankment. The man pounced on him, pinning him with his knees across Nathaniel’s shoulders. The man pressed the metal rod across the back of Nathaniel’s neck.

“Stop it, stop it,” the man gleefully said, “I gotcha here now. Gotcha.” Nathaniel whimpered into the dust as the man put full pressure onto his back. The man stood up, grabbing Nathaniel’s jacket collar to yank him to his feet.

“You better stand up here, or I’m gonna hit you again.” The man jerked violently on Nathaniel’s clothes. “Get up.” Nathaniel continued to whimper, and the man struck him again across his knuckles. Nathaniel shrieked with pain, his own cries masking those coming from the hillside. He cupped his hand against his chest, gripping his cross tightly through his shirt.

“You gonna get up now?” The man hissed at Nathaniel, who continued to breathlessly sob. The man began to press the metal rod into Nathaniel’s kidney. He writhed against the rod, heaving himself into a squat. The man jerked on his clothes again, and Nathaniel rose with him.

“There ya go, man, jus’ like that.” The man pushed Nathaniel ahead of him as they trudged back up the embankment where the others were. Mira had been gagged with a piece of grey cloth, and she lay whimpering in the fetal position at the feet of one of the men. Athena, who had also been gagged, knelt against the other man who held onto her hair, as she stared vacantly at her collapsed mother. Luke wept, clutching his abdomen where he had been kicked, his baseball cap toppled off the side of his head. The man prodded Nathaniel back up the bank before thrusting him down in the dirt.

“Rag ‘em all. The boy too.” The man standing over Mira hissed. He wore a grey sweatshirt with the sleeves torn off at the forearms which exposed a long tattoo of a dagger on his left arm. He also had stars tattooed over his middle knuckles on both hands that were faded and blue. Unkempt whiskers surrounded his thin mouth, his skin, despite being covered in dust, was tan. His eyes sat darkly in their sockets, and his uneven black hair hung behind his head in an unkempt ponytail. On his neck was a fading scorpion tattoo, with some illegible writing beneath it.

The man standing over Athena was the tallest of the three, he was thin, wearing a torn white dress shirt powdered brownish yellow by dust and sweat. His skin was lighter than the other man's, and his eyes were a fuzzy hazel. His hair was short, but uneven, as if it was hastily cut by himself. He had slight stubble about his mouth, and a small scar on his chin beneath his lip. Reaching into a green knapsack, he pulled out a stained grey dishrag and tore it into two pieces. Nathaniel winced at this sound, looking up at the man standing above his daughter.

“Please,” Nathaniel whimpered, “please don’t...”

“Shut up,” the man probed him with the metal rod again. This man had the darkest skin of the three, with dusty wrinkles about his eyes and mouth. He was mostly bald, though a peppering of gray curly hair around the sides of his head. His shirt was sleeveless, dark denim which exposed a rough tattoo of a skull with a feather headdress on his right shoulder. Nathaniel began to shake, tracing his eyes across the three men slowly. Mira moaned from behind her gag, which made the man standing over her tighten his grip on her hair.

“Crowsey,” the man barked at the dark skinned man with the metal rod, “see what they got. We’ll take em off with us too.” The dark skinned man began to tear apart Mira’s bag, upturning it, collecting what food she had into a small pile. He did the same thing with the other bags, smiling as he discovered the chip bags from the vending machine.

“You can’t,” Nathaniel wheezed, but began violently coughing into the dust. The man ignored him for a moment, before leaping over to him. The dark skinned man knelt down, sniffing at Nathaniel’s clothes. He began to snicker.

“This one,” he chirped, “look, he’s pissed himself.” The other man smirked, while the tall one did nothing. The dark skinned man continued to rummage through the belongings of Nathaniel, Athena, and Luke. Once he had collected the food from each bag, he loaded it all into

Mira's bag, discarding the others. He hoisted Mira's bag onto his shoulders, but placed it back down suddenly. Turning the backpack around, he plunged his hands into it, pulling out a plastic first aid kit. Opening it, he discovered iodine, bandage, scissors, and other first aid equipment.

"You," he looked at Mira, "you're a doctor?" Mira looked over at him, her eyes red with tears. The dark skinned man thrust the first aid kit back into the bag. "Yeah, that's all that's good, we can move." He turned his attention back to Nathaniel, before collecting the final piece of rag. The man tied it tightly around Nathaniel's mouth. The tattooed man spoke again.

"It's time to walk now," he looked first at Athena, then to Luke. "Stand up, shut up, and walk." The four remained quivering on the ground. "I said up!" the tattooed man shouted. Mira shot nervous glances at the others, before she scrambled as best she could to her feet. The tattooed man smiled. "Very good." Athena was the next to stand, with Luke shortly after. The dark skinned man knelt down to pick up Luke's hat, then placed it sloppily on his head.

"Lost your hat, fella," he chuckled, turning to face Nathaniel who was still lying down. He raised the metal rod to strike him, but Mira moaned from behind her gag, kneeling down to help Nathaniel to his feet. She shook him, holding the side of his face, eventually coaxing him to stand up. He clutched his injured hand at his breast.

"There we go," the tattooed man grinned at Mira, "easy." He shot a look over at the tall man. "Waist, you go first, take the girl and the boy. Crowsey, take the guy." With the command, the dark skinned man grabbed Nathaniel's sleeve, pushing him in the direction of uphill. The taller man held tightly onto Luke's shoulder while dragging Athena by her wrist up the bank. The tattooed man held Mira by her hair, pushing her forward, but she began to walk obediently in front of him, so he let go. The seven of them made the gradual ascent up the dusty slope back to the crest of the ridge. Flies swarmed them, landing on the cheeks and necks of the four captives.

Nathaniel was panting heavily, whimpering to himself the entire time. The three men ushered them along the top of the ridge to a more level area in the shadow of a cliff. In the distance behind them, the horizon that washed out towards the coast.

Once they reached the shaded area beneath the cliff, they rounded it to a platform next to a small cabin. It looked like a wooden bunker, and from this point, the entire valley, cube van, gas station, and grocery store were visible. The three men marched their captives to the small cabin and thrust them inside in a heap. Nathaniel collapsed, still muttering to himself behind his gag. Mira tried to crawl closer to Luke, who was beginning to cry again. The tattooed man grabbed her shoulder, thrusting her to the far side of the cabin. There were five knapsacks in the small cabin already, with various other supplies piled in different groups. The tattooed man walked over to one of the piles, lifting up a water bottle, and drew a long drink from it as it crackled in his hands. Mira looked at Nathaniel, who had buried his face in his hand, then to Athena, as she writhed on the floor to face her mother. Luke sat curled against the cabin wall, quivering. Two rifles sat propped against the wall, with a small sawed off shotgun next to them. A black compound hunting bow lay on the floor beside them. The tattooed man set the water bottle down, then began to trace his eyes over Athena.

“Look at this pretty one,” he smirked, taking a step toward her. Mira shrieked from behind her cloth gag, pulling it away from her mouth.

“You leave her alone!” Mira shrieked, “Please, Nate, help me!” Nathaniel regained some of his lucidity, lifting his head from the cabin floor. Mira was crawling toward Athena, trying to place herself between her and the tattooed man. The man pounced on Mira, gripping her throat tightly.

“Shut up,” he spat through his teeth, while Athena and Luke tugged at their gags. Nathaniel collapsed to the floor again, muttering prayer to himself with his eyes closed. The tattooed man let go of Mira, turning his attention back to Athena, but the taller man had stepped in the way.

“What do you want, Waist?” The tattooed man hissed. The tall man pointed down at Athena.

“This one.” The taller man’s voice was flat and low. The dark skinned man stood on his own, beginning to chuckle.

“You want this one, Waist? The little pretty one?” The tattooed man stepped closer to the tall man, “Maybe I want her, huh?” The tall man stuck his arm out, placing his palm on the tattooed man’s shoulder. In an instant, the tattooed man snatched at the tall man’s face. The tall man anticipated it, twisting the tattooed man’s arm behind his back. The two men fell in a wrestling heap, while the dark skinned man watched. In a moment, the tall man was on top of the other man, pressing his face into the cabin floor.

“Okay,” the tattooed man choked out, “okay, get off.” The tall man released the tattooed man, who stood up in a huff.

“Please don’t hurt her, please don’t...” Mira whimpered at the man’s feet. He knelt down in front of her. The cabin smelled salty with resin, the air heavy with everyone’s breathing. The tattooed man gripped her chin tightly.

“You gonna be quiet?” he asked. She quivered a nod, sobbing a little. “I don’t have to put the rag on you again?” He tightened his grip slightly, “Do I?” Mira shook her head, gulping deeply. “That’s good, see, because if you wanna make noise, scream at me, or try and run off,” he grabbed her hair with his free fist, “I’ll get Crowsey there to kill your boy.” The dark skinned man chuckled while Mira stifled her sobbing, vigorously nodding. Athena sat poised behind the taller man, in

silent shock looking at her mother. Luke stayed silent. “There you go,” the tattooed man grinned, “you two’ll stay quiet too? We don’t have to rag you again?” Athena and Luke shook their heads nervously. Nathaniel began to murmur louder from behind his gag. He stumbled to his feet, dashing crookedly through the cabin door. He crashed through the door frame into the brown dust outside, hobbling in his escape. The tattooed man was upon him in a moment, kicking him between the shoulder blades into the dirt.

“Don’t touch me,” Nathaniel croaked, “let me go, please just...” The man interrupted him with a sharp kick to the ribs.

“I said shut up,” the man grunted, pressing his heel into Nathaniel’s crumpled hand. Nathaniel wailed in pain. “Crowsey,” the tattooed man called to the dark skinned man who was blocking the doorway, “get him the pill.”

Crowsey stomped through the cabin past the tall man, who was keeping an eye on the other three. They watched together as Nathaniel moaned in the dust at the feet of the tattooed man. Crowsey pulled a large wad of cloth from the bottom of one of the army bags at the edge of the cabin. He began to unravel the cloth, which contained a small ball of barbed wire about the size of a walnut. He held the ball in front of his eye, grinning, before pulling a roll of duct tape from the bag. Crowsey rejoined the tattooed man outside.

“There you go Hef,” Crowsey handed the tattooed man the ball of wire and duct tape. From the cabin, Luke began to sob, but Mira clasped her hand over his mouth to hush him. She covered his eyes. Nathaniel’s whimpering mutter became louder as he rolled onto his back to face the sky. Two black birds circled high above.

“My God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield,” Nathaniel began to mutter, “my stronghold and my refuge, my savior; you save me from violence.” The tattooed man began to laugh.

“What the hell’re you saying, are you saying a prayer?” The tattooed man circled around to Nathaniel’s face, barbed wire ball in hand. “I’ll give you one last chance to shut up.” For a moment it was silent, before Nathaniel opened his eyes to meet the tattooed man’s. Nathaniel coughed lightly, before shouting with all his remaining voice.

“I call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised, and I am saved from my enem...” but was cut off when the tattooed man shoved the wire ball into his mouth, holding it shut. Athena squealed from the cabin, but Mira clasped her hand over her daughter's mouth, holding both children against her body. With a violent rip, the tattooed man pulled back a long strip from the roll of duct tape, which he wrapped around Nathaniel’s mouth. Nathaniel thrashed his head against him, but the tattooed man drove his knee into the nape of Nathaniel’s neck, finishing the job of taping his mouth.

“Now you’ll shut the fuck up, huh?” The man stood tall over Nathaniel’s crumpled figure. “Who do you pray to, man? Do you see any God out here?” The man pointed across the dusty landscape, the shifting clouds dimming the already fading light. “If he’s gonna save you, let him do it. Let him come down right now and stomp me out.” Nathaniel’s nostrils caked with dust as he breathed heavily against the dry earth. Several black flies landed on his cheeks and eyelids. Four black crows now circled above the two men. The tattooed man looked skyward. “Oh, look man, your prayer,” the man mocked enthusiasm, “the angels are coming, see?” He pointed at the crows above them. “They’re coming to take you to heaven man,” he smirked, “piece by fucking piece.”

He kicked dust into Nathaniel's face as he turned back to the cabin. "Crowsey, tie him, it's gonna be dark soon."

The tattooed man entered the cabin.

"What's your name?" He asked.

"Mira," she replied softly.

"The boy?" The man asked, but got no response. "The boy?" He asked more sternly.

"L-Luke," Mira stammered. The man began to smile.

"And the girl?" Mira didn't answer.

"Athena," Athena mumbled.

"Such a pretty name," the tattooed man smiled. The tall man stepped closer, grunting.

"Alright, alright, Waist," the tattooed man shuffled. "His name is Waister, but call him Waist."

The tattooed man looked over his shoulder at Crowsey, who was dragging Nathaniel inside.

"That's Crowsey." The tattooed man stood up to his full height. "You'll call me Jefe," he grinned,

"or Chief if you want."

Nathaniel toppled through the cabin door with a final push from Crowsey, who retrieved string from one of the nearby bags to bind his hands. Nathaniel continued to mutter from behind his taped gag, his eyes closed. "It's gonna be better for everyone if all of you stay quiet," Jefe squatted down, taking Mira's wrist. "Now come with me." Mira shot a quick glance at Luke and Athena before standing up.

"Mom," Athena croaked.

"Luke, stay with your sister and your dad," Mira tried her best to speak steadily, "mommy will be okay." Jefe led Mira out of the cabin into the blue-gray dusk. Nathaniel groaned through his tape.

“You. Little boy,” Crowsey pointed at Luke, “go lay next to your daddy, and be quiet. Go to sleep.” Luke still held tightly onto his sister’s hand, but she drew him to crawl over to Nathaniel. Waister moved close to Athena, taking her wrist firmly in his hand. He pulled her to her feet, leading her towards the exit of the cabin.

“Ath, don’t,” Luke moved toward her, but Crowsey grabbed him.

“I said go to sleep. Be quiet.” Crowsey pushed Luke back to the floor. Athena looked back at him one last time before Waister led her out of the cabin.

Jefe led Mira to another smaller cabin that was built a few meters down the cliff. A blanket already lay on the floor next to a flashlight and another water bottle. Jefe sat Mira down on the blanket. She resisted momentarily. Jefe’s dirt-caked fingers began frantically tearing at the buttons of her blouse, removing two of them completely as he did so. He grabbed her matted hair in tight fistfulls, pushing her skull against the hard floor of the cabin. Mira let out a wincing whimper, but managed to remain quiet. Jefe’s hands found their way along her back, where he jerked her bra up over her head, casting it into the dark of the cabin. His teeth dragged along her shoulder, plunging into the flesh of her neck for a moment while his hands squeezed firmly on her breasts. His nails were long and splintered, which scraped like sandpaper along her abdomen, over her hip bones, and into her pants. She pursed her mouth, focussing as much as she could on a spot on the ceiling. Jefe’s motions were jagged; he moved with an uneven rhythm, grunting as he did, in between generous grasps at her exposed flesh. She felt his nails digging into her thigh; she gasped, drawing her hand up to cover her mouth. Jefe dragged his rough stubble along the inner part of her forearm, and as he brought his rough palm toward her chin from her thigh, for a moment, it felt soft. Between his thrusts and grasps, there were moments that felt gentler, as if the deeper valleys of his hands weren’t as rugged as his nails and fingertips. Mira turned her head to the side,

biting down on her upper arm slightly. Jefe exhaled heavily onto her cheek, and with one final push, he stopped. He groaned as he rolled off of her, his hand still gripping her mess of hair. She exhaled steadily.

“Mari?” Jefe asked. Mira nodded once, not correcting him. He rolled closer to her, pulling the wool blanket over both of their legs. Mira gently covered herself with her blouse as she pulled a single tear away from her eye.

Waister had led Athena around the cabin to a small shed at the cabin’s rear. Inside the shed lay a tattered sleeping bag in the dark. Waister pushed Athena onto the sleeping bag where she landed, sprawled on her back. She began to breath quickly, looking up at his darkened face. The remaining light coming through the shed door caught on his chin, showcasing the scar below his lip. He stared at her for a moment, tracing his eyes down from her face onto her collar where they rested. She gulped once. He lurched forward, plunging his right hand down her shirt. His fingers were cold on her skin, and she shuddered as his wide hand closed into a fist around the cross on her necklace. He pulled in out from her sweater, examining it for a moment in the dark, before jerking on it hard enough that the clasp behind her neck broke and the necklace dangled from his hand. Athena gasped deeply as Waister examined the four inch metal cross with his hands. He tucked it into one of the pockets of his pants. He pulled the length of the sleeping bag overtop of Athena’s body before he found himself a spot to rest on the shed floor beside her. She continued to breathe heavily, but her breaths gradually steadied, and the small dark shed went silent.

The morning brought the same drab sky that had been there before; a steady breeze scurried along the ridge before tumbling onto the cliffside above the cabin. Crowsey had risen before the others, and took a high perch to survey the valley below. Narrowing his eyes, he spotted a thin trail of grey smoke against a distant ridge, before it became invisible against the heavy cloud cover.

In the adjacent cabin, Jefe woke, removing his hand from the tangle of Mira's hair. This roused Mira, who lay still, blinking, eyes fixed on the ceiling.

"Get dressed, we'll go soon," Jefe's voice rumbled. Mira pulled her pants back on before retrieving her bra and blouse from the cabin floor. Jefe rolled up the wool blanket, then took Mira's wrist, as he lead her back to the cabin where the others were. Jefe shoved Mira in the direction of the cabin, where Athena and Luke already sat, next to Nathaniel's crumpled frame. The two children rushed over to their mother, as Waister watched.

"Are you okay?" Mira inspected her children, who didn't have any fresh wounds, "Athena, did he..."

"No, mom," Athena answered, "he didn't."

Outside, Jefe joined Crowsey on his survey.

"Smoke down there. I saw this morning. Maybe they've got food." Crowsey picked at his teeth with his fingernails.

"You go down and see," Jefe commanded, "take the rifle. See how many they are, and what they got." Crowsey turned, heading back to the cabin. Jefe joined soon after.

In the cabin, Crowsey picked up one of the rifles, slinging it over his shoulder. He tucked a small water bottle into his pocket, then quietly slipped out of the cabin. Jefe opened one of the

bags in the corner, pulling out two metal tin cans. He handed them to Mira. She glanced at them for a moment, then back up at Jefe. “For you and your...” Jefe pointed Luke and Athena. “Eat.”

“Athena,” Mira whispered sharply, “share this with your brother.” She handed Athena one of the cans. Jefe pulled a small rusted pocket knife from one of the bags, pressing it into Mira’s palm. She slowly unfolded the flaky blade, then the hooked can opener at the other end. She gave the pocket knife to Luke. Nathaniel groaned on his side, his mouth still moving beneath the duct tape gag. Mira’s eyes remained on him. Jefe walked over to Nathaniel, knelt down, and began unwinding the duct tape. Nathaniel moaned as he did this, and when it was finally off, Jefe pulled the barb-wire ball from his mouth, covering it with this other hand.

“You see this?” Jefe held the ball against his eye. “If you make a noise, if you talk, you can guess where I’m gonna put it next, huh?” Nathaniel’s breathing steadied as he stopped squirming. “You,” Jefe grunted at Mira, “feed him.” Mira took the pocket knife from Athena and started chiseling into the top of the can. Dark brown liquid spurted out, and once Mira had formed a triangular hole, she brought it over to Nathaniel, putting it to his mouth.

“Eat,” she pleaded, “and for God’s sake stay quiet.” Nathaniel resisted for a moment, but began to lap up the contents of the can. Jefe tossed a bottle of water at her feet, which she also gave to her husband. She wiped the grime away from around his mouth, and his eyes met hers.

“Help me,” Nathaniel softly whispered. Jefe stomped over quickly, wire ball and tape in hand. Nathaniel winced at his arrival, but instead of gagging Nathaniel, he handed the ball and tape to Mira. She held it in her blackened fingertips for a moment.

“You do it,” Jefe grinned. Mira glanced at Athena and Luke, who had begun to share their can of food. Mira looked down at Nathaniel’s cheek, being careful not to make eye contact with him. Clasp the wire ball in her right fingers, she gently eased apart his lips with her left hand.

“No,” Nathaniel mumbled through his muffled mouth, his feet and bound hands writhing.

“I’m sorry,” Mira whispered, pushing the ball against his teeth. They didn’t open. “Nate,” Mira choked, forcing the ball harder. Nate squirmed and grunted, thrashing his head from side to side. Mira looked up at Jefe, who was still watching intently. Mira’s left hand slid up Nathaniel’s face, closing both of his nostrils tightly. He began to moan louder, kicking his boots against the wooden floor. Mira leaned hard into her push; she heard the metal barbs scrape over Nathaniel’s front teeth. He began to bleed in crimson streaks against his speckled gums. As Nathaniel began to run out of breath, his kicking stopped, and Mira was able to get the ball inside his mouth. Jefe chuckled, handing her the duct tape. She looked over at Athena, who was covering Luke’s eyes, tears streaming out from under her hand. Mira began wrapping the tape back around Nathaniel’s mouth, and after three complete passes, she collapsed onto her back.

“I’m sorry Nate,” she sobbed, “I’m so sorry.” Waister, who had observed the whole time, walked out of the cabin, watching the sky. Jefe lay down a few feet from the others.

“Everyone be quiet, we’re waiting for Crowsey.” Jefe closed his eyes. Athena and Luke joined Mira next to Nathaniel, where they lay in a huddle.

Heat from outside crept into the cabin where the air became heavier. Waister wandered in and out of the cabin, kicking at rocks in the dust with his eyes on his surroundings. Luke turned the rusty pocket knife over in his hands, while Mira tried to untangle some of the knots in her and Athena’s hair.

Outside, a horde of speckled flies circled the entrance of the cabin, hiding in the shade of the cliff. Large black flies swung in low loops against the powdery ground, while a bird picked at something in the dirt at the cliff’s edge. The wind was nearly dead, and even Nathaniel’s squirming had subsided.

A few hours later, Crowsey returned. He moved swiftly over the rocks on the side of the ridge, his return startling those in the cabin.

“Hef,” Crowsey wheezed, catching his breath, “there’s four guys down there, they had a couple guns. They said they got food too. We could give them the reach, with the girl.” Crowsey nodded at Athena. Jefe’s eyes darted from Athena to Mira, finally landing on Waister.

“Did they follow you, Crows?” Jefe asked.

“No, they stayed back. I told em I’d come back with something for a trade. Something good.” Crowsey unslung his rifle next to the other ones. Waister stood up from against the wall.

“We’ll give them the reach?” Waister asked Jefe. Jefe looked puzzled for a moment, as if he was counting in his head.

“You and Crowsey will go,” Jefe cocked his head towards the captives, “I’ll watch these ones.” Waister grunted, and began collecting gear from the corner of the cabin. He slung one of the rifles over his shoulder, then pulled a long black machete from behind one of the bags. Meanwhile, Crowsey picked up an empty backpack, which he slipped the black hunting bow and a bundle of arrows into. He slung the other rifle over his shoulder; tightly securing his boots. Waister fastened the machete to his belt, slipping a small bottle of water into his pocket.

“Waist,” Crowsey called out, “tie the girl. Rag her too.” Waister marched over to Athena, pulling her to her feet. Athena shrieked, resisting Waister’s pull.

“Let her go,” Mira cried, as Luke tugged at his sister’s pant leg. Jefe pounced on Mira, binding her hands behind her with a piece of twine.

“Get the boy, Crowsey,” Jefe barked, and Crowsey descended on Luke, subduing and binding him with ease. Mira and Luke, and Athena were all gagged, hands bound, as Waister lifted Athena to her feet and out the door.

“You better shut up,” Jefe spat at Mira, before shoving her face into the cabin floor. She sobbed through her gag as Athena called back toward the cabin over her shoulder. Waister swept Athena’s feet with his leg, causing her to tumble head first onto the cabin’s step. She lay there dazed, as Waister hoisted her onto his shoulder before following Crowsey down the bank toward the spot where he had spotted the smoke trail earlier.

Athena moaned with each lurch as Waister carefully navigated the ridgeline behind Crowsey. Crowsey was nimble, despite the signs of aging on his face and hair, making almost no noise as he bounded along the dusty ridge a few metres ahead of Waister. Athena whimpered, trying her best to see what was going on, but couldn’t see far from her position behind Waister. Waister swatted a large black fly that had landed on his shoulder, its guts smeared milky purple on his dirty sleeve. The ridge eventually levelled out, to a spot where three men squatted around a smoldering fire pit. Crowsey raised his hands to signal the men, one of whom had a pistol, and the man lowered his gun.

The man with the pistol had long hair at the back of his head, was bald on top, and had a wiry bronze beard. He wore a stained yellow shirt, exposing an oddly swollen belly. The man next to him was short, very thin, with shaggy brown hair on his face and head. He stood over a blue duffel bag, grinning widely. The third man squatted by the fire pit, wearing a worn black cap above a heavy brow. He looked up from the ashes he was probing once Crowsey came into view.

“What’s thatcha got?” The man grinned, exposing his upper gum line, swollen and black in front of his yellow teeth. The man coughed heavily.

“Thatta girly?” The thin man squawked, getting closer to Crowsey and Waister. The man by the fire grinned as he stood up, dusting off the knee of his pants.

“We got a girl here,” Crowsey pointed at Athena, who began to squirm, “what do you got for a trade?” The thin man began to fumble with the duffel bag zipper, opening it to expose a collection of several bags of oatmeal, some canned food, a clean looking blanket, and four jugs of bottled water.

“We give this to ya,” the man with the pistol pointed, scratching his guy, “all this for the girlie.” Crowsey stepped forward, inspecting the contents of the duffel bag. He jostled the cans of food around, shaking a box of oatmeal, grinning at the dry rattle. Lifting the blanket out of the bag, he rubbed it against his cheek, before setting it back down.

“This is pretty good stuff, huh,” Crowsey stood up, “good stuff, Waist.” He turned to face Waister, who looked back sternly. Crowsey nodded slowly. “Yeah, we’re gonna do it. We’re gonna give you the girl for this stuff.” The thin man chuckled, exposing teeth surrounded by dark gums too. Waister set Athena down on her knees, as she writhed and whimpered from behind the gag.

“Greg,” the man with the pistol said to the man next to the fire, “go get her.” The man walked toward Athena, but Waister stepped in between them at the last moment.

“The gun.” Waister said plainly to his face.

“Wha?” The man apprehensively stepped back.

“I want his gun, too.” Waister pointed at the potbellied man with the pistol. “For the girl.” The man looked longingly at the pistol in his hand, and then to Athena, who was squirming in the dirt at Waister’s feet. The man winced, before placing the pistol in the bag with the other supplies. Waister stepped aside, and the man in the hat dragged Athena toward the fire pit. The other men joined him.

“Good trade boys,” the potbellied man grinned, “uhh, so long.” Athena thrashed in the man’s arms, and the thin man stepped closer to carry her legs. The two of them followed the

potbellied man as they plodded away over another ridge. Crowsey zipped up the duffel bag, keeping an eye on the yellow stained shirt of the potbellied man as it slipped out of sight. Somewhere beyond the clouds, the sun shifted, and a shadow fell over the valley and fire pit. Crowsey turned to Waister after the men were well out of sight.

“Time to move,” Crowsey stood up, dragging the duffel bag out of sight behind a clump of dirt. Crowsey started along the path the men had taken Athena along, with Waister close behind.

The potbellied man led the other two who carried Athena down a ravine into a large flat area. The wind swept harder here, causing the men who carried Athena to sway. She had tired herself out from thrashing in their arms, now she merely whimpered, the skin on her hip rubbed raw by the thin man’s shoulder. The potbellied man swatted at the flies landing on the bald patch on his head, wheezing every few steps. He led them to a camouflage tarp which was strung between a dead tree and a large boulder higher up on the ridge. The tarp had two small tents under it, with bedrolls and mattresses inside. A fourth man stood up at their approach, carrying a shotgun in his hands. He wore a straw hat, chewing on a piece of charred meat.

“Whee,” the man jeered at the sight of Athena, who was now being dragged in a staggering walk by the thin man. “Bagged us a girlie, did ya?” He pranced over to the potbellied man. He proceeded to inspect Athena, pinching her arm with his fingers. The thin man swatted him away.

“Not you, Reis,” he spat into the dust, “you don’t go first.” Athena was dragged under the tarp, then thrust into one of the tents.

“I’m going first,” squawked the potbellied man, scratching at the exposed skin above his sweatpants.

“Why’s that?” Objected the thin man, walking over to face the potbellied man. Their voices grew louder, clapping echoes off the dusty ridge.

“Cuz’ I was the one with the tradin’, that was my food. I gived the most up, so I’m gonna be going first with the girlie!” The potbellied man raised his voice, then began to cough violently. He knelt onto one knee, coughing into his fist. The man with the hat brought him a bottle of water. He took a long gulp from it, regaining his footing. “Reis, get a fire going,” he choked, pacing toward the tent where Athena lay, “I’m going first.” The thin man sat in a huff on a rock at the edge of the camp. The potbellied man ducked under the tarp breathing heavily as he did. He crawled toward the tent where Athena was. She clambered against the far side of the tent, moaning through her gag. Tears streaked the dirt on her reddening cheeks as the man stuck his head into the tent. Athena reared her leg back, kicking him in the base of his throat. He lurched back into the dirt, coughing and grunting. His face went bright red as he coughed, veins protruding from his scalp; streams of bile trickling down his chin. He began to heave, pale grey liquid vomit spurted out from behind his blackened gums.

The coughs echoed up the ridge, bouncing dryly over the boulders. From this high point, Crowsey observed the camp, taking steps closer steadily. He watched as two men lit some pieces of paper on fire, and began to collect wood from the dead bushes and trees nearby. The fourth man held a shotgun, standing over the others as they worked on the fire. He was chewing on something, distracted by his food, ignoring the others’ grumbling and the coughing of the potbellied man. Crowsey crept closer, a pack of flies hovering about his shoulders, landing in the cracks next to his mouth and eyes. The valley had darkened, the low clouds seeming to sit only a few feet above Crowsey’s face. He kept his eyes on the men at the base of the valley, making sure that all three stayed in his sight. One of the men working on the fire disappeared beneath the camouflage tarp to check on the vomiting man. Crowsey quickly descended through a narrow ravine, out of sight of the men below, who were too preoccupied to notice Crowsey’s approach. Once he was close,

he set down his backpack and pulled the black hunting bow from it. As he knocked the first arrow, he spied Waister's dark silhouette crouched on the ridge above where the camouflage tarp was fastened to the boulder. He drew back the arrow, aiming just above the man standing with the shotgun, who was watching the freshly burning fire. The cloud of flies remained buzzing around Crowsey's head, as he held his breath, releasing the bowstring.

The black and green arrow whizzed several feet above the man with the shotgun's head, before it clacked to a landing between some nearby rocks. Both men's eyes darted in its direction, the man by the fire slowly standing up. The man with the shotgun swivelled his head in a quick circle, before standing motionless. Crowsey's second arrow arched low, slicing through the air, before planting itself just above the collarbone of the man with the shotgun. He let out a sharp squeak, collapsing into the dust. The man by the fire began to shriek, stumbling backward, as Waister's dark shape sprinted toward him. Waister plunged his machete into the man's extended forearm, quickly withdrew it, then planted it again in the side of the man's neck.

"Hey!" the man screamed, reappearing from under the tarp, but Waister was upon him. Crowsey ran closer to the camp, watching as Waister clubbed the man with the butt of his machete in the forehead. The man gasped, clawing at Waister's face, but was unable to get close. Waister kicked the side of the man's knee, which crumpled him to the ground. The man whined, face down in the dirt, while Waister raised his machete. The man gurgled as the blade dug into the back of his neck, which Waister then stomped on several times. Crowsey had arrived at the fire, and the pot-bellied man, who had only just stopped vomiting, crawled to the edge of the tarp.

"Wha," he coughed into his stained sleeve, his black gums dripping with saliva. Flies swarmed in large clouds, landing on the faces of the dead and living alike. The pot-bellied man tried to scramble to his feet, but Waister clubbed him with the butt of the machete. The man

crumpled back to the ground. Crowsey stood over him, rolling the man's rotund body onto its back. The man's yellow teeth, grey with saliva, heaved with each troubled breath. Crowsey placed his foot on the man's throat, stepping down with all his weight. The man's stubby arms waved, his feet digging into the dirt. He kicked up dust that coated the wet vomit stains on his shirt. His eyes bulged, his dirty face twisting under Crowsey's boot, until he finally lay still, drool still oozing from his lips.

Athena peered out from inside the tent, eyes red from crying and dust. Waister walked closer, Athena cowered.

"I'll take it off now," Waister reached over, undoing the knot in the cloth behind her head. She exhaled steadily, still shaking. Waister eased her out of the tent, undoing the twine that bound her hands.

"Hoo, we gave them the reach," Crowsey said triumphantly, pulling the black arrow from the dead man's neck. Two small vultures already circled the fresh corpses. "Let's see what's here." Crowsey opened his bag, sliding in the shotgun the man had been holding. Waister began checking the insides of the other tents. Crowsey stamped out the embers of the fire, which left a small glow on the bottom of his boot.

"Here," Waister handed Athena a small empty backpack from one of the tents, "take any food you can find." She took the backpack, nodding nervously, before crawling into the tent again.

The three of them gathered what supplies they found; several cans of food, water bottles, and an unsoiled blanket. After loading the supplies into the bags, they prepared to head back to the others at the cabin. Athena glanced at a tin plate with some scraps of meat on them, before reaching down to take one.

"Don't," Waister cautioned, "that will make you sick." Athena put it back.

“How do you know?” Athena asked.

“See that guy?” Crowsey pointed at the body of the potbellied man, his milky eyes upturned. “He was sick like that.” Athena stared at the man on the ground as flies crawled across his bald head and exposed gut. His pale flesh seemed to glow in the dimming light.

“Let’s go back; gonna get dark soon.” Crowsey collected the bag from the dirt. Waister picked up another.

“Carry this one,” Waister handed a third bag to Athena, which she slung over her shoulder obediently. The three of them headed back up the ridge toward the cabin. Athena took one last look at the camp, where the two vultures had descended on the corpses. She swatted flies away from her face, returning to keep pace with the others.

They arrived back at the cabin at dusk. It was nearly invisible against the mountain, and completely quiet. Inside the cabin, Mira knelt overtop of Luke, who slept curled against his father. Jefe clutched a rifle, chewing on a granola bar near the cabin’s entryway. Crowsey entered the cabin first, tossing his bag of supplies at his feet.

“Hef,” Crowsey interrupted the silence, as Jefe stood to meet him. “We got some food and water and even a gun for the trade.” Mira shook sleep from her eyes, stroking Luke’s hair as she glared at Crowsey. “We gave em the reach, too,” Crowsey grinned, plopping a second bag on the cabin floor. “There’s some more food and water; and another gun too.” Jefe clasped his hand on the bag in the dark, feeling out its contents. Waister entered the cabin with Athena quietly behind.

“Mom,” Athena whispered, crawling over to Mira. Mira began to sob, trying her best to stay quiet.

“Athena, I thought,” she choked, “I thought you weren’t coming back.”

“The other men took me, there was another camp,” Athena said, “but they followed us to the camp and...”

“We gave ‘em the reach,” Crowsey boasted, “took ‘em all out.” Jefe grunted in satisfaction. Mira hugged her daughter close. Jefe turned to them.

“We’re going on in the morning,” he said, laying out a wool blanket. Jefe curled up on it, while Crowsey and Waister lay next to the door, their rifles in hand. Mira sighed with Athena next to her, huddling in the dark while Nathaniel softly whimpered.

Above the cabin, clouds churned slowly. Any sign of the moon or stars had long been obscured. The wood of the cabin creaked occasionally, as the wind picked up in the cooler night air. Mice crawled beneath the cabin, unknown to those sleeping within it, searching for any stray crumbs that may have fallen to the wooden floor. A fly sat motionless on the browned opening of one of the discarded cans of food; invisible in the cabin’s darkness. Wind blew from the distant coast, carrying more clouds that couldn’t seem to climb the dipping ridges winding inland beyond the small cabin.

Waister was the first to wake, and had begun packing up his bags before the hazy dawn. Athena woke next, but remained next to her mother. She watched Waister in the cabin, as he lifted cans of food from one bag to another, sliding the rifles into one of the larger green backpacks carefully. He removed his stained shirt, tossing it to the floor, then pulled a red dress shirt from one of the bags they had filled at the dead men's camp. Athena saw dark lines across his back, but they weren't tattoos. They ran across him from his shoulder blades down to his hip. His forearms and neck were much darker than his torso, which caught the light from the doorway in the sharp dips between his muscle and bone. He pulled on the red shirt, adjusting the buttons, and inspecting the only hole at the shirt's base. Athena closed her eyes as he turned back to continue packing up the bags.

Jefe woke next, saying nothing, but stumbling outside to urinate. The stream echoed off the powdery ground, as Jefe stood shirtless, arching his back. He had more tattoos on his back, though faded and blue, the word 'OMERTA' was legible on the back of his right shoulder. When he had finished, he walked back to the cabin yawning, then pulled on a gray sweatshirt from the cabin floor.

Crowsey rose next, and the movement in the cabin woke the others up gradually. He joined Waister by the baggage, as he organized the supplies into seven bags. Crowsey picked up one of the big water jugs they had gotten in the trade. He held it in the air in front of him.

"Hey Hef," Crowsey called out, "did you already check this water?" Jefe shook his head, kneeling over his backpack.

“I just pissed,” he said, handing a small plastic bottle to Crowsey. Crowsey took the plastic bottle from Jefe, along with the jug of water, and walked out to the wet spot in the dirt. He undid the lid of the water jug, pouring a generous amount over the damp puddle of urine. After that, he knelt down with the small plastic bottle, dropping a sprinkle of the brownish yellow powder into the wet spot. As he stirred it with his thumb, Jefe approached him from behind to watch. The wet patch began to darken, turning into a dark purple that was almost black.

“Fuck.” Crowsey cursed, pulling his thumb from the dirt, “Dirty water.” Jefe sighed, heading back into the cabin. He collected the remaining jugs from the trade, tossing them out of the cabin to Crowsey, who began to dump them out. Mira stood up.

“Why are you doing that?” She asked Jefe calmly.

“Dirty water,” Jefe shook his head. “It makes you sick.” Mira continued to watch Crowsey dump the bottles out, which formed a small muddy stream down the incline. Jefe shot a glance at her. “We’re gonna move now. Everyone carries a bag.” Waister hoisted the bag with the weapons onto his back from the floor. Jefe walked over to collect his bag, while Crowsey, who had just dumped out the last bottle of water, picked up his bag with the hunting bow inside.

“Luke, honey, you can take the small one,” Mira directed. “Athena,” she began, but Athena stomped over and picked up one of the bags.

“Mari,” Jefe called, “make him carry one too, huh?” Jefe pointed at Nathaniel with his chin. Nathaniel sat propped against the wall, his eyes swollen and red. Mira helped him to his feet, then draped a blue duffel bag across his shoulders. He mumbled something from behind the tape, and she quickly kissed his cheek, before picking up a bag herself. Crowsey led them out of the cabin, past the dark wet spot on the ground. Luke took a long look at the patch of dirt, which was drying into a chalky purple swirl. Jefe walked behind Mira, who ushered Nathaniel along. Waister

took up the rear, with Athena in front of him, as the group headed along the side of the ridge toward the more level ground in the distance.

The group navigated the steep terrain gradually, Crowsey a few metres ahead of the rest. The crumbling ridge had swathes of darker dirt that slid down in streaks along the steeper sections. Prickly bushes shivered dryly in the wind, their hollow percussion adding to the buzz of the flies. Behind each ridge the flies sat in larger groups, protected from the wind; darting in and out of the patches of shade. Each time the group moved through a shadier area, they were swarmed with the tiny black bodies that stuck to their faces and arms. The clouds shifted, but didn't part, as the heavier gray clouds from the coast gave way to browner ones inland. After a few hours of traversing, the group arrived at more level terrain. The base of small mountains appeared in the distance, but any sign of the top of them was obscured by clouds.

The group stopped to rest against a small hill, taking shelter from the wind. Nathaniel collapsed, exhaling through his nose forcefully; resting his forehead on the earth. Mira eased the duffel bag off his shoulders, helping him to turn onto his side. The others removed their backpacks, swatting at the flies landing on the sweatier parts of them. Jefe took a plastic bottle of water from one of the bags and tossed it to Waister, who immediately began to drink it. He gave one to Crowsey, then took one for himself. He drank nearly half the bottle in one go before he recapped it and put it away. Mira observed him intently as he did it. He pulled one more bottle and handed it to her. She stared at it in her hands.

“Is it dirty?” She asked meekly, holding it against the sky.

“Clean,” Jefe wiped his brow with the back of his hand. Mira gently removed the cap from the bottle. “Crowsey found bandages and medicine in your bag. Are you a doctor?” Jefe reclined against the hill closing his eyes.

“No, I uh,” Mira stammered, “I was a nurse before...”

“Before the flashes?” Crowsey said over his shoulder, as he examined one of his arrows. Luke observed Crowsey intently.

“Yes, before that.” Mira looked over at Nathaniel. “My husband, he was a pastor. At a church.” Jefe smirked.

“Church. I haven’t been to there in a long time.”

Waister swatted his way through a cloud of flies, crawling farther up the hillside. Athena watched him as he observed some birds sitting on a flat rock in the distance.

Mira pause for a moment, watching Crowsey hand an arrow to Luke for him to examine. “We lived near the ocean when it started. The, um, ‘flashes’. I worked at a hospital. After the flashes, it was okay for a couple months. But then people started to run out of food; run out of water. They got sick.”

“Sick,” Jefe said, gazing across the dust.

“Coughing, almost all the time. They would cough until they started to choke. We tried to help them at the hospital, but everyone got sick. Even the doctors, eventually.” Mira took a sip from the bottle, then handed it to Athena. “Share with your brother.” She dusted her hands off on her pant legs. “We...we left when too many people got sick. People started fighting; even killing each other. Just for water and food.” Athena walked over to where Luke was sitting, handing him the bottle of water. Luke set down Crowsey’s arrow to take a drink. Athena returned to her perch on the hillside a few feet below where Waister sat.

“The feathers have to stay clean, and they can’t be broken or it’s not gonna shoot straight,” Crowsey pointed to the feathers at the base of the arrow. “You need it to fly straight if you want to hit something.” Luke examined the arrow quizzically.

Mira paused for a moment before continuing. “We think, we thought, that maybe the air would be better if we got away from the ocean. Maybe we could find somewhere with food and water. So many people started to die there, and that’s when flies came.”

“I remember when the flies came.” Crowsey scoffed, “Big ones, like birds. They take a chunk of you when they bite.” He swatted at the swarm of small flies circling his bald scalp.

“Where did you, or, what were you doing before the ‘flashes’?” Mira asked. Crowsey took another drink of water while Waister repositioned his squat.

“Before the ‘flashes’,” Jefe cleared his throat, tossing a small pebble down the bank, “I was in the pen. I was with Crowsey.”

Mira paused for a moment. “The pen? Do you mean prison?”

Jefe wheezed a laugh, nodding. “Yeah, ‘prison’. We were stuck in there, Crowsey was in for a long time,” Jefe spat beside his boot.

“And you?” Mira asked.

“Me?” Jefe pressed his hand on his chest, “I was in forever.” He chuckled, “I was in for *life* man!” He itched the tattoo on his upper arm. “Those ‘flashes’, they saved us. I remember when they happened. Maybe ten days or so before the first flash, the guards in the prison were acting all scared. Lots of them were leaving. Crowsey was in the cell next to me, and he had a window on his. He said he saw lots of cars driving away. Then one day, maybe a week later, the flashes happened. I can’t remember if it was night time, or really early in the morning, but we heard the sound. Like a ‘pop’, coming from real far away.” Jefe chewed on his fingernail for a moment, nodding. “After that, everyone was gone. All the guards left, no more cars, everyone. They just left us in there to die like rats in a bucket. It’s true though, lots of guys did die. Guys got sick,

maybe from the flashes, or maybe from eating their own shit.” Mira squirmed at the mention of this.

“We didn’t eat our shit though,” Crowsey boasted, “we got a little sick, but it wasn’t as bad as the other guys.”

“Hmm,” Jefe nodded, “guys started to die on our block; it started to stink real bad. That’s when all the flies came. They came out of the toilets, crawled out of the dead guys’ cells too. They would bite us too, when we were sleeping, if we weren’t careful. We ate those flies though, for a few days. We didn’t eat our shit.” Jefe gestured at Crowsey, “Crowsey, that’s why we called him that. The whole time he was in there, even before the ‘flashes’, he’d take pieces of his bread and feed it to the crows through the window. They would keep coming back, every day, and he’d feed them again. After the ‘flashes’, the birds still came back. That’s when Crowsey grabbed one. We ate that bird, and a few more he grabbed.”

“The birds didn’t get sick,” Crowsey said, “but they didn’t come back after a couple days.”

“That’s when we got real hungry,” Jefe continued, “I thought for sure we were gonna die in there. It started to get quiet on our block. Guys stopped choking, they stopped puking. I guess they started dying. It started to smell real real bad, and there were so many flies we couldn’t keep them from biting us. We started to get sick, too. But there was one night, we were laying in the dark, and we heard another pop, with a flash that came in Crowsey’s window. The locks on our cells opened in the morning, electric magnets I think. They must have died. Maybe someone found his way to the switches and opened them, I don’t know. The doors were open though, so me and Crowsey just walked out of there. There were no voices though, just flies buzzing everywhere. All the guys we saw on the way out were dead.”

Crowsey handed his bow to Luke, who gently tugged against the string. “You wanna bring it back to your cheek, like this,” Crowsey pulled the string to Luke’s Cheek, “just two fingers. See that line above your hand? That’s where the arrow’s gonna shoot.” Luke let the bowstring snap forward, smiling slightly. Crowsey laughed, “How old are you, Luke?” Luke looked up at Mira.

“He’s,” Mira began, with brief pause, “ten. Luke is ten.”

“My son is about your age, Luke,” Crowsey said. Jefe shot a glance at Waister, who was still watching the surroundings. “We’re gonna find him soon. I bet you’ll like him.” Luke nodded at Crowsey. Nathaniel had fallen into an exhausted slumber, his nostrils whistling gently.

Mira tugged at the clump of matted hair on the side of her head; glancing over at Athena whose eyes were fixed on the sky. “Hef-fe?” Mira tried at his name. He nodded in reply, smirking a little. “I’d like to give Nathan-, Nate, some of our water. Is...is that okay?”

He nodded his head again, chewing slightly, “That’s all the water I’m gonna give you now though, once it’s gone, it’s gone, huh?” Mira nodded, walking over to Luke to retrieve the bottle. Jefe stood up, pressing his lips into Mira’s ear. She winced. “You’d better keep him quiet, and put the ball back in after.” Mira quivered at his words. He clenched his jaw tightly, “Got it?” Mira nodded frantically. As she took the water over to Nathaniel, Jefe sat back down. Mira gently eased Nathaniel onto his back, slowly peeling the tape away from his mouth. His lips moved beneath the tape slightly; his eyelids flickering. She carefully pulled the ball from his teeth without removing in all the way. She poured the water beside the barbwire ball slowly, and though he was only half awake, Nathaniel drank what she gave him. His eyes began to open as she eased the ball back into his mouth and wound the tape around his face. He groaned, opening his eyes more, but Mira covered them with her palm, easing him back onto his side where he continued to moan quietly to

himself. Waister climbed even higher up the bank; far enough that he was able to peer deeper into the inland valley.

Crowsey continued to speak to Luke, who listened attentively. “The rifle is good, sure, but with the bow and arrow you can get your arrow back afterwards, if you don’t lose it.” He itched his scalp as he spoke, swatting away a large fly. “The rifle also makes lots of noise; it makes a loud crack, so if you miss, you’re gonna scare away the animal you’re trying to shoot.”

“What about a person?” Luke asked, finally replying to Crowsey, who chuckled to himself.

“If you shoot at someone with the rifle, and then you miss, he’s gonna know where you are,” Crowsey lifted the bow in the air as a demonstration, drawing back the string, “but if you shoot at him with the bow, he only hears where the arrow lands, not where it came from. You can even shoot the first arrow and miss on purpose.”

“Why miss on purpose?” Luke asked, adjusting his ball cap.

“Sometimes you just gotta make him look,” Crowsey pulled the bowstring back to his cheek, “if he’s scared, he’ll probably stand still. That’s when you can hit him with the second arrow.” Crowsey released the bowstring with a satisfying twang. Luke smiled. A dusty shuffle came down the bank as Waister made his way back toward the others.

“I see trees over there,” Waister said, pointing up the ridge, “maybe that’s a good spot to stay. Not too far.” Jefe opened his eyes, sitting up from his rest. Crowsey packed up his bow and arrows.

“Get up,” Jefe barked at Mira, “get him up too. We’re going.” Mira obediently stood up, before jostling Nathaniel awake. He mumbled quietly as she propped him up and restrung the duffel bag about his shoulders. Athena quickly scooped up her backpack, while Luke huffed to lift his onto his back.

“We can walk around the ridge, I think,” Waister’s baritone voice croaked, “it won’t be so steep.” Waister led the way along the base of the ridge.

“Make sure he keeps up,” Jefe said to Mira, striding a few metres ahead of them. Nathaniel moaned as he stumbled along, his silvery hair clinging to his sweaty brow.

The wind picked up as they traversed the base of the ridge. Dust kicked up in plumes as each of them tried to cover their mouths. Brittle bushes clung to the ridgetop, and no flies could be heard or seen in the wind. One large black vulture circled above the ridge, tracking the group’s semicircle track. The dirt on the ridge side was pastel red beneath the kicked up brown airborne dirt. Waister led on, his eyes squinting, as the distant black treeline finally came into view. He pointed ahead, looking back at Jefe, who nodded in between two coughs.

As the group approached the trees, the wind began to calm. Crowsey jammed his thumb deep into his nostril, pulling out clumps of dust in a circular motion. He spat on his boot, which became caked with dry dust kicked up by those in front of him. The trees, though blackened, looked more alive than any of the trees the group had seen before. They were also much taller than the shrivelled trees beside the gas station and cabin. Waister led them into the trees, across a dry riverbed, which wound around another low ridge. The low ridge cupped into a bowl, which was littered with dead leaves. The leaves were gray, brown, with occasional red ones. Waister dragged his feet through the leaves, kicking them up until he found the soil. All of the leaves, even those on the bottom, were dry to the point of disintegration.

“No water here,” Waister observed, “but I think these leaves will burn.” Jefe observed the tightly cupped landscape. The clouds hung low; it would be dark in a few hours.

“We’ll stay here tonight.” Jefe walked into the tight dip of the landscape. “There’s no water, but, there’s not too many flies.” Mira sighed, leading Nathaniel into a dip beneath one of the jutting

trees. She pulled a wool blanket from the backpack she carried and spread it out for him to lie on. Waister climbed the hill higher up, to another flat spot, where he lay his backpack in the leaves. Athena and Luke placed their backpacks near Nathaniel, sitting close to their mother. Crowsey was staring into the distance back toward the treeline. He set his bag down, pulling out his bow and arrow.

“I see the birds over there,” Crowsey said, “they look pretty big.” He pointed into the distance where two large vultures perched on a fallen log; their tiny white heads barely visible atop their black tuft of feathers. “I’m gonna go try and get one.” Jefe said nothing, unrolling his blanket in the leaves next to his bag. “Hey,” Crowsey’s voice grumbled, “Luke?” Luke sat up, startled at hearing Crowsey use his name. “Come on with me.” Mira gave Luke a worried look, but quickly nodded at Luke, who stood up to join Crowsey. Crowsey handed Luke the bundled up arrows as the two of them trudged off through the dead leaves.

Nathaniel fell in and out of consciousness, muttering to himself and twitching all the while. Jefe laid back against the tree, examining the middle fingernail on his left hand. His brow furrowed with concentration, as he gently mouthed words to himself under his breath. Waister perched up the hill next to his belongings, stretching his shoulder against a tree trunk, his eyes following Crowsey and Luke’s now distant shapes. He used one of the larger leaves to wipe down the edge of his black machete which was sticky and opaque with blood.

Crowsey and Luke drew nearer to the two vultures perched on the log. Their shriveled white heads were clear now, with blue skin next to their darker beaks. They sat motionless, even as flies swarmed them; landing on their beaks and eyes. Crowsey knelt next to a large tree, about twenty feet away from the birds.

“Psst,” he whispered softly to Luke, gesturing at the arrows. Luke carefully grasped the arrow just before the feathers, and slowly drew it from the bound canvas bag that held them. Crowsey took the arrow from Luke’s grip, hooking the notch around the taut bowstring. Luke held his breath; his eyes darting from the bow to the birds on the log. One of the vultures turned its head, almost suspiciously, and looked straight at the tree the two of them knelt behind. Crowsey had the arrow drawn back fully to his cheek, but waited. The wind was blowing toward them gently, which pressed the small grey leaves into the earth. A branch swayed above them, Luke winced at the sudden hiss of the arrow, which struck low on the right bird’s body, sending it fluttering to the ground. The left bird clumsily flapped skyward, kicking up leaves as it did, small black flies pulling away from it in plumes. The struck bird flapped furiously, trying to right itself, with its small head writhing against its pierced talon. Crowsey lunged forward, with Luke in tow, standing on the bird’s wing.

“Get the arrow out quick, before he breaks it!” Crowsey commanded, as Luke reached out to grab the base of the arrow. Startled by the thrashing animal, Luke jerked back hard on the arrow, and his hand slipped off its base over the feathers. He cried out in pain as the feathers cut thin slices into his fingers. “Damn fool!” Crowsey roared. Luke scrambled back toward the bird, wincing in pain, and slipped his hand into his shirtsleeve. He grasped the arrow again, below the feathers, and held it steady to get his other hand on it. The bird was thrashing less ferociously, and Luke was able to pull the arrow from its leg, before stumbling back into the leaves. Crowsey twisted his right heel around, planting it the bird’s neck and head, then grinding it into the dusty earth. The bird flapped several more times, before it lay flat in a bed of its own dark feathers, its talons curled up tightly. Luke panted heavily, standing back up, before wiping the tears away from his eyes with his sleeve.

“Show me the arrow,” Crowsey said, and Luke timidly handed it to him. Crowsey inspected the feathers, which were slightly crumpled, then held it up to his right eye, closing the other one. He exhaled sharply through his nose. “Hmm, I think it’ll still fly.” Luke sighed with relief, looking down at the dead vulture. “Let me see your hand.” Crowsey extended his own hand, which Luke placed his bloodied right hand into. Two thin streaks of red ran diagonally across his upper palm and fingers. Black and grey feathers from the bird stuck to the wound. Crowsey peeled the feathers off. “It’s not too bad, but it’s gonna sting.” Luke tucked it back into his shirtsleeve. “You carry him back,” Crowsey picked up the bow and bundle of arrows, “he shouldn’t be too heavy.” Luke bent down and hoisted the bird onto his shoulder; its long wings dangling behind his back. He grunted with effort.

“You got him?” Crowsey looked back. Luke nodded, plodding onwards through the crunching leaves.

Waister peered out through the trees beneath the dampening clouds. He was able to make out the two figures, and the black shape on Luke’s shoulder.

“Looks like they got one,” Waister said, standing up. “I’ll get a fire going.” Jefe, who had been resting, opened his eyes to survey the land around them. Jefe grimaced at the low bowl, but Waister reassured him. “We won’t make a big fire, it’ll be put out before nighttime.” Jefe returned to his relaxed position.

“Why don’t we want to make a fire, mom?” Athena asked. Jefe heard, and interrupted.

“If we make a fire at night, people might see it. If we make a fire in the daytime, people might see the smoke from it.” Jefe spat into the leaves next to him. “You gotta make it just before night, so the smoke is harder to see, but the fire isn’t so bright. You don’t want anyone sneaking up on you and cutting your neck open in the night.” Jefe dragged his index finger across his throat.

Mira winced, gently stroking Athena's hair. Athena looked up at Waister, who was snapping branches off nearby trees. He formed a small bundle, which he carried down the bank to a flat spot. He kicked aside leaves until the dirt was exposed, placing the bundle of sticks on the dry ground. Carefully, he began inserting dry leaves into the propped up sticks, leaving ample air pockets. He walked back up to his bag, picking up the machete, and used it to hack some of the thicker branches off of the nearby trees, which he placed next to the pile of smaller sticks and leaves. Jefe pulled a lighter out of his pack, tossing it to Waister, who knelt to light the leaves. A thin trail of grey smoke plumed out of the curling leaves, which carried high, dispersing into the breeze. Waister lit the leaves in a few more places, eventually starting a larger flame. Because the leaves were extremely dry, the fire ignited with minimal smoke. Waister probed the base of the fire with a longer stick before laying the first of the thicker branches across it. Athena watched him, mesmerised by shifting orange flame, and the deftness of Waister's hands. His movements were fluid, pulling twigs and leaves from the nearby pile, then inserting and adjusting them within the growing fire. Jefe moved closer to the fire after a crackle sprang from the first thicker branch that took. He knelt next to Waister, who gently blew between the gaps in the twigs, each breath making the flame stand higher. Crowsey and Luke approached the fire with a large cloud of flies circling the freshly killed vulture.

“Got one of them big ones,” Crowsey grinned. Luke shakily heaved the carcass next to the fire, where the bulk of the tiny flies began to hover.

“Luke, honey, your hand,” Mira rushed over to her son, taking his right hand up in her own.

“It's fine, mom,” Luke tried to sound bold, “it's not too deep. It's just going to sting.”

Crowsey smiled upon hearing this, before retrieving a folding knife from his backpack. He grabbed

the bird and jerked on the bird's leg until it came off; the hole where the arrow pierced it was still visible.

“Waist, can you give me your machete to chop up the bone?” Crowsey grunted, pulling the loose skin away from the bird's detached leg. Waister nodded, climbing up the bank to retrieve it. Crowsey yanked on the other leg until it popped off, black and grey feathers joining the leaves on the dusty ground about him. Waister handed him the black machete, which he drew high above the bird before plunging it into the bird's sternum with moist clap. Crowsey jerked the blade back out, plunging it two more times, before he was able to pull the bird's ribcage into two pieces. He placed the breasts rib down across the larger branch in the fire. Waister added two more thick branches to support the other parts of the bird. Soon, the bulk of the bird's meat was sitting next to the modest flame, after which Crowsey tossed the remaining parts of the bird behind a tree. The cloud of flies followed the carcass, attracted by the blood and driven away by the smoke. The group watched the meat change colour as bubbles began to sizzle on the bones. Jefe finished one of his bottles of water, tossing the empty plastic into his bag. Mira observed him, then spoke.

“Before, when I asked you about the water,” Mira said to Jefe, sitting on her right, “how do you know when it's clean? What was that that you dumped on it?” Nathaniel jostled, half asleep, crunching in the dead leaves. Jefe huffed, looking over at Crowsey.

“Doctor Singh,” Crowsey muttered, probing the fire with a stick. Jefe remained quiet for a moment, before turning to Mira.

“Hmm,” Jefe scratched the stubble on his chin, “what was the last part I said...”

“You and,” Mira looked over at Crowsey, “Crowsey, yes. You and Crowsey had just gotten out of the, um, prison. After the flash.”

“Ohh...” Jefe reeled back, clasping his fingers behind his head, the glow of the fire brightening the tattoo on his neck. “When we got outta there, we were starving. We were thirsty too, and pretty sick. There wasn’t anyone outside, most of the cars were gone. We didn’t know what the hell was going on, the sky was really cloudy, so it was dark even though it felt like daytime. And those flies, they were outside too, just floating there, hundreds of them all together. We kept going from the pen, across a big bridge, but even from up there it was hard to see anything. The clouds, they were really low to the ground. We were wondering if anyone was coming back, maybe to lock us up again, so we kept going as long as we could, following a creek on the side of the road. We both drank from the river, but I don’t think it was good water, because we felt more sick as we kept walking.” Jefe rocked forward, turning over one of the vulture’s wings on the fire. “Even though we didn’t have any food in a long time, we didn’t really feel hungry, just more sick. We coughed and coughed, like the guys back at the pen, until we choked and couldn’t breathe. We laid down under an old car we found, Crowsey started to puke, but nothing really came out.”

Athena’s gaze remained on the fire.

“Jefe started puking too,” Crowsey added, “so bad that neither of us could even stand up.”

“We just laid there by that old car,” Jefe nodded, “flies were landin’ on us, big ones biting our necks. Birds too,” Jefe smirked, jostling the sizzling meat, “like this one, flying around above us. I thought for sure we were dead, we were just layin’ by that car.” Jefe paused while Crowsey pulled one of the breasts off of the fire. He held the blade of his folding knife in the flame for a moment before jabbing into the white meat. Clear juices dribbled down onto his pant leg as he dug deeper into the meat. He held it up to Waister, who inspected the incision, and nodded.

“Ready,” Crowsey grinned, looking over the fire, “Hef?” Jefe nodded, reaching over to take the meat from Crowsey. Waister pulled out the other breast, followed by the two

drumsticks. Waister handed the breast to Crowsey. “You sure about that?” Crowsey looked back at him.

“You killed it,” Waister said plainly, taking one of the drumsticks with him as he climbed back up to his backpack. Crowsey thrust the other drumstick to Luke.

“For you,” Crowsey half smiled, the glow of the fire exposing his canine tooth. Luke took the drumstick into his lap, looking over at his mother.

“Take those two,” Jefe grunted over a mouthful of stringy meat, shrugging his elbows at the smoldering wings. Mira quickly pulled them from the log, handing one to Athena, who held it delicately with her fingertips. Mira slowly stood up, turning to face where Nathaniel lay “Ah ah ah,” Jefe wagged his finger at her, “none for him.” Mira quietly sat down, beginning to pick strips of meat off the wing bone. Jefe looked at Crowsey, a puzzled expression came over his face.

“Doctor Singh,” Crowsey said.

“Oh yeah, oh yeah,” Jefe continued, “so we were lyin’ there by that old car, good as dead, and it started to get dark. The flies were getting worse too, as the sun was going down. Someone was there though, I remember hearing him talking to me. I thought it was Crowsey, but it wasn’t, it was another guy in a green jacket. He was shakin’ me, asking me where I came from, but I didn’t answer him. I don’t think I could answer him. He started dragging me though, just dragging me along the river. I don’t remember how long he dragged me for, I wasn’t really awake though, I was so sick. When I woke up, I was on a mattress on the floor of a building. Crowsey was there too, layin’ on another mattress. There was water in a jug beside me, which I drank,” Jefe paused, kicking some dirt onto the fire, “I think I drank the whole jug. I never drank so much. I was never so thirsty before. There was a box of crackers too, and a bag of flour. We ate all of that.” Jefe

shuffled, tossing another handful of dirt onto the extinguishing fire. “The guy came back, the one who found us by the river.”

“Doctor Singh,” Crowsey chimed in once more.

“Yeah, Doctor Singh,” Jefe agreed, “he said he found us by the river and dragged us over. We were in a little house near the river, behind a bunch of tall trees. It was pretty well hidden. Doctor Singh, he told us that the water in the river was bad, and that it would make us sick. He said the water was making people sick all over the place. There were two more people at the house who were sick too; a man and a woman. We drank the water Doctor Singh gave us, and it made us feel better, after about a week. We were still coughing, everybody was, but we weren’t throwing up anymore or anything. The man and the woman didn’t get better though. The man died in the night sometime in the second week, and the woman died two days later. They started puking, not stopping, until they didn’t get up again. Doctor Singh was sick too. He would cough at night.” The sky had become nearly completely black, and the fire had dwindled down to just an ember.

“That’s when Waist came,” Crowsey thrust his chin toward the dark where Waister lay. “Maybe a week after the woman died, three guys showed up at the little house. Doctor Singh locked the doors and windows, but one of the guys smashed the window open. They probably thought nobody was home, and they started going through the cupboards in the kitchen, probably looking for food. We were in the basement, with Doctor Singh, and then Jefe and I sneaked upstairs. Doctor Singh had a little axe in the basement, and I found a fishing rod, so we sneaked up on the two guys in the kitchen.” Crowsey slapped his hand down on his boot for effect, “Jefe smashed one with the little axe, right in the head!” Jefe scoffed as Crowsey spoke, “And then I jabbed the fishing rod into the other guy’s throat. We killed both of them in the kitchen.” Waister crunched leaves as he re-positioned himself in the leaves. “There was another guy though, he

stayed outside. We found him when we were dragging the dead guys outside.” Crowsey extinguished the last of the fire. “Doctor Singh told us to bring him inside, then we gave him some clean water.”

“He got better in a couple days, Doctor Singh asked him to stay with us.” Jefe took over the story again. “He had this funny blue jacket on, it looked like it was a uniform or something. It had a little name written on the pocket. ‘Waister’.” Jefe chuckled as he said the name. “That’s how Waist ended up with us.”

Mira, still not satisfied with the explanation, probed one more time. “And the water?” There was a long pause as Jefe gathered his thoughts.

“The water, that’s right,” he tapped the side of his head with his index finger, “Doctor Singh was trying to figure out what was making people sick. He thought it was probably from the water. He said that after the ‘flashes’, people everywhere started to get sick. He said it was in the air, and in the water, and that’s why there’s so many clouds. He said it made all the trees die, the water bad, and made people sick. But,” Jefe announced, “he made something. He made a...powder. The powder he made, he told us, will tell you if the water is bad.”

“If the water turns dark, it means it’s bad,” Crowsey interjected, “but it won’t work unless you piss on it.”

“Yeah, piss,” Jefe laughed, “you need to piss on the water and the powder for it to work.”

Mira spoke softly, “So the water in the bottles back there.

“Bad water.” Jefe cut in. Nathaniel moved on the leaves, moaning quietly. Mira looked over in his direction. The fire was completely extinguished.

“Gonna lay down now,” Crowsey said, walking over to where his bag lay. He unrolled a wool blanket and lay down. Mira made a move to stand up, but Jefe grabbed her arm. Luke and Athena stood up, walking through the leaves toward where Nathaniel lay.

“Mom?” Luke called softly to her.

“Go lay next to your dad, sweetie,” Mira hushed, “go to sleep.” Once Luke and Athena had settled in the dark next to Nathaniel, Jefe stood up, leading Mira off into the trees, a sleeping bag tucked under his arm. He laid the sleeping bag behind a copse of dead trees, then eased Mira down onto it. She lay on her back, steadying her breath, and he began to pull her jacket off. He then began to tug on her blouse again, when she pulled her hands up to undo the buttons herself. Jefe paused, his warm breath against the nape of her neck as she removed her blouse, and then bra. She tossed them into a heap at her right. Jefe slid his pants down to his knees, then pulled Mira’s down. He gripped her hair firmly with his left hand, his right hand digging into her thigh, and Mira exhaled deeply as he began to push.

Athena and Luke lay next to Nathaniel, who had fallen completely asleep. Crowsey lay face down in the dark next to a brittle tree trunk, snoring into his wool blanket. Athena was awake, listening, and gently sat up next to her brother and father. Luke slept curled around his wounded hand, his ball cap drooped over the side of his mop of hair. His breathing was mostly even, and he appeared to be fast asleep. Athena crouched, listening beyond the breeze, and beyond Crowsey’s snoring. Off in the dark, she heard light crunching, and gasping. Cautiously, she stood up, and began to crawl up the steep embankment among the dead leaves toward where Waister was resting.

The following morning, wind cut sharply across the flat valley, whistling through the dead tree trunks and branches. The dried ashes of branches and leaves were pressed against the cupped ridge where the group had spent the night. Crowsey, who had woken first, climbed up the steep ridge to the crest to survey the land that lay ahead of the group on the road. His footsteps were masked completely by the wind, and he moved past the tree where Waister and Athena slept without disturbing them. He continued to climb the ridge, which rolled over into a sharper dusty incline. The earth here was still dry, which slowed Crowsey's ascent as he struggled to grip the powdery ground. He winced at the top of the ridge, his eyes scanning what landscape they could see beneath the heavy brown clouds. He could see a darker streak in the valley below, which appeared to be a road, winding through the hills with wooden power poles on either side. There were structures in the distance too. Crowsey couldn't tell exactly what they were, but several angular shapes were visible as geometric silhouettes in the distance. He pulled a plastic water bottle from his pocket, which was nearly empty, and finished it off. He carefully tucked the bottle back into his pocket while a small dribble of water wet the dusty gray whiskers below his lip. He turned back down the ridge, crouching, as he made his way back down the steep dusty embankment in the wind.

The rest of the group had risen by the time Crowsey returned, and were packing up their bags. Athena had returned to Luke and Nathaniel, while Mira inspected the wound on Luke's hand. Nathaniel groaned louder, which Mira did her best to ignore. Jefe was just returning from a nearby tree, which he had defecated behind. Flies circled behind him as he walked, as best they could, in the mounting wind.

“Hef,” Crowsey called out, crunching down the leafy hillside, “I climbed up there this morning to have a look. Up top of the ridge, then down again, I saw a road. The road goes over to some buildings.” Waister looked up the bank where Crowsey had come from, squinting as he did.

“We’re gonna go check it out then,” Jefe announced, glancing at Mira. “Everybody get ready to move.” Jefe reached into his bag and began rummaging through it. He pulled out a silver tin can, the rusty pocket knife, and Mira’s first aid kit. He carried it over to where she was sitting and dropped it at her feet. “Use that for the boy’s hand,” Jefe gestured to Nathaniel’s crumpled figure, “you can feed him if you want. Be fast. Keep him quiet.”

“Thank...” Mira began, but Jefe turned around to finish packing his things. Mira took a white cotton bandage from the first aid kit, a vial of iodine, and an adhesive bandage. Luke winced as she introduced the iodine to his cut, but he didn’t cry. She wiped as much dirt away from the wound before applying the bandage. “There you go, sweetie.” Mira kissed Luke’s cheek. He promptly turned away from her. Mira then proceeded to puncture the canned food and feed Nathaniel as she had done before. She took care not to remove the barbwire ball all the way, but the smell from his mouth made her eyes water. She poured a splash of water once she was finished, while Nathaniel struggled to speak to her while trying to keep the ball from sliding deeper into his throat. Mira efficiently rewound the duct tape around his face as he glared into her eyes. She looked away from him as she tethered the duffel bag around his shoulders once again.

Once everyone had packed up, Crowsey led the group up the embankment with Luke close behind him. The terrain steadily steepened, slowing Nathaniel’s uneven pace.

“Get going,” Jefe barked from behind him, kicking the sole of his foot. Nathaniel scrambled to regain his footing, making it another fifteen metres before losing his grip again. Mira knelt down, trying to ease the weight of the duffel bag. Jefe chuckled into the wind. “Look at you, man.

Mari's gotta carry your bag for you?" Jefe kicked dust up into Nathaniel's face. Mira knelt close to his face.

"Come on, Nate," she whispered, "we'll get through this. We'll get out." Nate blinked rapidly, clambering onto his knees, trying to right himself. Mira turned to Jefe, "Could you untie his hands? I think..."

"No," Jefe snapped, "he crawls or he dies." Nathaniel propped himself up, regaining his footing, taking a couple steps forwards.

"Come on, Dad, it's not much more," Luke called down from higher up on the embankment. Athena looked down the bank at her father, but said nothing. Nathaniel took a few more digging steps, but collapsed onto his chest again. He exhaled heavily into the dust through his nostrils, his beard covered in powdery brown dust. His lips writhed beneath the curling duct tape, mouthing out a repeating pattern. Mira stopped for a moment to catch her breath, before lifting the duffel bag off Nathaniel's shoulder. She strained to keep it balanced, as Nathaniel looked up at her, but she managed to keep the load steady in the wind.

"Get up, Nate." Mira wheezed, taking a shaky step forward. "Get up!" Mira shouted at him. The others looked back to see Nathaniel's sunken eyes meeting Mira's. Nathaniel pushed himself with rekindled purpose, managing to scuttle up the bank behind Mira, who stumbled shakily up the dusty hill, digging the sides of her feet into it as best she could. She pushed upward, each step pounding into the dry ground, before finding enough balance to thrust the other one forward. Her teeth clenched tightly as she heaved the backpack and duffel bag up the final few steps to the crest of the hillside. Jefe watched with a grin as Nathaniel clambered meekly behind in the trail of dust Mira had dug up on her ascent.

Jefe joined the others at the hill's crest, where Crowsey was pointing out the road he saw. It was less visible now, as the wind had kicked up much more dust in the past hour.

"Road's down there," Crowsey pointed down the winding hill, dotted with dusty bushes, "it goes that way. That's where the buildings are." Crowsey plodded forward, taking careful steps down the bank. Luke followed him closely again, then Waister and Athena. Mira glanced over at Nathaniel, wincing for a moment. She lifted the duffel bag back onto his shoulders. He staggered for a moment, but he managed to keep his footing.

"Don't fall behind," Jefe hissed at him, before joining the others on the descent.

The downward incline was an easier walk for the group, but the wind began to kick up even more dust. It became impossible to tell if they were getting closer to the road at all. Tiny grains of dirt in the wind battered their cheeks as they followed in Crowsey's tracks. A crooked power pole eventually came into view, and then the cracked pavement of the narrow road. Dust slid across the pavement, twisting on the flat ground. Beyond the road, the first of the buildings came into view. It was a small white brick building with a tattered blue awning in front. Crowsey pushed forward through the dust, trudging towards the building. The group reached what turned out to be the remains of a branch of a bank. The front windows were smashed out, and the dust had already filled half of the entryway. Crowsey slipped between the broken glass of the door, making his way to the back of the room.

"What a storm," Crowsey shook his head from side to side, digging his middle finger into his ear. Luke stumbled in, spitting out dust with Waister and Athena behind. A few minutes passed before Mira arrived, guiding Nathaniel, and then finally Jefe stepped inside. Nathaniel fell to his knees, trying his best to clear the dust from his nostrils with his shoulders. Mira dabbed dust away from beneath her eyes, and Athena tugged at her mess of dusty hair.

“We’ll stay here,” Jefe set his bag down against an upturned desk, “until the storm is over.” The others set their bags down. Crowsey wandered around the room, kicking shriveled dusty papers aside as he did. Mira went to check the bathrooms, while Jefe made his way up a small staircase in the corner of the lobby.

In the bathroom, Mira checked each toilet, but they were all dry, and the reserve tanks were empty. She walked over to the porcelain taps, trying each of them, but they yielded nothing. She looked into one of the cracked mirrors on the wall, inspecting her own face. Dust was caked around her nostrils and lips, which she dabbed at with the sleeve of her shirt. Her eyes were reddened, slightly swollen at the edges, and her cracked lips were pursed beneath the thin dusty line of hair on her upper lip. She traced her finger over the red nail marks on the side of her neck, and then across the teeth marks above her collarbone. She was interrupted as Athena entered the room.

“No water?” Athena asked. Mira shook her head.

Upstairs, Jefe had discovered a room with four long desks in it, scattered with loose shrivelled paper and upturned chairs. He walked around each desk, opening the drawers, which were filled with old files and stacks of paper. The second room upstairs was a break room, which had a sink, microwave, and a small fridge. Jefe quickly stomped over to the fridge and opened it. Stale air poured out of the mostly empty fridge, which had a crusted dry carton of milk, plastic containers with shrivelled black chunks inside, and a tub of margarine. Jefe pulled the lid off the margarine, which was dense and dry, but he began to dig his dirty fingers into it. As he ate the tub of margarine, he began to go through each cupboard, but found only empty cans. The cans looked like they had been punctured open with the blade of a knife, with rough holes on the tops and sides, and their dried contents leaking into the rims. He finished the last of the margarine before making his way back across the room to the staircase.

Downstairs, the others sat in a semicircle on the dusty floor. Jefe spoke as he rejoined them. “Let’s go up. It’s better up there.” Jefe grabbed his backpack from the debris strewn floor before making his way back to the staircase. The others followed, with Mira at the rear, ushering the moaning Nathaniel upstairs.

They settled in on the carpeted floor upstairs. Crowsey unrolled his blanket, pulling off his boots to relax. A wide window crossed one wall of the room, but only the road could be seen in the thick dark dust. Luke gazed out the window anyways, watching the plumes of dust batter the wide pane of glass.

“I checked the fridge in there,” Jefe pointed to the break room, “everything’s empty.” Athena leaned against one of the upturned desks, watching Waister clear dust away from the barrel of his rifle.

“People already came here looking for food?” Luke turned, facing Mira. “Were they like the people back when...”

“Yes, honey,” Mira answered, “everyone was looking for food.” Nathaniel grunted, rolling over to face the window. He grunted louder, a monosyllabic sound from behind the tape. He repeated it, looking at Luke as he did. Mira probed his foot with hers, and he looked over at her. She glared, holding her index finger across her lips.

The room became increasingly dark as the storm continued. It was even more difficult to tell if the sun was going down, with the dust and heavy clouds outside. Athena discovered a map in a drawer and unfolded it on one of the desks.

“Flathead National Forest,” Luke read aloud. “Is that where we are?”

“No,” Athena giggled, dragging her finger off the bottom left corner of the map, “we’re way off this way, somewhere.” Mira smiled, watching the two of them lean into the map, reading off place names.

“Bear Dance,” Athena said, pressing her finger into the map, smiling.

“Hungry Horse Reservoir,” Luke laughed, planting his dirty thumb on another part of the map. “I wonder if the water is good there.”

“I dunno,” Athena said, tracing her finger along a road on the map.

“Maybe we can go there,” Luke rested his cheek on the map. Athena didn’t answer. Jefe pulled out one of the boxes of oatmeal and passed it around to the others. They took small mouthfuls of the stale powder, which made their lips even dryer. Jefe gave one more water bottle to Mira.

“That’s the last one you’ll get,” he said firmly, “till we find more good water.” Mira grimaced, taking the water from him and unscrewing the cap. She handed it to Luke carefully.

“Only a sip, sweetie, we have to make it last.” She watched Luke tilt the bottle, barely enough to wet his lips, before he handed it to Athena to do the same. Mira took a small sip herself, just enough to lift the coat of dry oatmeal from the sides of her mouth. She sealed the bottle tightly before taking a seat against the wall on the right of Jefe. Crowsey was rummaging through the cupboards and refrigerator, shaking tin cans before letting them fall to the floor. Waister stood near Athena and Luke, who were still examining the map on the desk beside the window. Waister watched the window as he did, but nothing was visible in the dampened daylight.

Jefe was examining the middle fingernail on his left hand again, smearing the grime away from the end, mouthing words under his breath. Mira watched as he squinted, examining the fingertip intensely. He reached over to his knapsack, from which he pulled out a black folding

knife. He unfolded it deftly, before laying his left hand on the floor in front of him. Mira watched silently, a confused look coming over her face. Jefe pushed the pointed blade of the knife against a low part on the fingernail of his left hand middle finger. Holding it there steadily for a moment, he lifted the blade a few inches above the nail, then plunged it in. He grunted, drawing his left hand back, blowing on the fresh wound.

“What did you do that for?” Mira leaned closer, a bewildered look on his face.

“Three months,” Jefe said, admiring his finger.

“Three months? I don’t understand,” Mira’s voice quivered.

“See there?” Jefe held the fingernail out for her to see, dark blood dribbled out of a small horizontal crack at the top edge of the lunula. “It takes about three months for that crack to move all the way to the end.”

“But why would you want to do that?” Mira asked.

“I did it when I was in the pen, so I knew how long I was in there,” he presented her the wounded middle finger again.

“But you told me you were in there for life. Would that matter?” Mira massaged her own finger as she said this.

“Wouldn’t wanna miss my birthday,” Jefe chuckled to himself. Mira pause for a moment, unable to tell if he was joking or not.

“So does that mean you know what day it is? What month?” Her voice suddenly sounded hopeful.

“I can’t really know the day exactly.” Jefe looked at his nail, “The last time I poked it I was in the pen. But I’d say it’s almost April right now.”

Mira suddenly looked over to Luke and Athena, as they shuffled through the drawers, reading different file papers to one another. Waister was nearby, still periodically looking out the window. Mira lifted the water bottle up in front of her eye, staring at the dusty plastic.

“Jefe,” she asked, “would you tell me, what happened to, um, Doctor Singh?” Jefe grunted, wiping blood away from his fingernail.

“Doctor Singh, yeah, he figured out how to tell if the water was clean or not. He had the powder,” Jefe patted his bag, “and he showed us how to use it. He told us we had to piss on it to make it work. Something about the chemicals in the piss made it work. When Waister was better, he asked Doctor Singh if we were gonna kill him, but Doctor Singh said we wouldn’t, so Waister stayed. A few times I went out with Crowsey and Waister to look for food, and for more water to bring back to the house. Doctor Singh wanted to test it. He was older than we were, but he wasn’t, you know, really old. In a couple weeks he got sick though, he was coughing a lot, choking, like the man and the woman who died. We had a bit of good water, but lots of it wasn’t good. He got really sick, started puking; he started to look like an old man. After a while he couldn’t move very much, and he told us to go. He gave us all his powder, for the water, and told us to take it with us and leave. Maybe there was good water somewhere, he thought we might be able to find it if we kept looking.” Jefe sucked on the end of his wounded finger for a moment before continuing. “He said we needed rules, too.”

“What kind of rules?” Mira leaned closer.

“He told me, Crowsey, and Waister, that we wouldn’t survive if we didn’t follow our rules. There’s three rules he gave us.” Jefe cleared his throat, “First rule: Don’t bury anybody.”

“Why not?” Mira asked.

“Doctor Singh said if you put sick people in the ground, they’ll make the ground bad, and the water bad too. He said if you leave them, the flies and birds will eat them. Flies and birds don’t get sick.”

Mira looked puzzled, “Why don’t flies and birds get sick?”

“Doctor Singh said that the flashes were supposed to make people sick, some kind of weapon or something, but they made the water bad and killed trees too.” Jefe paused, “Flies don’t get sick. Birds don’t get sick.” Mira nodded, still unsure of what to think.

“And the next rule?”

“Yes, the second rule,” Jefe continued, “don’t kill people for fun. He said that if you start killing people for fun, you will end up killing yourself, too. He told us that sometimes we’ll have to kill people, but because we have to, not because it’s fun.”

“Do you,” Mira paused nervously, “think it’s fun?”

Jefe grinned slightly, “The last one, rule three: Don’t eat people. Doctor Singh said that even though we will get really hungry, if you eat people you’re gonna get sick.” Mira stayed quiet. Jefe continued, “When those guys came into Doctor Singh’s house, the ones that me and Crowsey killed, Doctor Singh had a look at them. He showed us their teeth, and all around their teeth was black.” Jefe exposed his gums, which were swollen, but pale pink with red patches. “You get sick if you eat people, and then that turns black. You’ll start puking like the others, then you’ll die.” Jefe wiped drool off his lip with his sleeve, “And that’s the three rules.” Mira set the water down beside her, watching the others again. Crowsey unpacked his bag to fish handfuls of dust out of it. Luke was flipping through an old appliance catalogue, while Athena had joined Waister by the window ledge.

“And Doctor Singh?” Mira asked.

“After he gave us the powder, and then he gave us the rules, he died.” Jefe dragged his index finger across his stubbly throat. “We don’t know why, but he got really sick. Crowsey thinks it’s because he was helping sick people and testing bad water lots.”

“That’s when you left?” Mira asked.

“Yeah, I went with Crowsey and Waister, we took the powder, good water, and some food. We started walking, away from where the sky was darker, up into the hills.”

Mira pondered for a moment, remembering leaving in the night with Nathaniel and the kids, avoiding the congested roads that lead inland out of the city. She remembered the heavy blanket of flies that landed on everyone, living and dead. She remembered when food got scarce, and people started to become sick. She remembered the streets littered with debris, smashed cars, and bodies pushed to the wayside; the claustrophobic clouds that rolled between buildings

“Is that when you found us?” Mira asked, looking straight ahead.

“Huh,” Jefe scoffed, “Crowsey saw you comin’ up that hill. We heard him bashin’ on that glass door until it broke.”

Mira’s attention snapped onto Jefe, “You were following us?”

“For maybe a day or so,” Jefe confessed, “we watched you go in that empty store the next day. We could hear someone bashing on something for a long time, too. You made lots of noise.”

Mira looked taken aback. “Yes that was when Nate,” she looked over at Nathaniel, who lay flat on his back, breathing unevenly. She didn’t continue.

“When we caught you, he tried to run off scared,” Jefe gestured at Nathaniel, “remember, he pissed himself?”

Mira didn’t answer, squeezing the bottle of water gently while she observed her husband resting. He lay on his side, arms tied, crumpled against the peeling paint on the room’s wall. His hair,

though thinning, was longer than she'd ever remembered it; draping in a silvered dark mop over his shoulder onto the floor. His breathing was irregular; his mouth moving beneath the duct tape, while his grimy eyelids half open, barely exposing his pale eyes. The whiskers on his face were unkempt, with stray patches of silver trailing over his Adam's apple down his neck. This sight of him was much different than the man she had met at church nearly eighteen years ago, whom she would marry a year later, bearing a daughter the following year. She thought for a moment of Nathaniel Sturges, pastor; her husband. It was hard to picture that rotund, clean shaven face she remembered speaking in front of the service at the church a few blocks from her college. His charismatic voice used to guide the whole church in prayer, echoing off the walls of the small white chapel. She and Nathaniel had moved into a bigger house the same year Athena was born with four bedrooms and a garden. Nathaniel had wanted to name her Grace, but Mira thought she had heard that word too many times, and had preferred the name Hazel. They eventually compromised on Athena, though she had always thought Nathaniel regretted agreeing to that name. Nathaniel rolled onto his other shoulder, closing his eyes. The room had grown much darker now. Luke and Athena had begun to quietly thumb through catalogues and old receipts as best they could in the darkening space. Mira turned to Jefe.

“Do you...” Mira began, but was cut off by Waister’s sharp hissing to hush the room. He stood by the window, staring outside intently, with his arm and forefinger extended to the room. He shot a glance at Crowsey, who had peeked out from the kitchen, beckoning him over to the window. Crowsey crept over carefully while the others slowly rose to their feet.

“Something’s there. Look.” Waister whispered to Crowsey who was now standing very close to him. Crowsey peered out into the swirling dust, farther down the road, where a light

flickered. For a moment, the light stood still, then began to flicker again, its beam catching enough dust to be visible. Jefe made his way closer to the window.

“What the fuck is it?” Jefe peered out into the dark. The light had disappeared. The three men waited by the window unmoving, while Luke and Athena watched the window from a few metres back. The light appeared again, this time more faintly.

“Someone’s out there. Over there in the other building.” Crowsey said. Waister’s eyes still remained glued to the spot where the light had appeared.

“Fuck,” Jefe growled, “I wonder if they saw us come in here.” The structure where the light had come from was barely visible. It was only a darker shape against the already dark surroundings, obscured by the swirling dust.

“It was really stormy,” Mira said from behind the desk, “maybe they didn’t see.” For a moment, it was silent, the three men fixated on the window.

“Or maybe they saw us, and they’re just gonna wait for us to go to sleep before they come give us the reach,” Jefe hissed over his shoulder. Mira shrunk against the desk, looking over at Nathaniel, who lay quiet now.

“Someone’s gotta watch it,” Crowsey suggested. “If the lights come outside, or someone is coming here, he’s gotta wake us up so we can be ready.” Luke looked puzzled, tilting his ball cap on his head slightly.

“Why don’t we sneak up on them now. We can give them the reach first.” Luke approached the window. Jefe laughed through his nose.

“Hey, listen to little man over here,” Jefe tousled Luke’s hair, knocking his cap onto the ground, which he picked up.

“Luke, honey, come here please,” Mira beckoned softly.

“You wanna give them the ‘reach’?” Crowsey asked, without turning his head from the window. “We don’t know who they are, or what they got,” Crowsey shook his head.

“How many of them,” Waister finally spoke. Athena stepped close to the window, looking where the others looked. Waister shared a quick glance with her before returning his gaze to the spot where the light had appeared.

“We’re gonna stay here,” Jefe announced, “taking turns watching that spot. If anything happens, wake the others up. When it’s morning, we’ll have a better look at what’s over there.” Luke had walked over to stand by his mother.

“And then…” Luke began to speak, but Mira covered his mouth. Jefe chuckled over his shoulder.

“Ah, little man wants to reach ‘em,” Crowsey smiled at Jefe’s remark. “Waist, you’re gonna watch first. Then me, then Crowsey,” Jefe backed up from the window. Waister nodded. “Everybody else, stay fuckin’ quiet, and don’t turn on any flashlights or matches.” Jefe looked over at Luke, who Mira was holding tightly against her. “You got that little man? No matches.” Luke nodded his head vigorously.

Jefe returned to his spot by the wall where he unrolled his wool blanket to lie on. Crowsey made a spot for himself on the kitchen floor, while Mira and Luke stayed between Nathaniel and Jefe. Once the room had settled, the wind beating against the outside could be heard more clearly. It whistled through the broken front doors of the building, ricocheting up the staircase in a gentle, but constant, howl. Crowsey grunted as he tried to get comfortable, making sure to leave his shoes on and tied. Waister hadn’t moved from his place by the window, and although Athena had set up her blanket near her mother and brother’s, she returned to beside the window to stand beside Waister. He said nothing. Mira and Luke had fallen asleep, and shortly after that, Jefe began to

snore on his side; his shotgun and rifle nearby. The wind outside remained steady as it became much too dark to see the spot where the light had come from.

“Did you see it again?” Athena asked, touching the cool glass with her fingertips.

“I didn’t see it again, not in the same place.” Waister pointed into the darkness, “I thought I saw something a little higher up, a smaller light.” His eyes remained focussed outside, “It was fast though. Maybe it was nothing.”

“What do you think it is? More people like us?” Athena asked.

“People like us.” Waister said plainly. Athena paused for a moment, unable to see anything beyond the window. Everyone else in the room seemed to be fast asleep. She noticed Waister kept his rifle next to him.

“Do you think they’re people like the men from,” Athena furrowed her brow, “the, uh, ‘reach’?”

“Maybe like them,” Waister shrugged. He leaned his head back to expose his neck, with a small trail of dark whiskers running down it. Athena drew her fingers through a tangle of her hair.

“Why is it called that? Why do you say ‘reach’?”

“It’s what people called it in the pen, I think,” Waister answered, “when you’re trying to get something. You know, take something from another guy.” Athena observed Waister’s knuckles as they gripped the strap of his rifle.

“So you were in jail with them?” Athena gestured towards Jefe.

“I was in the same jail, but I was in a different place,” Waister traced his finger along the glass of the window, “I didn’t know them before.”

“Did you get out the same way? When the flashes came?” Athena bit her lip mentioning the flashes.

“When the flashes started, we were out on the road,” Waister said, “they made us work in the ditches by the jail, sometimes until it was late. There were two guys watching us; they had guns, but when the flashes started, somebody grabbed one of the guns. I think he shot the other guy.”

“And then what happened?” Athena asked.

“I can’t remember, except that we just ran.” Waister gripped his wrist with his free hand, “I was chained by the feet to two other guys, so it was hard to run. We ran and hid in the trees, we watched cars driving everywhere. Everyone was scared, going really fast. Once it was dark we busted into somebody’s garage and sawed off the cuffs. We stayed together, me and those two guys. We thought they might come looking for us. We didn’t know what was going on. Until people started getting sick.”

“I remember people getting sick,” Athena said, “coughing and choking. They would drink water, and take medicine, but they didn’t get better; more just got sick. That’s why we left. Everyone was getting sick, lots of people were dying. And then there were flies, big black ones. The more people died, the more flies there were. We left in the night, when people were fighting over food, and burning dead people in the middle of the road.”

“We saw fires too.” Waister said, “We were hiding on a boat we found for a few days. It was a big boat, with food, water, clothes, and locks on the doors. We could see the fires. Everything else went dark fast.” The two of them looked out into the night in silence, while the hum of the wind masked the sound of sleep in the room.

“How long were you in jail for?” Athena asked. Waister didn’t reply for a moment, as if he was gathering his thoughts.

“I was in there for almost four years,” he said, “until the flashes.”

“Were you going to be in there for a long time?” Athena asked cautiously. Waister inhaled deeply, before exhaling through his nostrils, fogging the window in front of his face.

“Twenty five years.” He bowed his head slightly. Athena stayed quiet. Nathaniel stirred behind them for a minute. Athena looked over her shoulder, before returning her vision to the dark window.

“Those marks on your back,” Athena asked slowly, “did they happen to you when you were in jail?” Waister shook his head. “Where then?” Athena continued.

“My family,” Waister said, “when I was a boy, my father, my brothers, my cousins. All of them went to jail. They would do things; take things, and they would go to jail for it. We were always trying to take things. Sometimes we'd get caught. My brothers were older than me. They would take things, sometimes they would hurt people. Sometimes they would hurt each other.”

“And you too?” Athena said.”

“And me too, sometimes.” Waister’s eyes remained fixed on the window. It remained dark, and there was no sign of the light he had seen. Athena paused for a moment, readying herself for her next question.

“When you,” she stuttered, “when you found us, by the store.” She paused for a moment again, “He, Jefe, was looking at me, coming after me, but you stopped him. Do you remember?”

“I remember,” Waister nodded.

“You got in a fight with him,” Athena hushed her voice, “you beat him too.” Waister nodded again. Athena continued, “If you’re stronger than him, how come he is the boss and not you?”

“I’m not good to be leader,” Waister answered, “I was never good to be leader. When I was younger, I always followed my brothers. They were older; they were better leaders.”

“And what happened to them?” Athena asked.

“They went to jail when I was a teenager, and then when I grew up, I went to jail too.”

“Did you see them again?” Athena asked. Waister shook his head. “But you don’t want to be the leader now?” Waister shook his head again. Crowsey chewed in his sleep for a moment, one of his outstretched limbs jostling an empty can. “When Jefe said ‘what do you want’,” Athena spoke again, “you said ‘this one’.” Athena gulped as she said this, looking over at Waister, who still looked straight ahead. “What did you mean?” Waister looked over from the window, finally meeting eyes with Athena again.

“I didn’t want him to take you. I didn’t want you to be his.” Waister said in a hushed voice. For a moment, the room was entirely still. Athena tried her best to make out his hazel eyes in the dark. She stepped closer to him, her finger outstretched toward his pale knuckle.

“Did you want me to be...” Athena began to whisper, but Jefe interrupted her as he jostled himself awake. He hoisted himself to a crouch and ambled around the desks to join them at the window.

“Did you see anything else, Waist?” Jefe asked groggily, rubbing his eyes in the dark.

“Nothing,” Waister answered, peering again into the dark.

“Alright, I’m gonna take over. Get some sleep.” Jefe slapped Waister’s shoulder hard, before taking up his unslung rifle and peering into the dark himself.

Waister made his way across the dark room to where Jefe had been, then headed downstairs into the darkened bathroom with the mirror in it. Athena followed a few steps behind him, joining him beside the empty sink. They stood for a moment in the dark facing one another. Athena placed the palm of her hand on the rough stubble of his cheek, gently tracing her thumb over the edge of his mouth. Her hands found their way down his shoulders, to the base of his back, where she lifted

his shirt up and over his head. It fell to the floor. She moved her hands over his back, feeling the scars that lined nearly every part of it. Her fingers felt the spaces between the ribs on his gaunt torso, before moving down the distances of his long arms. Her breaths had quickened, as she reached up to place her hands behind his head, pausing only for a moment, before pulling her face against his to kiss him.

Upstairs, Jefe remained vigilant at the edge of the window, eyes fixed on the spot where he had remembered the light coming from. He traced his hand over the barrel of the rifle, which was satisfyingly smooth to the touch. The darkness sat beyond the window, unchanged and unmoved by the thrashing dusty wind. The clouds still dangled in the dark sky, their sprawling presence lingering close enough to obscure any chance of moon or stars.

Clouds twisted throughout the night, racing across the sky in rolling heaps. Wind tumbled down the high ridges to the west, with new dry earth joining the airborne dust. Black crows rested on the roof of the small building, shielding themselves from the wind as they waited for dawn. Dawn came slowly, under the veil of heavy clouds, and with it, a gradual end to the sharp winds. The dust receded enough for the outline of the road and nearby power poles to become gradually more visible to Crowsey, who had taken over watch sometime in the night. Crowsey sat fixed at the window as the sky moved from black to hazy grey, and only gave a glance when he saw Waister and Athena return upstairs to take their respective places on the floor to rest. By this time, Crowsey could make out the shape where the light had come from, which appeared to be another squat building that was at least two stories high. It sat on the far side of a parking lot, beyond a decrepit chain link fence that had hardly any fence left on its rails. It swayed in the now calming wind, as a small door on the building came into view. Crowsey sat still, observing the building for any sign of light or movement. The quiet of the upstairs room was interrupted by a lone fly that had found its way upstairs and flew about the room, landing on the faces of those sleeping on the floor. The fly made its way to Crowsey, where it landed on his wrist. He paid the fly no mind.

Jefe woke after a couple hours had passed. He quietly made his way toward the window next to Crowsey. He said nothing as he joined him, looking only in the direction of Crowsey's vision. Jefe squinted to examine the other building in the distance, which besides the one they were in, was the most notable structure in the small scattering of buildings.

“See anything?” Jefe asked. Crowsey shook his head.

“What should we do?” Jefe crawled back over to his bag, pulling out a bottle of water, then returning to the window.

“We should wait longer,” Jefe said, taking a quick drink from the bottle, “sooner or later someone’s gotta come out to take a piss or something.” Crowsey nodded. Behind them, Nathaniel stirred but didn’t wake. Mira and Luke were still sleeping, while Athena had managed to fall asleep next to her family as well. Waister lay against the wall in the corner, eyes closed, but listening. Jefe passed the bottle of water to Crowsey.

“I wonder if they’re on the move like us,” Crowsey took a quick drink, “or maybe they’re holed up in there.” He took a long look across the dusty blue grey ground towards the distant structure. “If they’re holed up, they’ve gotta have some food in there. Maybe water.” The two men watched the building in silence, swatting at a few new flies that had found their way in. “You sure you don’t wanna sneak over there now, maybe get em by surprise?”

“No,” Jefe grunted, “if they’ve got lights, maybe they’ve got guns too. We don’t know how many they might be. We’ll just wait ‘em out here. Gotta come out sooner or later.”

“Hm,” Crowsey sighed in accordance, patting the sweat beginning to form on the back of his neck. “Unless they already know we’re here.” Jefe looked worried for a moment. He reeled back from the window, looking over at the others. Mira lay on her side, her back facing Nathaniel, Luke in front of her. Athena lay a few feet from Luke against her backpack.

“I think if they already saw us in here, they’d already be here.” Jefe said, sitting down against the window ledge. Crowsey kept his eyes on the far building, clutching the rifle.

“Hope you’re right about that.”

A few hours passed, and with each one, more flies made their way inside the building. The wind had subsided to a much gentler breeze now, which allowed more flies to move freely through the dusty air towards the small building. Crowsey and Jefe still sat poised by the window, while Waister, who had woken again, remained leaning against the wall. Mira had also woken up, but

remained next to Luke, easing at the knots in his mess of hair. Nathaniel was somewhere between waking and sleeping, still mumbling quietly behind the tape on his mouth as flies crawled across his wrinkled forehead. A sheen of sweat slicked the exposed skin on Athena's shoulders, which rose and fell as she slept. Waister watched discretely, brushing at a fly which crawled along his thumb.

"There," Crowsey interrupted, "I see him." Jefe peered over the window ledge across the dusty lot. A figure walked from the door in the structure, which appeared to be a man, dressed in grey and brown baggy clothes. He carried a small shovel with him as he made his way from the building's entrance towards a broken down car nearby. The man planted the shovel in the ground several times, before pulling off his pants and squatting over the small hole he had dug.

"What's he doing, taking a shit?" Jefe muttered against the window. Waister approached the window silently, while Mira sat up slowly to watch the others.

"There's another," Crowsey pointed, as a second man came from the building. "Look, he's got a gun." Crowsey squinted, looking at the dark object the man had slung over his shoulder. Mira's shoulders tensed upon hearing this. They continued to watch from the window, observing the two men outside in the dust.

"Hm, maybe it's just two," Jefe said, crawling over to his belongings. He picked up his rifle, then inspected the small shotgun. Waister stayed by the window while Crowsey returned to his belongings by the kitchen, taking up the pistol he had gotten from the men they had killed before. Mira watched them as they readied their weapons.

"You're just going to go and shoot them, then?" She asked nervously. Crowsey looked over at Jefe, who was busy loading shells into the small shotgun. "What if they see you first?" Waister was still surveying the outside, keeping an eye on the two men in front of the building.

The man stood up from his squat, before wiping himself with something he picked up from beside the car.

“We’re gonna give ‘em the reach,” Jefe slung the small shotgun at his hip, then picked up the rifle, “gotta get em off guard.” Luke had woken up, and now sat listening keenly. Slowly, he began to stand up in order to see out the window.

“Sit down.” Crowsey hissed, “Don’t move.” Luke curled back down to the floor. Jefe’s eyes darted from the window, then to Luke, before resting on Nathaniel.

“We’re gonna use him,” Jefe smirked, “he’s gonna walk out there. Those guys will be busy with him. We’re gonna sneak around between those sheds, then give ‘em the reach.” Crowsey nodded in affirmation.

“What do you mean ‘use’ him?” Mira nervously asked. Nathaniel stirred.

“Oh, shh, Mari,” Jefe glided over to her, putting his hand on her cheek, “he’s gonna help us. All he’s gonna do is walk up that road and get their attention. Then when they’re looking at him...” Jefe mimed a gunshot with his fingers. Mira gulped slowly, sweat forming on her cheek next to Jefe’s hand.

“And what if they shoot him,” she said shallowly, “what if they shoot Nate?” Jefe let his hand fall from her face, returning to his weapons.

“Then they shoot him.” Jefe said coldly. Luke looked worriedly at his father. Athena stirred herself awake, looking up at her mother kneeling over her. Mira began breathing more quickly. Jefe walked over to where Nathaniel lay, jostling him awake. “Hey bud,” he whispered coarsely, “we gotta job for you.” Nathaniel squirmed, his crusted eyelids pulling open slightly. Mira began to draw audible breaths. The sweat began to pool at the base of her neck, speckling her collarbone with small glimmering beads. Flies clung to her neck and cheek, which she stopped swatting at in

her tension. Nate began to mumble fearfully as Jefe's face drew closer to his. Mira slowly stood up, steadying her breath.

"I'll go," Mira exhaled. Jefe turned around to face her full height. "I'll go instead of him."

"Mom..." Luke tugged at her pant leg, but she hushed him.

"You sure Mari?" Jefe scoffed, "you don't think they're gonna shoot you?" Mira's mind became more focused as a newfound boldness commanded her voice.

"No they won't," Mira was confident, her dry lips clasp as she spoke, "because I'll do it naked." Luke and Athena shared puzzled looks, while Crowsey furrowed his brow quizzically. Waister's eyes remained locked on the window.

"Hoo," Jefe howled quietly under his breath, "Mari, you're talkin' crazy now. But you know, I think you're right." Jefe tapped his finger on the side of his temple. "You're gonna walk over there naked, like you just came up outta nowhere, and they're gonna be looking at you." He chuckled to himself, "They're gonna be only looking at you." Crowsey smirked as they exchanged a glance.

"Mom." Luke probed her leg with his finger, "No. Why are you..."

"Hush dear," she knelt down next to him, "mommy's going to be fine. They're not going to hurt me. They're not going to shoot me." She gently kissed his forehead.

"Just stay here with your sister." Athena looked at her mother with a hint of understanding. Athena reached her arms around Luke, drawing him close to her.

"Alright, Mari, you better get ready," Jefe crept back over to the window. "Waist, you stay back with the others. Keep an eye on things from here." Waister nodded. Jefe and Crowsey made final preparations with their gear, taking a survey of the sheds across the street. They spotted a narrow space between the sheds nearer to the far structure where the men were still standing.

“We’ll sneak over there,” Jefe pointed, then turned to Waister. “When you see me pass that white pole at the edge, send Mari up the road.” Jefe turned to Mira, who hugged Athena and Luke quickly. “Mari, when Waister tells you to go, just walk up the middle of the road, not too fast, not too slow. I think they’re gonna come to you.” Mira nodded, gritting her teeth. “Crowsey and I are gonna take ‘em out, then we’ll see what they got inside the house.” Mira nodded one more time, slowly letting go of Luke’s hand.

“Ready, Hef?” Crowsey tightened his belt. Jefe nodded. They crept down the stairs, crossing the dusty road at the near side of the building, out of sight of the two men in the distance. Waister watched them weave between the sheds that lined the crippled fence at the edge of the lot. Crowsey and Jefe were downwind from the two men, which helped mask any sound they might make on their approach. Waister gripped his rifle tightly; his eyes darting from the two men in the distance to the hunched silhouettes of Crowsey and Jefe. A large fly crawled across Waister’s cheek, which he shrugged off with his shoulder. Jefe and Crowsey were nearing the white pole at the edge of the nearest shed to the men. Waister turned his head sharply to look at Mira.

“Go now.” Waister calmly directed, turning back to the window. Mira stood up, waving to Luke with her fingertips.

“I’ll be right back,” she whispered, before carefully walking downstairs to undress. Nathaniel grunted something from behind the duct tape gag, before rolling over quietly.

Once Mira had removed her clothes, she stepped shakily out onto the dusty ground. Flies swarmed her exposed flesh, and she used her arms and hands to cover her breasts and crotch as best as she could. Her uncovered skin starkly contrasted her dirty face and arms, making her much more visible against the shifting brown earth beneath her. Rocks dug into the soles of her feet as she coughed into the nape of her elbow. Her hair swirled about her as she plodded along the road,

with a flock of crows watching her from their circling perch high above on the breeze. She knew at once when the men had spotted her, as one of them let out a piercing shriek into the breeze. He barked something at the other man, who staggered out from behind the broken down car. Both men hastily shambled toward her, as she steadied her pace, trying her best to keep her nerves and balance. The men wore shabby grey and brown clothes. One man had long rust coloured hair and a beard, his loose shirt hanging off his wiry frame. The other man, much shorter, had a wide brimmed hat atop his mustard coloured skin; with patches of fluffy brown hair caked on his chin and neck. The short man carried a rifle, while the other had a shovel with him. Mira had reached the end of the lot, across from the pole, where she knelt down in the dust. A cluster of flies surrounded her as the two men closed the last few metres and were upon her.

“My my,” the tall man’s voice wheezed as he knelt down, grabbing onto Mira’s chin, “where did you come from little ma?” The shorter man circled around behind her, scooping his arm underneath hers to cup her breast.

“Where’d your clothes go?” the short man chided. “Ah, don’t matter, you feel good.” He lay his rifle in the dirt, sliding his free hand around her hip, reaching between her legs with his dry stubby fingers. He began to dig his teeth into her neck, while the taller man raised his right hand up to his lips, preparing to whistle. Instead of a whistle, there was a muffled crack on the breeze, and the tall man fell to the ground gasping, dark brown blood pooling in the dust around his neck. He writhed for a moment in the dirt while Mira and the short man recovered from the sound. The short man picked his rifle up from the dirt.

“Will!” He shouted, raising the rifle as he crouched next to Mira. The other man kicked about in the dust, face down, while the dark puddle grew larger around his neck. After several kicks, he lay still. Mira remained low in the dust, squinting to see the pole as best she could. She

could see the side of Crowsey's shoulder sticking out from behind the shed. The short man above her hadn't spotted him yet. Crowsey stayed still, as the man crouched lower, frantically searching for the source of the shot. The man turned his attention to Mira.

"Where are they!" the man spat frantically at her, probing her with his rifle, "where are they? I'll kill you!" She winced as the man drew the barrel of his rifle to her cheek. A rattling sound from nearby drew the man's attention, and he snapped his rifle upwards to meet it. Mira spied Jefe jostling a loose piece of the fence with his rifle. The man fired twice at Jefe's position as Jefe ducked behind the white shed. In this time, Crowsey had emerged from where he was hiding and closed the distance on the man standing above Mira. Crowsey shot the man once in the abdomen. The man lurched over, yelping, before landing in a squirming heap beside Mira. She scrambled backward away from him, her bare feet digging into the rough dust. Crowsey pounced on the man, clubbing him with the butt of his rifle several times until the man lay still in the dust. Jefe reappeared from behind his shed, jogging hastily over to where Crowsey and Mira were.

"Alright?" Jefe coughed out as he arrived. Mira nodded, trying her best to cover herself. Crowsey kicked the two dead men, who lay still, already attracting packs of flies to their warm pools of dark blood. Jefe pulled his coat off, tossing it to Mira. "Crowsey, see what these guys got, I'm gonna check the house." Crowsey began to rummage through the men's pockets while Mira draped the coat over her shoulders. She tried to calm herself, glancing into the window in the distance where the others were. Jefe carefully approached the house, passing the broken down car out front towards the narrow door of the building. He didn't notice the window above the door, where the barrel of a rifle poked out, before snapping an echoing blast across the dry landscape.

Jefe lurched over backward into the dust, dropping his rifle as he fell. Crowsey crouched low beside Mira, trying to see what had happened. Jefe held his right arm tight against his left

shoulder as he scuttled backward towards the broken down car. A third man appeared from the narrow doorway of the building, a small rifle in his hands. The man began to run towards Jefe, who had made his way behind the broken down car, out of sight of Mira and Crowsey. Crowsey stood up, holding the rifle close against his cheek, firing once, and missing. The man got closer to the broken down car, then Crowsey fired a second time, but the man stayed standing. Before Crowsey could manage to ready another bullet, the man had reached the car, pouncing around it and out of sight of the others.

A sharp, loud crack whipped across the flat ground. Mira held her eyes to the ground, covering her ears with both hands. Crowsey managed to load two more rounds, clumsily, as he staggered slowly towards the broken down car. The man reappeared from behind the car, standing up to full height, looking over at Crowsey. Crowsey readied his rifle to fire, but noticed the man clutching at the base of his neck. A dark brown streak formed on the man's shirt, moving gradually outward and down. He extended one hand forward to break his fall, his head bobbing as he gurgled. The man fell face first into the dirt, kicking up a plume of dry dust as he did. Jefe crawled out from behind the car, his small shotgun clutched in his left hand, with his right hand still on his shoulder. Crowsey dashed over to meet him.

"Hef," Crowsey shouted, "you okay?" Jefe nodded, spitting onto the man Crowsey began inspecting Jefe. "You're hit," Crowsey pointed to Jefe's shoulder.

"Bastard got me," Jefe removed his hand from his shoulder, which spurted a quick stream of blood through his dirty sweater. "It ain't so bad," Jefe put his arm back onto the wound. Mira made her way over to the others, still wrapped in Jefe's jacket.

"You're hurt," she gasped, looking at Jefe's bloody hand.

“Nah,” he huffed, “I’m fine. I’ll be okay. Crowsey,” he called, “let’s check that place out.”

Crowsey helped Jefe to his feet.

“You can’t go in there you’ve got to stay still,” Mira pleaded, but was ignored. Jefe and Crowsey staggered over to the narrow doorway of the building with Mira in tow.

The entryway of the building was littered with various containers, most of which looked to be empty. There was also a flashlight Crowsey began inspecting the empty cans, rifling through them as he searched for ones that weren’t empty. Jefe tested the flashlight, which worked, before lifting the hatchet in his left hand. There was a small blanket draped over an old chair, which Mira picked up and draped over her naked body. There was clothing piled in the back of the room next to sheets and other bedding. Crowsey lifted a can, shaking it next to his ear, smiling.

“Got one,” he grinned, but as he did, a shuffling sound came from somewhere above them. Crowsey snatched his rifle up as Jefe picked up the small hatchet, heading toward the staircase. Crowsey went first, quietly mounting the brown wooden stairs, with Jefe close behind. Mira stayed at the bottom of the staircase. Another sound came from upstairs, and they froze for a moment, before continuing on. At the top of the stairs there were three doors. The first door on the left was open, and inside were several bottles of water, some unrolled sleeping mats, and backpacks. The next door was slightly open, through which an old brass bathtub could be seen. The final door was closed, and Crowsey silently crept close enough to it to touch it. He looked back at Jefe, who still clutched his bleeding shoulder, before he pushed the door open hard.

A deafening crack sprang from the door, ricocheting down the hallway and staircase. Jefe staggered for a moment, while Crowsey covered his ears. They remained crouched in the hallway as the sound passed, hearing panting coming from the final room. They heard something heavy drop to the floor, two times, as the panting continued. Crowsey regained his balance, facing the

room again. He took a quick look into the room before charging into it screaming, where an old man lay trying to reload a rifle. Crowsey smashed the rifle out of his hands with a swift kick, before striking the man across the cheek with the butt of his rifle.

“Got him,” Crowsey shouted back to Jefe, who staggered into the room. The old man lay against an old bookshelf, his rifle beside him on the wooden floor. A younger woman also lay in the room on a mat, but she wasn’t moving. Jefe noticed a narrow open window in the room, with the broken down car in plain view outside.

“It was you then.” Jefe growled, “You’re the one who fuckin’ shot me.” The old man said nothing, clutching the side of his face, beginning to whimper. “What’s that you say?” Jefe stood over of the old man.

“P-p....” the old man choked out. Mira had made her way upstairs, joining the others in the room.

“Say it,” Jefe leered over the man. The old man whimpered, pressing his thin lips together behind his wispy gray beard.

“P-p..” the old man stuttered again. He shifted to steady his breathing. “Please don’t...”

“There you go,” Jefe cut the man off, striking him at the base of the neck with the hatchet. The old man croaked, trying to raise his gaunt arm, but Jefe swung again and again. The blunt hatchet bloodied the old man’s neck and chin to a pulp, spilling onto the floor in maroon splatters. Mira covered her eyes, gasping, as the wet slapping of the axe blade against the man’s exposed bones found its way to her ears. Jefe growled as he furiously swung at the man until, exhausted, he collapsed next to the old man, dropping the hatchet to the floor. Flies began to settle on everyone in the room. “Crowsey,” Jefe panted, “get the others. Bring ‘em here.” Crowsey darted from the room without saying anything. Mira scanned the small room, from Jefe’s panting heap, to the pulp

of the old man's face, to the woman on the mat. She made her way over to the woman, feeling her for a pulse.

“Dead?” Jefe asked, still clutching his shoulder. Mira nodded. “Let's go downstairs and wait for the others.

Between Crowsey, Waister, Athena, and Luke, they managed to carry all the gear across the dusty road to the new building. Mira helped move the bags inside, while collecting her clothes and getting dressed. Waister dragged the dead bodies from upstairs outside, piling them next to the other one on the far side of the car. A medium sized vulture already perched on a nearby shed, eyeing the fresh corpses.

Nathaniel stumbled to the front of the house, guided by Crowsey, plopping into a heap. He jostled over so that he was facing the sky, panting heavily through his nostrils. Luke and Athena brought their bags inside, laying them on the lower floor. Jefe stood outside, carefully peeling his shirt off, away from the dark open wound on his shoulder. He dumped a splash of water from one of his bottles onto it, which flushed some of the dust that stuck beside it.

“Waist,” he called, “get one of the water bottles from upstairs in there. Test it.” Waister headed inside obediently, retrieving a wide jug from the upstairs room, and a small plastic container of brownish yellow powder. He looked at Jefe, then to Crowsey.

“You gotta piss?” he asked. They shook their heads. Crowsey looked over at Luke.

“What about you, fella?” Crowsey pointed at Luke. “Can you make a bit of piss for us?” Luke looked confused for a moment, but then nodded his head. “Just do it in the dirt there,” Crowsey pointed at Luke's feet. Luke shyly turned his back to the others, a tiny trickle dabbling into the dust. Flies were immediately drawn to the warm pool, which Crowsey swatted away, unscrewing the cap of one of the water jugs. He poured a generous amount onto the urine patch,

then a quick sprinkle of the powder. He and Luke watched as the water pushed its way into a swirling track in the dust. The water darkened slightly, to a cloudy shade, but still clear, where it stayed. Crowsey held the jug up to his eye.

“It’s a little dirty, Hef,” Crowsey took a sip, “but it’s not that bad. It’ll be okay to drink a bit of it, I think.” He took another drink from the jug, before handing it to Jefe, who poured some on his wound before drinking. Mira watched Jefe intently, as he pulled out a pocket knife, preparing to dig into the wound on his arm. Her grip on Athena’s sleeve tightened as she watched.

“Mom, are you...” Athena began, but Mira sprang forward toward Jefe.

“Let me, please, let me do it,” she pleaded, her voice startling Jefe. “I’m a...I was a nurse. I know how to do it. You’ll probably make it worse.” Jefe glanced at her with a smirk. “Here, I’ll go get my first aid kit from your bag.” She paused for a moment, “Is...is that okay?” Jefe looked at the wound on his shoulder, wincing as he squeezed a stream of dark blood from it.

“Okay,” Jefe grunted, gripping the pocketknife in his teeth. Mira darted into the house, rifling through Jefe’s backpack, before returning with the first aid kit. She also brought one of the chairs from inside and set it down on the dusty ground.

“Sit,” she said sharply. Jefe glared at her. “I mean, please, sit.” Mira flashed her teeth. Jefe smirked, sitting down in the chair, his back facing her. Nathaniel rolled over to observe as Mira pulled a small bottle of iodine from the first aid kit. “This is going to sting, okay?” Mira said softly. Crowsey chuckled in the background, while Waister took a generous drink from one of the water jugs. Mira carefully poured the iodine onto the wound, which brightened it, foaming at its dirty edges. Jefe hissed through his teeth. Mira began to gently dab at the wound with a sterile piece of tissue from one of the plastic bags inside the first aid kit. She poured the iodine over the edges of a pair of long tweezers, which she began to probe into Jefe’s wound. He grit his teeth as she did,

biting down into the plastic handle of his pocketknife. Mira could see the dark fragment of the bullet in Jefe's flesh, and she plunged the tweezers deeper in. Jefe half laughed as she did, wincing at the same time.

"Keep going, Mari," Jefe said sharply, "you're right on top of it." Mira pinched the tweezers' clamps down onto a folded flap of metal that jutted off the shell fragment. She tugged on it, but it was lodged firmly in place, so she began to gently work it backward through the opening in Jefe's shoulder. The shiny centre of the shell fragment became visible, and Mira pursed her lips with focus, ignoring a small fly that crawled across her forehead. With a delicate tug, the shell fragment came loose, and she held it up in front of their eyes.

"Hoo, pretty big one," Crowsey observed it, before Mira let it fall into the dirt. She poured one final drop of iodine into the wound before dousing it with water from one of the bottles. The wound sat fresh and open, flies beginning to swarm it.

"I'm going to have to stitch it up," Mira said gently as she inspected the wound. "It's clean, but it's wide."

"You know how to do that?" Jefe looked apprehensive.

"Yes," Mira assured him, "I have the thread right here. We should do it now while it's still light out." Jefe looked over at his shoulder, then to the sky. Two more vultures were circling, while the third one was already picking at the dead body by the car.

"Waist," Jefe barked, "bring those bodies farther away. They're gonna bring more flies here." Waister headed off to the four dead bodies by the car. Jefe leaned back into the chair. "Okay Mari, get it going."

Mira swabbed the edge of the wound with a sterile tissue before drawing the spool of surgical thread from the first aid kit. She poured iodine over a thin silver needle with a hook at the

end, before threading it onto the edge of the twine. Luke watched her hands work deftly, while Athena stood up to go help Waister with the bodies. Mira looked at Athena briefly before returning to the needle and thread. She made the first incision, Jefe winced, gritting his teeth behind his lips. The needle ducked through his flesh and skin at the end of the wound where it was deepest, cinching it closed. Residual blood oozed from the wound, with clear liquid beneath, which Mira dabbed up effectively. Repositioning herself, she made the middle stitches on the wound, as Jefe gritted his teeth and clenched his fingers. Nathaniel squirmed in the dirt, moaning and coughing into the duct tape gag as he watched. Mira finished the last few stitches before tightly tying the stitching against Jefe's skin, then with a small pair of scissors from the first aid kit, she clipped the extra thread from the end of it.

“Done?” Jefe turned his face to meet hers.

“Almost,” she answered, pulling a large square pad of gauze from the first aid kit. She fixed over the wound with some surgical tape, which looked blindingly clean against Jefe's dirt crusted tan skin. “It's finished.” Mira stood up, putting the supplies back into the first aid kit. Jefe moved his arm in a circular pattern, inspecting the dressing as he did. Mira picked up Jefe's discarded shirt, which now had a gaping bloody tear on one of the shoulders. “Maybe you can find another one inside.” She let it fall to the dirt.

Waister and Athena had dragged the three men across the street and behind another shed. They returned, each taking water from one of the jugs. Mira looked down at Nathaniel, who writhed against the wooden siding of the building.

“I'll take him inside,” Mira said, bending down to help Nathaniel up. “Jefe,” she asked, “may I give him food and water? Maybe change his clothes.” Jefe nodded at her.

“Just keep him quiet.” Mira helped Nathaniel to his feet, dragging him through the door of the house. He sprawled out near the back wall of the house next to a tangle of discarded bed sheets. Mira rifled through the pile of clothes, finding a pair of faded black pants, which she brought over to Nathaniel along with a small can of soup and one jug of water. Nathaniel’s clothes reeked of urine and feces, which Mira slowly removed, tossing to the side of the room. She poured a small amount of water on his chafed legs, easing away the smears on his thighs. Carefully she eased the new pants onto her husband, who was only half cooperating as she did. Once his pants had been changed, she slowly began unwrapping the duct tape around his mouth. She saw the metal wire ball between his swollen lips, and eased it out of his mouth, as it dribbled mucous onto his chin.

“Mira,” Nathaniel moaned through his lips, “Mira we have to...”

“Shh,” she scolded, dumping water into his open mouth, which he quickly swallowed. She then forced some of the chunky canned soup into his mouth with her fingers. “Eat up, quickly.” She dabbed at his chin with her sleeve.

“Mira...” Nathaniel moaned a little louder, “what did you do.” His lips struggled to find each other, tears welling at the edges of his eyes. “Why did you help him?”

“Shh,” Mira shot at him, looking over her shoulder, before pouring more water into his mouth. “I had to do it, Nate. What good would it be if he had an infected wound?” She watched him feebly drink back the water, his eyes still on her. “We’re with them, Nate. We’re with them whether we like it or not. For now.” She looked over at the door, observing Crowsey inspecting the dressing on Jefe’s wound.

“We have to get free, Mira,” Nathaniel began to sob, “we have to...” Mira snatched up the wire ball and shoved it through his teeth. He let out a sharp moan, falling back onto the floor. Straddling him, she pushed the ball into his mouth with her palm, collecting the tape from the

ground beside him, before hastily taping it back into place. He whimpered as she did so. She stood up, heading back to Jefe's backpack, where she drew the roll of duct tape from it. She added a fresh layer to Nathaniel's gag, before resting his head against the floor of the house.

"Be quiet, dear." She whispered, "Please be quiet."

Jefe, Waister and Athena entered the house and began to relocate their backpacks. Athena took hers upstairs, while Jefe inspected the bedding against the wall near Nathaniel. Outside, Crowsey was showing Luke how to pull the bowstring of the hunting bow. Waister followed Athena upstairs, leaving Jefe downstairs with Mira. Jefe began to eat from a bag of cereal he had in his backpack. Mira looked over at him as he did.

"I thought you said one of the rules was 'Don't kill for fun'," Mira said flatly.

"Yeah I did," Jefe crunched, "yeah it is."

"But the old man upstairs," Mira questioned, "you were laughing and smiling when you killed him. You didn't have to kill him."

"He shot at us," Jefe justified, "so that's why I killed him."

"But why did you ask him to say 'please'?" Mira asked, "You killed him anyways." Jefe grumbled to himself.

"I came up here to give these guys the reach, and that's what we did," Jefe explained, "we took their stuff, and we killed them. I made this old guy say please, I just wanted to hear him say it. I wanted him to listen to me."

"But then why did you kill him after? Wasn't that just 'for fun'?" Mira asked sternly. Jefe appeared to be at a loss of words for a moment while he collected his thoughts. Athena and Waister's footsteps could be heard through the floorboards.

“That’s not the same,” Jefe finally answered, “because I had fun killing him, but I didn’t kill him for fun.” Mira puzzled on his words for a moment.

“I suppose I see the difference.” Mira answered meekly, returning to her belongings. “Does that mean that you do like killing? You think it’s fun?”

“Sometimes it is,” Jefe said, “sometimes it’s not. I spent a long time in the pen. I was in there and out of there for most of my life. Up in there somebody’s always telling you what to do. Somebody’s telling you what to say. Not anymore though,” Jefe boasted, “now I tell them what to say.”

“Why were you in there,” Mira asked, “in the pen.”

Jefe took a drink of water before he answered. “I stole a car,” he mumbled, “and then someone tried to take it back, so I killed him.” Mira looked out the door beyond the house, where Crowsey stood with Luke.

“And him?” Mira asked, “do you know why he was in there?”

“Yeah,” Jefe nodded, “back in the pen, another guy on our block told me about Crowsey. He said he was driving his car when he was drunk.”

“That’s all?” Mira asked.

“No,” Jefe continued, “the guy said that when he was driving the car he crashed it. He killed his little boy.” Mira looked out at Crowsey, who let Luke fire one of the arrows into the dirt.

“Is that true?” she asked.

“Hm,” Jefe hummed to himself, “I don’t know. Can’t really know.” He began to unpack his blanket onto the floor. “We’ll stay here tonight.”

Outside, Crowsey stood behind Luke as he drew back one of the arrows against the bow’s thin black string.

“Keep it flat when you shoot. See that line? That’s where it’s gonna go.” Crowsey pointed ahead at a wooden power pole that stood near the edge of the dusty road. Luke drew the bowstring back, firing the arrow several feet short of the pole. “Good aim, just need to pull back on it more.” Crowsey went to collect the arrow. Luke looked at the vultures that were picking at the corpses in the distance. A thick cloud of flies hovered around them too, with big black flies crawling ovetop of the corpses. Crowsey returned with the arrow. “Try it again.” Luke drew back the bow once more, this time the arrow was much closer to the pole. “Good,” Crowsey cheered, “almost there. Try again.” Crowsey retrieved the arrow once more. Luke pulled the arrow back steadily, waiting for the thin notch on the bow to line up with the base of the pole. He pulled hard on the string, leaning back, before releasing the arrow. It arched a few feet above where he fired, before it caught the wind, sailing forward into the wood of the post. A satisfying click echoed back toward them as the arrow sat planted near the base of the pole. “There ya go,” Crowsey encouraged him, “that’s all there is to it.” Luke eagerly dashed ahead to retrieve the arrow.

Flies sat in scattered swarms around the small structure where the group rested. Some smaller birds had joined the vultures as they feasted on the bodies left by the shed, eagerly picking up smaller scraps of dirty flesh. Flies of every size landed on the mangled limbs; crawling in and out of the scrappy clothing that stuck to them. As the day dragged on, the birds had picked most of the flesh from the exposed parts of the bodies, while dirt kicked up by the wind gradually began to cover the rest. In the distance, the hill which they had come down shimmered through sheets of airborne dirt and packs of flies. The evening brought calmer winds, which granted a clearer view inland. Crowsey spotted two larger mountains in the distance. He joined the others inside the house who were already settled into their spaces for the night.

Jefe had one of the flashlights, which he opened to inspect the batteries. Crowsey bashed open a can he had found earlier, scooping out sticky chunks of pineapple with his fingers.

Upstairs, Waister sat in one of the rooms with Athena, looking out into the darkening landscape.

“Why do they call you ‘Waister’?” Athena asked him.

“When I came to the house, with Doctor Singh, the men I was with were killed. Jefe and Crowsey killed them.” Waister probed his chest with his finger, “Before that we were hiding on a big boat we found, I told you about that.”

“Yeah, you told me about the boat,” Athena moved closer to him.

“When we were on the boat, I found some new clothes to wear instead of the suits we had from jail. The shirt I found on the ship said ‘Waister’ on it. It was written on the front.”

“So they just called you that?” Athena asked him curiously, “and you just have that name now?” Waister nodded.

“My name didn’t matter in jail very much, and before that, people just called me what they wanted to.” Waister flicked the flashlight on, keeping the beam pressed to the floorboards.

“What did the men you were with before call you? The men from the boat?” Athena asked, making a shadow puppet with her index finger in the edge of the flashlights glow.

“I don’t remember,” Waister answered, “punk, or goof, or something like that.”

“Do you like being ‘Waister’?” she asked him.

“It doesn’t matter to me,” Waister said softly, “I don’t think it really matters anymore.”

Athena paused, listening to the buzzing of the flies outside the paneless window frame.

“Where are we going?” Athena asked, “Do you know?”

“I don’t know,” Waister answered, “I guess we’re going to keep going until we find good water. Lots of good water.”

“Don’t you want to find your family?” Athena asked. Waister shook his head.

“I haven’t seen them in a long time,” he shook the messy pile of hair on his head to one side. “I don’t even know if they’re alive.”

“But everything changed after the flashes. Don’t you think?” Athena asked. Waister didn’t answer. “Before the flashes, we lived in our house. I went to school, so did Luke. Dad went to work, and we all went to church on Sunday.”

“Sunday,” Waister echoed her. She suddenly realized that she hadn’t thought about what day it was for a long time.

“Do you think we can make things good again, for everybody?” she asked. “Do you think it can be like it was before the flashes?” Waister turned his eyes to the flashlight for a moment, and then onto Athena.

“Before the flashes,” Waister began, “I don’t remember if it was good. I don’t remember if it was different.” He caressed his forearm with his right hand.

“It was different,” Athena answered hastily, “it was good, and people were...” She stopped herself.

“Inside the jail, or outside the jail, I can’t remember what was good,” Waister said. “I can’t remember what was different.” Athena didn’t answer for a moment. She gazed out into the dark, listening to the breeze that rattled the wooden window frame.

“Before the flashes, did you pray?” Athena asked.

“Pray?” Waister repeated, puzzled, “Pray for what?”

“Pray to God,” Athena clasped her hands together, “so that he’ll protect you.”

“Protect me from what?” Waister answered.

“God can protect you from anything,” Athena said shakily, “if you pray to him.” The silhouette of the shed where the corpses were piled became harder to see in the dark. “Is it scary,” Athena stuttered, “when you kill somebody?”

“No,” Waister said. “It’s not scary anymore.”

“How many people have you killed?” she asked. Waister shrugged. His eyes travelled out the window once more.

“How many have you killed?” Waister asked, finally.

“None,” she answered mechanically. The glow of the flashlight pressed against the floor softly illuminated the pinks of their hands as they found one another in the dark.

“What was it like, to kill somebody,” Athena turned to Waister, “what was it like the first time?”

The following day brought more flies. They clung to one another in speckled smears across the dim air, with more and more finding their way to the house where the group remained. The bodies piled by the shed had been picked apart by birds throughout the night, and were now indistinguishable from one another in the dust. These bodies had drawn more flies; small ones that clustered in the doorways and large ones that buzzed through the hallways and into each room of the house. Luke scratched at his neck in his sleep, where one of the larger flies had left a swollen pink bite on his dirt caked flesh. The others tossed in their sleep as well, rolling themselves to cover as much of their skin as they could. Jefe woke first, staggering to his feet, before pacing outside of the building. He blinked in the drab light, clearing his vision to observe the packs of flies. The drone of the flies' wings hit him from every angle, as more and more of their black bodies found their way to his cheek and neck. He swatted and spat, before stumbling beside the house to urinate. Crowsey woke next, scratching the grey whiskers on his scalp, before heading outside to join Jefe.

“Fuckin’ lot of them today,” Jefe spat through a cluster of small flies that were drawn to the wet patch of his urine, “we’ve gotta leave this spot.”

“I saw a couple mountains over that way,” Crowsey pointed inland, covering his face with his free hand, “could be a good place to head. Maybe less damn flies there.” Jefe nodded, wincing at the motion of his wounded shoulder. “Get a bit more rest,” Crowsey pointed at his wound, “we’ll leave after that.” Jefe agreed, hobbling back inside and ducking under a wool blanket. Crowsey walked farther out from the house, scouting the mountains he had seen the day before. The mountains stood tall against the brown earth, their height magnified by the low clouds. They

appeared to reach all the way to the sky; their dark masses looked almost blue against the dim morning clouds. Crowsey made his way back inside, where he waited for the others to wake.

By the time the others woke, the number of flies inside the house had nearly doubled. They crawled over every surface of flesh, as the sleepers in the house squirmed to cover themselves. Under Jefe's direction, they began to pack their bags in preparation to move. Mira pulled her and Nathaniel's bags to the entryway, where she was joined by Athena. Waister did a final sweep of the upstairs before he joined the others by the door. Mira guided Nathaniel to his feet, as he scrunched his face through the cloud of flies that followed him. Once they had all gathered, Crowsey led the way across the dusty ground towards the distant mountains.

The wind had calmed to almost nothing, which allowed more flies to keep up with the group. The smaller flies clung to the sweaty faces of each of them, while the larger ones buzzed in lazy orbits waiting for an exposed neck or arm. Their feet scuffed on the powdery dust, kicking up mushroom shaped plumes as they did. Nathaniel trudged behind, heaving long breaths through his reddening nose. Waister slapped a fly that had landed on his shoulder, its crumpled body tumbling to the dust. Smaller flies were immediately upon it. A lone vulture circled high above the group, unnoticed behind the hum of the flies.

The earth became less powdery as they reached the base of the mountain. Flattened bushes populated the crumbly rocky hillside as the group carried on. Crowsey still led, several metres in front of the others, his eyes fixed on the crest of the low mountainside. As the group made their way up the slope, fewer flies remained around them. Their pace slowed, however, as the ground here was littered with oblong rocks that crunched beneath their feet. They traversed through the narrowing space between the bases of the two, the scraping of their steps echoing. Crowsey walked much farther ahead of the others, and eventually he disappeared from their sight. They joined him

as he sat crouched behind a fencepost twisted in metal wire. He held his hand up in the air, hushing the others.

“Do you hear that?” Crowsey whispered to Jefe, who knelt beside him. Jefe sat still, tilting his ear skyward. A faint rattling hiss came from somewhere beyond the next ridge.

“What do you think it is?” Jefe whispered back to Crowsey.

“It sounds like water,” Crowsey grinned, standing up eagerly. Jefe followed close to Crowsey, while the others followed several metres behind them.

Scrambling ahead of the others, Crowsey was the first to see beyond the ridge, which sloped down towards a narrow ravine. The base of the ravine was a darker brown than the bank that lead down to it, which was littered with tangled dead bushes. Crowsey marched through the crisp clumps of bushes, swatting flies away from his face as he did. By the time he arrived at the bottom of the ravine, the others had appeared at the top of the ridge. The earth became damp beneath Crowsey’s shoes as he finally reached the water. Slow moving and cloudy, a narrow stream pushed through the gentle trough of the earth. Crowsey plunged his hands into the cool liquid, cupping it near his face.

“Look,” Crowsey turned back to Jefe who had arrived next to him, “it’s water.” He let the water fall through his hands, splashing the soft earth at his feet.

“Maybe it’s good water; maybe we could test it,” Jefe adjusted his backpack. Crowsey looked upstream, where the water wrapped around a rocky bluff out of sight.

“We should follow it up that way, maybe it’s less muddy up there.” Crowsey pointed to where the stream disappeared around the rocky outcropping. Jefe nodded, beckoning Waister with his hand high in the air. The others were making their way slowly down the bank. Crowsey took the lead again, following the gentle curve of the stream’s edge. It looked to be a shallow stream,

and its motion was so slow that it looked like it was sitting still. Downstream, the water disappeared around the base of one of the steep mountains, but the clouds obscured the far side of it. They continued to follow the water upstream, while every so often a splintered fencepost came into view along the uneven ground. As Crowsey rounded the stony bluff, he noticed the river straightening out to a wide point ahead. There was a copse of tall, brittle tree trunks that surrounded a structure. It was a faded blue house with a tin roof that was covered in thick streaks of dirt. Crowsey paused, holding his hand in the air beside him to signal Jefe.

“Look,” Crowsey pointed at the house, “something’s there.” Jefe crouched down, peering over at the house. It sat against the stream on top of a small brown embankment, with white rocks sticking out of it. The yard surrounding it was bordered with more small fence posts, some with strands of wire still clinging to them.

“Wait for the others, then we’ll check it out.” Jefe grunted, slowly removing his bag to unslung his rifle.

Luke and Mira arrived first, who Jefe promptly hushed. Athena and Nathaniel were a few minutes behind, with Waister at the very back.

“We’re gonna go check that house out,” Jefe pointed, “make sure that it’s empty. Everyone else stays here. Be quiet.” Jefe gripped his rifle. “Waist, you and me.” Waister nodded, removing his bag and collecting his rifle. Crowsey had his weapon drawn too, keeping a stern gaze on the structure in the distance. Jefe and Waister approached the building slowly, while the others watched.

“Do you think anyone’s home?” Luke whispered.

“Hush, dear,” Mira pulled him closer to her, “just wait.” Nathaniel sat crumpled in place, his eyes fixed on the river.

As they approached the house, Jefe and Waister heard nothing except the stream and the flies. The house was two stories, with a small veranda at its front door, facing away from the water. They quietly rounded the house through the small yard, which had a pile of discarded scrap wood in it. There was also an old chicken hutch next to a folded sheet of metal. Waister approached the door first, his gun hoisted and ready. The front door was open, which showcased a pile of dead leaves pushed against the inner wall. Waister's boots crunched on the leaves as he passed into the living room, which had several wooden cabinets and a low table at its centre. A wide television sat covered in a thick layer of dust across from an old couch with its insides spilling out of its stitching. He proceeded past a small bathroom towards what looked to be the kitchen, where most of the cupboards hung open and empty. The refrigerator was also open, and also empty. Jefe cocked his head, and the two backtracked through the living room to a staircase by the front door. The floorboards creaked as they ascended to the tight hallway of the second floor. There were three bedrooms on this floor, one of which had a small bathroom attached to it. The wallpaper peeled off at the ceiling in each room, where dusty bed frames held up compact mattresses. The house was quiet, and the two of them could still hear the stream outside.

"Hm, nobody here. Good." Jefe lowered his rifle, heading back downstairs to signal the others.

Waister reached the house with the others, carrying Jefe and Crowsey's bags with them. Crowsey immediately went into his bag to retrieve a bottle of the powder. He walked to the water's edge with it. Next to the small house, the stream was wider and deeper. Crowsey undid his pants before unscrewing the lid of the powder. He began to urinate into the water, bubbles swirling in a shifting patch, before he dumped some of the powder in. The patch began to darken, but not completely, staying a hazy purple cloud near the surface of the murky water.

“Shit,” Crowsey said, “it’s not really that clean here.”

“Can we drink it?” Luke asked.

“You’re gonna get sick if you drink a lot of it. I don’t think we should.” Crowsey put the bottle away, before carrying his things inside the house. Jefe was already inside, rummaging around in the cupboards.

“Look,” Jefe said, pointing to three cans of soda he had found, “maybe there’s more stuff here.” Crowsey joined him in his search of the cupboards, while Mira went upstairs. The rooms were mostly empty, except for bedding and scraps of old clothes. The master bedroom had a bathroom connected, which Mira began to search. She opened one of the large drawers of a cabinet, which had a collection of towels inside. She lifted one out, which was mostly clean, using it to brush the dust away from the mirror. She caught her reflection in the mirror, noticing her bloodshot eyes and the dirt caked hair against her skin. Opening the next drawer, she found a small bottle of mouthwash, a bar of soap, and a plastic bag filled with pink disposable shavers. There were also nail clippers, scissors, and some dental floss inside. She pulled it all out, inspecting it near the light from the small window. In the shower there were several shampoo bottles; some of which still had shampoo inside. She took one of the fullest ones and added it to her collection. On her way out, she checked the cupboard under the sink, where she found shaving cream, and a box of tampons. Her eyes fixed on the box of tampons, which she quickly snatched up and opened. There were four left. She slid them into her pockets before collecting what she had found and heading outside.

Downstairs, Jefe checked the other bathroom where he found a straight razor. He dragged the blade gently against his thumb and grinned. Crowsey had kept searching the cupboards where he had found several cans of chicken broth as well as two bottles of beer.

“Hey, Hef,” Crowsey called over to Jefe holding up the bottle, “cheers.” The two of them snapped the caps off before drinking the tepid beers.

“Been a long time since I had one of these,” Jefe laughed, “it’s not great though, is it?” Crowsey chuckled, taking another gulp of his beer.

Mira joined the others outside, where Athena had set Nathaniel down against the side of the house. Luke was tossing rocks into the stream, while Waister had begun to remove his clothes.

“Hey Ath,” Mira called, “come over here please.” Athena approached her mother. Mira showed her the collection of things from the bathroom. “I found all this upstairs. You can use some of it if you like.” Athena shook the bottle of shampoo next to her ear, before picking up one of the disposable razors. Waister had already waded out into the stream, which was up to his ribs. He dunked his head into the water.

“Thanks mom,” Athena said, “you’re going to use it too, right?”

“Yes, dear,” Mira smiled, “it will feel good to be clean, won’t it?” Athena nodded, before heading down to the side of the river. “Luke,” Mira called, “did you want to wash your hair?” Luke grinned, before he began to take his clothes off. Waister had finished washing, and waded back towards the shore. Athena watched the drops of water race over his exposed collarbone towards his hip. She knelt by the water, slowly taking off her clothes. Mira soon joined her and did the same. She noticed Athena’s underwear lying on the ground, which had a red brown stain on the front.

“Ready to go in?” Athena asked.

“Yes honey,” Mira recomposed herself, bringing the bottle of shampoo into the water with them. They wet their hair, doing their best to untangle the twisted dirty knots in it. Mira retrieved the scissors she had found, which they used to clip off the end, and some of the more stubborn

knots. Luke splashed in the water nearby, submerging his head to wet his hair and face. Once the dirt had been removed from Mira's face and neck, dark bruises and fingermarks became visible. She lathered her hair with the shampoo before giving it to Athena to do the same. The bubbles rolled off them into the water before being gently carried downstream. They dunked their heads once more to rinse, before Mira tossed the bottle to Luke.

"Make sure to clean your hair, Luke," Mira cooed as Luke collected the floating shampoo bottle. Athena took the shaving cream next and began to coat her thighs and shins with it. Mira watched her daughter's practiced method as the pink razor slid through the white shaving cream in long straight streaks. Athena then did the same to her underarms, before turning around to finish between her legs. Mira was shaken by her daughter's comprehensive shaving, but suddenly felt compelled to do the same. She collected one of the razors from the bag and began to shave her own body with it. Luke had finished washing his hair, tossing the bottle onto the shore. He continued to splash about in the water. Nathaniel watched from where he lay by the house, breathing more steadily now. His lips moved beneath his gag, his voice only a low hum in his prayer.

Mira and Athena had finished, and headed to the shore to dry off. Mira had brought some of the towels from the bathroom with her, and she handed one to each of her children. Waister's eyes remained on the clouded sky, as if he was searching for something that wasn't there. Jefe and Crowsey came outside, noticing the others by the water.

"Hoo, Mariposa," Jefe crooned at Mira, "all cleaned up I see." Jefe walked over to her, dragging his grubby thumb across her cheek. "Smooth."

"I'm gonna have a wash," Crowsey said, heading down to the water's edge.

“Don’t want to be the only dirty one,” Jefe chuckled, heading down to join Crowsey. The two of them splashed into the water, vigorously rubbing the crevices of their bodies. Mira opened the bottle of mouthwash and began to swirl it around in her mouth. She passed it to Athena afterwards. Jefe waded back onto the shore to where he had taken his clothes off. He rifled through the pockets for a moment, before speaking.

“Hey Mari,” Jefe said, looking over at Mira.

“Yes?” she answered. Jefe was holding up the straight razor he had found.

“My turn.” Jefe smiled behind his patchy whiskers. She stared at him blankly for a moment. He headed back towards the water. “Come on,” he called back to her. She stood up, readjusting the towel to cover herself, before collecting the bottle of shaving cream. Jefe knelt in the shallow water, wetting his cheeks with his hands. Mira stood behind him, where she began to slowly lather the shaving cream onto his cheeks, chin, and neck. Once she had sufficiently coated it, Jefe dunked the straight razor into the stream before holding it open for her to take. Crowsey had swum farther away, floating leisurely on his back looking skyward, while Waister had walked off between the trees where he squatted down to defecate. Mira cautiously took the razor from Jefe’s fingers, before pressing it against the lower part of his cheek. She drew the razor up against his skin, lifting the cream filled with stubble upward before flicking it into the water. She passed over his chin, carefully around his lips, in gentle short movements. Nathaniel watched, his eyes narrowing on Mira as she worked, while Athena and Luke redressed on the shore. Mira had finished with Jefe’s cheeks, and she crouched lower to begin shaving under his chin and neck. Her fingers grazed over his Adam’s apple, which sat relaxed in Jefe’s throat. He faced skyward with his eyes closed, where two birds circled in the breeze. Mira steadied her breathing, looking over at Nathaniel. He had sat up straight, locking eyes with her for a moment. He had an expectant look on his face, shuffling to

get a better view. Mira gripped the razor tightly in her hand, looking back at Jefe's exposed throat. She gulped, before preparing to press the razor against his skin.

Jefe's hand lifted out of the water, sliding up Mira's leg. Appreciative of the new smoothness, he lifted his hand higher. He lifted it over his shoulder so he could slide his hand up high enough to go inside the towel Mira had fastened to herself. Gently, his fingers crept up the inside of her thigh toward her crotch. Mira tried to suppress her laughing, but she couldn't.

"Stop it," Mira said through her grin, "stop it, or you're going to make me cut you." Jefe chuckled, retracting his hand from the towel.

"You're the boss," Jefe said.

"I'm almost done," Mira said with a graceful flick of the razor. Nathaniel shuffled in the dirt where he lay, his muffled screaming barely audible from behind his gag. Mira looked up at him once, before resuming shaving Jefe's neck.

"All done," she said once she'd finished, after which Jefe plunged his face back into the stream to rinse. Crowsey had made his way gradually back over to the shore to dry off.

"We're going to stay here for now," Jefe said, "we'll follow the river up more soon. Maybe the water's clean somewhere up there." Jefe looked at Mira, who was getting dressed. "Come upstairs," Jefe grinned at her. She gave a quick glance to Athena, before gathering her things and following Jefe to the house. Luke shook his still wet hair against his face.

"Hey kid," Crowsey said to him, "wanna practice with the bow again?" Luke nodded, standing up to join Crowsey shooting at one of the nearby trees. Waister had returned, washing his hands thoroughly in the stream before sitting next to Athena on the beach.

"Do you think the water will be better that way?" Athena looked upstream. Waister shrugged. Somewhere in the distance, a bird cawed.

The clouds pulled away from the earth towards the evening slightly, revealing more of the jagged mountainside. It leaned away from the stream, climbing gradually to where it slipped from view. Crowsey remained outside while the others had found places within the house. Athena and Luke had helped Nathaniel into the den, where he lay on the decrepit couch. Athena thumbed through some old books she found in one of the drawers, while Luke snapped a measuring tape open and closed. Waister used an old rag he found to clean the ins and outs of his rifle, while Jefe and Mira slept upstairs. Only a few flies had made their way inside, and none of them were bigger than a raisin.

Outside, Crowsey knelt by the stream, soaking his shirt and socks before wringing them out. Dark grey scummy water dripped from his weathered socks into the brown stream, which was comparatively cleaner. Out in the water Crowsey spied something floating. It was difficult to see what it was in the dark, but as it floated by, he made out the shape of an empty metal soda can. It bobbed gently in the slow current as it slowly turned away from him toward the bend downstream. His eyes darted upstream, but nothing else floated in the darkening water. He continued to wash his shirt, shooting quick glances upstream every few seconds, but he saw nothing. As the dark settled in, Crowsey joined the others in the house to sleep.

Early in the morning, Mira began to vomit. She lurched awake from her sleeping position next to Jefe, which startled him awake. Apprehensively he sat up, reaching for his rifle in the dark, before realizing that it was Mira making the noise.

“Mari,” He inspected the small puddle of vomit next to the wool blanket. “You sick Mari?”

“I’m fine, I’ll be,” Mira wheezed, “I’ll be fine.” Jefe unzipped his backpack, pulling out a plastic bottle of water.

“Drink some of this. It’s clean water,” he handed her the bottle, “not too much though, hey?” Mira nodded, retching again until her face and neck reddened. The tendons in her neck stuck out as she pursed her lips to spit into the pile of vomit. She drank carefully from the bottle, holding the water in her mouth for a moment before swallowing it. Her cough rumbled a few more times before she could lie back down.

“Sleep,” Jefe directed. Mira held her fist to her mouth, curling onto her side. Her breathing gradually steadied and she was able to sleep again.

Mira woke several hours later to an empty room. She could hear the others moving about downstairs, as well as sound coming from the stream. She crawled over to the window to peer outside. Luke and Crowsey were tossing rocks into the stream, Luke trying his best to throw as far as Crowsey. Jefe crouched in the shallow water with the first aid kit. He had just finished redressing the bandage over his wound on his shoulder. The taping job looked sloppy, but Mira supposed that it would do, as long as the stitches were clean. Footsteps began to climb the staircase, and Mira lunged back underneath the wool blanket, closing her eyes. Athena peered into the room.

“Mom?” she asked.

Mira faked a yawn, turning over. “Hey dear, everything okay?” she asked.

“Yeah, well, I was coming to see if you were okay. You didn’t get up yet.” Athena scanned the room, noticing the small dark spot where Mira had vomited. Jefe had cleaned up most of the solids. “He said, Jefe said,” Athena stuttered, “you were feeling sick.”

“I’m okay,” Mira smiled, “I just had an upset stomach. I’m okay.” Athena grinned.

“I fed Dad, and gave him some water,” Athena said plainly. Mira sat up.

“Did he...Did you,” Mira blurted out.

“It’s okay Mom, I know we have to leave it on him. I put it back on.” Athena dug her thumbnail into the wooden doorframe.

“I’m sorry sweetie,” Mira pouted, “I’m sorry about the way things are right now. We just have to get through it. You’re being so strong, and I’m proud of you.” Athena lowered her eyes, grinning slightly.

“Well, I’m going to go back downstairs. Get some more rest, Mom. Jefe said we won’t leave until tomorrow.” Athena turned to leave.

“Wait, one more thing,” Mira called, shuffling over to her pants, “I’ve got something for you.” Mira reached into the pocket to pull out the four tampons she had found earlier. “Take them.” Athena shyly walked over and took two of the tampons from Mira’s hand.

“You keep two,” Athena said, quickly sliding them into her pocket. Mira looked up at her for a moment. Her daughter’s thin frame seemed taller than she had remembered. According to Jefe’s thumbnail, Athena would be sixteen soon, although she looked older than that, Mira thought. Athena got her lighter eyes from Nathaniel, which contrasted starkly against her weathered face, but sat elegantly in place, like a speckled bird’s egg sitting in a nest.

“Of course, dear,” Mira tucked the other two tampons back into her pants pocket.

“Thanks mom,” Athena knelt down to hug her mother. Mira felt the metal cross on Athena’s necklace press sharply against her own chest. “Now get some more rest.” Athena turned and headed back downstairs. Mira lay back onto the blanket to close her eyes; the stretching sound of the stream pulling itself through the small window overtop of her.

Mira dreamt that she was standing next to a wide lake, where she could hear the waves lapping at the shore. Her feet dug into the sand, which was warm on the surface, but cool underneath. She could hear voices all around her, and although she shouldn't recognize any one specifically, they all sounded familiar to her. The air around her was clear, and from where she stood, she could see clouds. The clouds were far away, pressed against a blue sky, with distance dragging on between each one. She saw the sun. It burned wide and round above her, but she had no trouble looking directly at it. Somebody was calling her. A white butterfly circled in the air above her as the sun expanded across the sky. She heard a sharp flapping noise next to her ear, but couldn't see anything but the brightness of the glowing sky. She heard someone call her name again, this time more clearly.

“Mariposa.”

Mira awoke to the sound of Jefe's gentle snoring. She sat up on the blanket in the quiet room. She stood up, taking a moment to find her balance, before taking the first steps out of the room. She arrived at the stairway, which she crept down as quietly as she could. In the den she saw Nathaniel curled tightly against the splitting sofa cushions. Athena lay behind the couch on some stray bedding next to Luke, with Waister not far behind. All of them slept steadily in the den. Mira went outside, where Crowsey sat on a chair next to the door. He looked up at her briefly, before returning his gaze to the stream.

“Sorry,” she whispered. He didn't answer. She scampered over to one of the nearby trees, and squatted down to urinate. It began to trickle against the dry twigs at the base of the tree. The stream appeared dark silver against the black of the looming mountain, but remained a faint strip

beneath the cloud cover. Mira reached her hand underneath herself, dragging one of her fingers through the stream of urine. She raised it to her face, inspecting the wet finger. It gleamed in the limited light, covered in the clear urine. Mira exhaled unsteadily, before standing back up to head inside. She mounted the stairs quietly, taking her place on the blanket next to Jefe. She shut her eyes, running the palm of her hand over her ribs, belly, and crotch, before drifting back to sleep.

At dawn, Crowsey roused the sleepers in the den, instructing them to pack up their bags. He stomped upstairs to Jefe and Mira's room, tapping his rifle on the wooden doorframe.

"Let's get going soon, hey Hef?" Crowsey called into the room. Jefe grunted loudly rolling over to his other side. Mira sat up, stretching, before gathering her clothes to get dressed. As they prepared to move, the mountain began to become visible again against the clouds. Crowsey waited on the veranda, his bag already packed, scoping the river ahead. Waister joined him, dropping his bag on the veranda, before he helped Athena get the duffel bag onto Nathaniel's shoulders. Nathaniel grunted sharply for a moment, before succumbing to the weight of the small blue duffel bag. Luke gathered his things to join the others as Mira and Jefe made their way downstairs.

Waister led the group to the side of the stream which they began to follow in single file. The stream curved into the distance out of sight, with patches of dead bushes every so often. Athena followed Waister closely, with Crowsey and Luke behind her. A few metres back Nathaniel ambled along, with Mira not far in tow. Jefe took up the rear now, checking over his shoulder periodically. The incline wasn't too steep, and the group followed the stream with relative ease. Flies began to arrive as more light did, hanging in uneven clusters that dipped into the surface of the stream. Clouds shifted against the stony ridges that rose up on either side of the stream. The valley became narrower with a steeper grade, which made the stream move faster. The rush of the stream dampened the steps of the group, as well as the flies, or any other sound that could be heard

in the valley. Ahead of them, a cluster of twisted tree trunks surrounded an old truck that sat in a dusty patch of earth. One of the doors hung open, bent downward at an awkward dislocated angle. Waister approached the truck curiously, peering inside through the open door. The seats had been torn up, the glove box pulled open, and the inside was strewn with crumpled papers. The bed of the truck had dead leaves packed into its corners and a small cluster of empty beer cans lay tucked underneath the driver side front tire. Waister passed by the truck, continuing on through the narrow valley. Athena followed close behind with Luke, his eyes glued to the grill of the old truck. Crowsey paused by the truck, kneeling down to pick up one of the empty beer cans. Above him, two black crows circled mechanically. He turned the beer can over in his hands, inspecting the fading label and pushed back tab. A cluster of tiny flies swarmed his sweaty face and neck, crawling along the creases in his cheeks. He turned around slowly, scanning the far side of the river, his vision narrowing on a cluster of boulders next to a twisted stump.

A sharp crack ricocheted off the valley walls, splitting the gentle hum of the river. Jefe dropped to a crouch, while Waister wheeled around, brandishing his rifle. The beer can fell with a metallic clink to the rocks beside the truck as Crowsey's hand bolted up to press against his neck. Blood flowed thick and dark down the right side of Crowsey's face. He lurched over, dropping his bag, wheezing as he fell to one knee. A second crack followed that, which punched a hole in the hood of the old truck. Luke lay flat, hands over his ears, while Athena scrambled to his side. Nathaniel keeled over onto the dirt, pulling Mira to the ground as he fell.

"Waist!" Jefe shrieked, "Go!" Waister turned without hesitating and began sprinting up the riverside. In a moment of adrenaline, Crowsey picked his bag back up and ran after Waister. "Leave it!" Jefe shouted as he followed, but Crowsey staggered after Waister upriver from the truck. Three more shots fired, two of them hitting the water and a third somewhere in the dirt next

to Luke and Athena. They huddled together in fear, sobbing while covering their ears. Mira tugged on Nathaniel's shoulder, as he lay stunned in a heap, eyes fixed on the sky. Waister, Crowsey, and Jefe disappeared over the ridge as the footsteps approached the others.

"Nate," Mira wheezed out, her ears ringing. "Get up." She looked over at Athena and Luke, who lay face down in the dirt, holding one another. Two men descended the bank on the far side of the river, crossing through the shallowest point. The first man wore a brown wool jacket and a black toque, carrying a small backpack and a long black rifle with him. He had a surprisingly kempt brown beard and clean skin on his face. The other man was shorter, clean shaven, and looked to be younger. He also carried a rifle with him, wearing a camouflage coat, his long hair tied in a ponytail behind him. Mira quivered next to her husband in the dirt, as one of the men stood over top of Athena and Luke.

"Please don't..." Mira begged, her voice barely carrying. The man in the hat walked over, his rifle aimed at her, kneeling beside her.

"A woman," the man spoke, his uneven gray teeth sticking out behind his lips.

"Two women," the other man called over. "And a kid, too." The man next to Mira shot a look at the other, before looking back to her. Nathaniel rolled over, his swollen eyes meeting the man's.

"And who's this guy?" The man probed Nathaniel with his rifle. "Why is he tied and gagged like that?" Mira didn't say anything. She trembled, meeting the man's eyes.

"P-please..." She began, but he cut her off.

"Josh, tie those two up, let's take 'em back." He barked at the other man.

"What about the other three?" The young man replied.

“Ah, forget about them,” The man said, pulling a plastic tie and a rag from his bag. He quickly bound Mira’s hands behind her back, then gagged her with the rag. She heard Luke and Athena whimpering as the other man tied and gagged the two of them. Mira looked over at them, making brief eye contact with Athena.

“Stand up, let’s go,” the young man said, probing Athena, who stood up slowly. Luke scrambled to his feet, standing tightly against his sister.

“Get up,” the man said, “we’ve got a bit of a hike ahead of us.” The man grinned, pulling Nathaniel to his feet. He probed Mira and Nathaniel along the riverbank back downstream, where they followed a narrow path that wound along a higher ridge. Mira tried to look over her shoulder, but the man jabbed her with the rifle.

“Eyes forward, and nobody dies,” the man croaked. Mira glued her eyes to the ground ahead of her, feeling warm urine dripping down the inside of her thigh.

The two ushered them gradually back downstream along a separate path between the hills. They pushed through thicker patches of dead bushes, some of which were wet at their bases. Mira’s eyes burned with tears as she did her best to keep her eyes on the ground in front of her. She listened for the movement of Athena and Luke who walked behind her several metres. Heavy swarms of flies circled the bushes, which the two men swatted and slapped at with their free hands. One of the men pulled the cork from his canteen,

“Nearly there,” he gasped nodding his head forward. Ahead of them stood a series of buildings surrounded by a metal fence. The stream wrapped around the base of one of the dark mountains and flowed more swiftly alongside the metal fence. As they approached, a wooden bridge with intact railings stretched across the river toward a metal gate. The older man waved his hand in the air as they approached.

“Hey Sean, open the gate, we found a few out there,” the man’s voice echoed. The gate was pulled open by a bald man wearing a thin blue sweater with a hood. He had a pistol on his hip, and jogged across the bridge to meet the others.

“How many, Ed?” the bald man asked.

“We got four here; two women, one man, and a little boy,” Ed replied, pointing to his captives. Mira stared firmly at the ground.

“Not bad,” Sean said, walking by and inspecting Mira, “they weren’t armed?”

“There were three others with them. Men who were armed. We hit one of them and they ran off.” Ed pantomimed firing his rifle. Sean began to chuckle.

“Better take ‘em to see Ainsworth,” Sean said, swatting flies away from his teeth, “I think he’s at the hall.”

“Yeah we’ll head there right away,” Ed jostled Nathaniel’s shoulder, “keep it moving.”

They crossed the bridge through the gate into an open area between several buildings. At the far side of the lot there were two wide metal buildings with rounded arching roofs. To the left stood a smaller wooden building with two doors in front of it. A long square building occupied most of the area to the left of the bridge, two stories, with windows every few feet. Across from that there was a long green army tent. A large grey shed with boards across its windows stood beyond the tent. Wires ran from a small shack next to the army tent to poles connected to the roof of the large building. Ed led the captives through the wide lot before thrusting them one by one into the dirt outside the army tent. Mira huddled against Athena and Luke, who sobbed behind their gags. Several other men watched from the edges of the lot, along with two women who peered out from a doorway in the large building. Doors on the large metal buildings swung open to reveal more observers.

“Ainsworth!” Ed called into the army tent, “We’ve got some new arrivals.”

A medium sized man dressed in a long brown coat stepped out of the army tent. He had dark gray hair and beard, wore black gloves, and made slow strides across the dusty ground to meet them.

“We found these four upriver, by an old truck,” the younger man said eagerly. “There were some others with them, but they ran off.”

“This one,” Ed pointed his rifle at Nathaniel, “he was already tied up when he was with them.”

“Excellent,” the grey haired man said, kneeling down to Nathaniel. Nathaniel’s cloudy eyes met the man’s as he lurched back exposing his neck. The golden chain of Nathaniel’s necklace glinted for a moment, and the man seized it. He yanked the chain out of Nathaniel’s shirt, exposing the small cross at its end. The man then pulled a small flip knife from his pocket, cutting away at the duct tape on Nathaniel’s face. Nathaniel groaned as he unwrapped it, eventually revealing the barbwire ball inside his mouth.

“My god,” the man said, peering into Nathaniel’s mouth, “ what did they do to you?” Nathaniel began to weep, his face rolling against the dusty ground while a small pack of flies circled him.

“I am Reverend Salvador Ainsworth, and although I lead the chapel in this community, everyone here is equal in my eyes, and in the Lord’s. What is your name?” The grey haired man had brought Nathaniel, Mira, Luke, and Athena inside the large two-floor building where they sat at a long table. A young man had removed the barbwire ball from Nathaniel’s mouth.

“My name is Nathaniel Sturges,” Nathaniel croaked, dabbing at his drooling bottom lip with a rag he was given, “this is my wife Mira, my son Luke.” Nathaniel coughed heavily into the rag. “And Athena, our daughter.”

“Welcome, Mr. Sturges,” Ainsworth spoke softly, making eye contact with each of them, “may I ask where you came from?” Nathaniel began to cough more heavily, drinking water from a glass put on the table for him. He spilled water as he drank shakily.

“Excuse me,” Nathaniel mumbled.

“May I?” Mira interjected, placing a hand lightly on Nathaniel’s shoulder. Nathaniel nodded swiftly.

“My name is Mira Sturges, pleased to meet you...Reverend.” Mira began, clearing her throat, “We lived on the coast before the, um... ‘Flashes’ began. Before everything...”

“Before the change,” Ainsworth said clearly.

“Yes, exactly. Before the change.” Mira continued, “Nate, Nathaniel, was a pastor at a local church in our neighbourhood. That’s where we met, many years ago, at church.” Mira paused for a moment, collecting her thoughts. “I spent most of my time raising Luke and Athena, but more recently I returned to working at a hospital in our area. Before I met Nate, I studied nursing.”

“Excellent,” Ainsworth interjected, “we have some medical supplies in our infirmary, but I doubt anyone already here has the understanding you possess in that area. You will be a most welcome fit to our community.” Ainsworth turned to Nathaniel, “And you, ‘Pastor’, I welcome you to my place of worship that I have established in this rugged land. You may have seen it when you were outside, the big green tent. It may not be made of stone or wood, but my place of worship welcomes you; each of you.” Ainsworth turned to the others as he spoke, as if preaching. “Now tell me, Mrs. Sturges, what brought you all the way here? Why was your husband bound like he was?”

“We...” Mira stuttered at the mention of her last name, “we stayed at our home on the coast after everything changed. It was fine for a while, maybe a month or two, but that’s when food and water started to become scarcer. People started to get sick; almost everyone was coughing, throwing up. Eventually people started to die.” Mira gulped before continuing, “That’s when the flies came.” Ainsworth nodded at the mention of the flies. “They came out of the toilets, they came out of the water; and they came out of the dead. Our community wasn’t safe anymore; people were desperate. They started to fight over food and water, even killing each other.” Mira paused for a moment. Luke had lowered his eyes, placing his ball cap on the table. Athena looked straight ahead; her stoic gaze fixed on the window. “We decided to leave,” Mira continued, “we left at night, heading up the hills inland. We avoided roads, which were packed with cars and the dead. That’s where the flies were the worst. We marched for a few days, finding what food and water we could along the way.” Mira took a moment to pause, watching Nathaniel carefully sip the glass of water, then wiping blood and mucous from his lips. “We were met by a group of men one morning,” Mira began.

“Beasts!” Nathaniel interjected, spewing bloody spit from his mouth, “they were criminals.” Nathaniel began to weep as he spoke, “They beat us, they tied us up with gags. They made us their prisoners. They...they...” Nathaniel looked up at Mira, then over to Athena, choking as he tried to speak. He flung himself at Ainsworth’s feet, weeping as he did. “I prayed every day, Reverend, every moment I was awake. I prayed for protection, for me,” Nathaniel sobbed, “and for my family. I...I thought my prayers were finally answered when my wife was given an opportunity to...” Nathaniel looked Mira in the eye. Her eyes recoiled when they met his. “I had almost given up, Reverend, I thought that was our only chance. But your men, you...” Nathaniel turned back, kneeling in front of Ainsworth, “you saved me. You saved us from them.” Nathaniel keeled over, weeping at Ainsworth’s feet.

“Hush, Nathaniel, you’re safe,” Ainsworth placed his hand on Nathaniel’s back, “God heard your prayers; he protected you, and now here you are. You are safe,” Ainsworth rose to his feet. “You are all safe.” Mira knelt down to help Nathaniel to his feet.

“Get up,” she whispered, “stand up dear. Please.” She eased Nathaniel to his feet and back into the chair.

“Now that I’ve heard your story, allow me to tell you a little about my...our community,” Ainsworth paced as he spoke. “You’ve already met Edward and Joshua, who I hope weren’t too rough with you,” Ainsworth smiled at the two armed men standing at the end of the table near the door, “but our community is made up of eight so far. We have Edward and Joshua, our scouts, who collect supplies they can find outside the community. Joshua’s brother Sean watches the gate you crossed to get inside. Tran is a bright young man in charge of our electric and mechanics...”

“Electric?” Mira interrupted. Ainsworth smiled.

“Yes, electric. I’ll explain that in a moment.”

“Excuse me,” Mira apologized.

“It’s nothing,” Ainsworth nodded, continuing, “Roland is our gardener who manages the small greenhouse near the far wall. It provides much of the food we eat here. That just leaves Juan, our butcher, and his wife Lena, who prepares our dinners.”

“Did you say butcher?” Luke spoke eagerly.

“Ah, curious, are we?” Ainsworth grinned, revealing his white teeth and pale gums, “I’ll get to that too. Let me start from the beginning. When the changes began, much like yourselves, I found myself forced from my home. Violence, pestilence, and scarcity drove me from the homestead I had far to the south of here. Edward and I left with two others, who unfortunately did not survive the journey out of our county,” Ainsworth did a short bow, “but their sacrifice was not in vain, because Edward and I found others along the way. We discovered Sean and his brother Joshua sleeping in a truck by the roadside, and they agreed to join us in our search for a new home. Both of them are brave, and Joshua is a skilled marksman as well. Juan and his wife Lena lost their farm, agreeing to join us when we discovered them drinking from a muddy slough at the roadside. Our gardener Roland was on death’s door when we found him; lying under a tree with flies all about him. We gave him water and food, and he was grateful for this, choosing to join us as well. Finally, the young man Tran initially tried to attack us, but was outnumbered and surrendered. I managed to convince him to join us, as I saw him as a bright young man with a bright future; only a little misguided.” Ainsworth paced along the table as he continued. “To address your questions; we discovered this place on the river abandoned. Whether it be simply good fortune, or perhaps an answer to our prayers, this place has served as our salvation and community. Tran, who has a good understanding of machines and electricity, identified this place to be a self-sustaining project that was likely abandoned by the previous owners when everything changed. A greenhouse and

barn already stood erected, this building we're in now already had a small stockpile of medical supplies and rations, and the barn for livestock stood vacant and ready. Not only that, but a small turbine system sat just beyond the bridge, and with a few days study, Tran was able to revive it into working order."

"So you have power here?" Mira asked.

"It's not much, just enough for a few lights and the hot water tank, but we consider it a blessing nonetheless." Ainsworth grinned at Mira, "Tran also discovered solar panels on the greenhouse, and despite the constantly clouded sky, they capture enough energy to power the lamps inside the greenhouse which Roland uses for our crops." Ainsworth walked over to Luke, tousling his hair, "And now for your question, curious one. Our butcher, Juan, also tends to the pigs we have raised in the barn. Joshua and Edward tracked a pack of hogs they had seen roaming the hills, managing to capture the sow and two piglets. From there, Juan began to raise pigs. Although Lena cures most of the meat in order to preserve it, every so often we are lucky enough to be blessed with a fresh pork roast." Ainsworth returned to the end of the table where Nathaniel sat. Tears still trickled down Nathaniel's cheeks. "You see? Everyone here has a role; everyone plays a part. I'm sure you and your family will fit in just fine."

"Thank you Reverend, bless you," Nathaniel sobbed into his clasped hands.

"You've endured much, Nathaniel," Ainsworth pressed his hand onto Nathaniel's head, "rest now." He turned to Mira, "There's a shower at the end of the hall, just before the infirmary. You may wish to clean yourself. You'll find beds on the second floor, you may claim any you wish that is unoccupied. I understand if you wish to rest now, I'll have someone wake you before dinner, which will be held in the chapel later today."

"Thank you, Reverend," Mira said, looking over at her children.

“Thank you,” Luke chirped.

“Athena,” Mira said sternly.

“Thanks,” Athena muttered, not looking at Ainsworth.

“Ah, such a beautiful voice,” Ainsworth turned his gaze to Athena, “a presence such as yours is most welcome in my community. Things so fair are difficult to find in the world now.” Ainsworth turned to Mira, “Tell me, how old is she?” Mira bit her bottom lip, looking down at her middle fingernail on her right hand. She thought of Jefe’s stabbing of his own fingernail to keep track of time that had passed. She remembered the rough tattoos on his dirty body as she had helped him shave in the river.

“She’s nearly sixteen,” Mira turned her attention back to Ainsworth.

“A young woman then,” Ainsworth walked over to Athena, lifting her hand to kiss it, “very pleased to have you here.” Athena looked at her mother pleadingly.

“Athena, would you like to come wash up?” Mira stood up, marching over to Athena, “Luke, stay with your father. You can wash up when we’re done, and help your father if he needs anything.” Mira stood face to face with Ainsworth, “Reverend.” She curtsied. He bowed.

“Very well, if you wish to speak, I’ll return to the chapel. Feel free to explore the area, except for the barn,” Ainsworth glared at Luke, “raising pigs is a sensitive process, and Juan does not like others meddling in his barn. Am I clear?” Luke nodded, joining his father at the end of the table. “Excellent,” Ainsworth clasped his hands, “I’ll see you at dinner.”

Crowsey lost his footing on some rocks sticking out of the dusty bank, tumbling downward into a small gully. Jefe lunged down to help him.

“Waist,” Jefe panted, “can you see anyone?” Waister climbed to the high point on the ridge, looking back over the ground they had covered since Crowsey had been hit. The only movement he saw came from a few black birds that sat perched on a tree nearby.

“Nobody followed us,” Waister answered, remaining on the top of the ridge. Crowsey lurched onto his back clutching the side of his neck. Dark blood poured from the pit of his collarbone, squeezing its way through his dirty fingers onto his torn shirt. His breaths were quick and sharp.

“Hef,” Crowsey managed to murmur, “my bow.”

“What? You want your bow?” Jefe was confused, but rifled through Crowsey’s fallen pack, pulling out the black hunting bow. Waister walked down the hill to join them.

“When you find my boy,” Crowsey gargled, “Hef...Waist. Give it to him. Give it to my boy.” Crowsey’s breaths began to slow down; the flow of blood from his neck becoming more gradual. Jefe looked at Waister, who said nothing.

“Okay, Crowsey,” Jefe put his hand behind Crowsey’s skull, easing it to the side. Crowsey’s eyelids opened slightly, his mouth shifting into an attempted grin.

“Look, Hef,” Crowsey’s wincing eyes looked past Jefe, towards the cloudy sky. Four black birds circled above them, low in the sky. “I’m gonna feed them one more time, Hef. Remember...” Crowsey’s final breath was long. His shoulders eased back onto the hillside, his eyes stuck in their half open position. Jefe dragged his fingers over the lids to close them. He sat saying nothing for a moment while a large black fly landed on Crowsey’s cheek. Jefe stood up.

“You take the bow and arrows, I’ll get whatever else he’s got in the bag,” Jefe said flatly. Waister collected the bow and arrows, adding it to his own bag.

“Where will we go next?” Waister asked, staring at Crowsey’s corpse.

“Let’s try to get back to the river. We’ll follow it up, and just keep going.” Jefe said, pulling bottles of powder and some tins of food from Crowsey’s bag. He also took the pistol. “Let’s go.” Jefe turned, walking at a brisk pace up the next ridge. Waister slung his bag back over his shoulder and followed. When they crested the hill, Jefe looked back once, where he saw the cluster of black birds landing at the spot where Crowsey lay.

Although the shower was brief, the warm water felt soothing on Mira’s skin. Athena had gone first, and had already headed upstairs to find a bed. As the room became dark, Mira spied a small lamp that was plugged into an outlet next to the sink basin. She flicked the switch on, which caused the long blue bulb to glow dimly. The light restructured how her reflection looked, showcasing her cheekbones and chin. Her face looked unrecognizable now that it was clean, but the bruises remained on her neck, ribs, stomach, and thighs. She leaned in close, observing one of the bruises on her neck more closely. Her fingers gently dragged across the dark outline of Jefe’s lips that remained at the base of her neck.

“Mira, dear,” Nathaniel’s frail voice called down the hall, “it’s nearly dinner time.”

“I just need to get dressed, Nate,” she called back, collecting her clothes from the floor hastily.

“Go get Athena, I’ll meet you at the chapel with Luke,” Nathaniel said down the hall.

“Okay, Nate. We won’t be long,” Mira wrung out her hair one last time.

A long wooden table sat in one end of the tent, with mismatched chairs and stools at its side. Candles lined the centre of the table, with electric lamps lighting the corners of the tent. A mixture of different styles of plates and cutlery sat at each place at the table. Joshua Edward and Sean sat together to the left of Ainsworth, who took the head of the table. An old man sat next to them, who had grey stubble and a peach coloured jacket on. Next to him sat a young man with thick black hair wearing a teal sweater. Luke sat on the other side of the table next to Nathaniel, leaving two seats next to Ainsworth unoccupied.

“Welcome Mira; Athena,” Ainsworth rose, gesturing to the seats to his right, “please sit.” Mira rounded the table with Athena behind her

“Thank you, Reverend,” Mira bowed slightly.

“Juan should arrive with the food any moment,” Ainsworth said, “ah, here they are now.” A portly woman with dark hair and a wide floral dress pushed through the tent flaps with a large metal cafeteria tray in her arms. She set it down at the centre of the table. It had a metal bowl filled with chunks of mashed potatoes, another plate that had chopped carrots and peas, as well as a bowl of squash and parsnips. There were also roasted onions and garlic in a smaller dish at its end. A barrel chested man with receding dark grey hair pushed through the tent flaps next, holding a larger metal tray. This one had a large metal cooking pot on it which had an oblong shape of meat sitting in a pool of its juices. Steam rose from it, the smell attracting some small flies.

“Juan, would you please close the flaps, flies are getting in,” Ainsworth directed. Juan and the woman left the tent, tightly cinching the flaps behind them.

“They’re not eating?” Nathaniel asked.

“Juan and Lena take their meals on their own,” Ainsworth answered, “they’re always welcome to join us, but I respect their privacy. Juan works very hard so that we may enjoy such

wonderful meals. Now then,” Ainsworth reached out, grabbing Athena’s hand. She recoiled at his touch, “Athena, would you lead us in saying grace?” Athena looked to Mira desperately. Mira took up Athena’s hand.

“May I, Reverend?” Mira interjected, “Athena is just a little shy.”

“Of course,” Ainsworth said flatly, gripping Athena’s hand more tightly, “everyone join hands.”

“Bless us,” Mira stuttered slightly. Nathaniel squeezed her hand. “...O Lord, and these, Thy gifts, which we are about to receive from Thy bounty...” She peered over at Ainsworth, who was looking at Athena. Mira quickly blurted out the final lines, “Through Christ, our Lord. Amen.”

“Amen,” Nathaniel bellowed loudly, while the others at the table joined in. Athena said nothing. The others began passing the trays around, each of them loading a little of everything onto their plates. Ainsworth waited to be served last, making sure to serve Athena himself. She stared at the chunk of pink meat on her plate, as she did, Ainsworth swatted away some of the small flies that followed it.

“Apologies for the flies, everyone, we had better eat quickly.” Ainsworth said politely before stabbing a piece of carrot with a dessert fork. Nathaniel plunged into his food with a desperate hunger. Mira placed her hand on his shoulder to slow him down. Everyone ate quickly compared to Mira, Athena, and Luke, who were more reserved. Athena ate only her vegetables, not finishing her potatoes, and not touching the meat.

“Is something wrong?” Ainsworth asked, putting his hand on her thigh. Mira turned, protectively.

“I’m just not that hungry,” Athena muttered.

“Surely you’re hungry after being out there so long without a proper meal,” Ainsworth’s mouth shifted into a forced grin. His hand remained on Athena’s thigh.

“Reverend,” Mira spoke up, directing the Reverend’s gaze at herself.

“Mira,” Nathaniel scolded over a mouthful of food.

“Pardon me, but I think that may be the problem,” Mira gulped before explaining, “because we haven’t had much to eat over the past few weeks, I think maybe Athena’s stomach has to get used to so much food at once. I’m sure it will be back to normal after a few meals like this.” Ainsworth’s glare toward Mira turned softer suddenly.

“Of course,” Ainsworth grinned, retracting his hand from Athena’s thigh, “I trust your judgement, Mira. You are a nurse after all.” Athena shot a look of gratitude towards her mother. “There are plenty of things to get used to around here,” Ainsworth said playfully, “and plenty of time to do so.” Athena gulped slowly. “Very well, you are excused. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Thank you,” Athena muttered.

“Me too,” Luke said, standing up.

“Sit down, Luke!” Nathaniel grabbed Luke’s wrist.

“It’s quite alright, Nathaniel,” Ainsworth chuckled, “Luke, you are excused as well.”

“Thanks,” Luke blurted out, scampering after Athena out of the tent.

“Nathaniel, perhaps you’d like to finish Athena’s uneaten meat?” Ainsworth pointed at the plate. Nathaniel paused for a moment, before nodding eagerly. Mira slid the plate to Nathaniel, who swatted the flies off it before sawing off a chunk of the brown and pink mass.

Athena trudged toward the building with the beds, across the dark dirt of the community. Flies still buzzed in the breeze that had begun to pick up. Luke ran to catch up with her.

“Ath, why didn’t you eat,” Luke asked gently, walking behind her, “are you sick?” He saw her wipe tears away from her cheek with her sleeve. “Are you crying?”

“No, Luke,” she spat over her shoulder, “leave me alone. I’m going to sleep.”

“Why are you crying?” Luke reached out to grab her arm, but a sharp squeal carried along the breeze, freezing them both in their tracks. “What was that? Did you hear that Ath?” Luke’s eyes darted around frantically. Athena pointed to the barn at the far side of the fence.

“It must be the pigs,” Athena said, which calmed Luke slightly. Luke peered curiously at the lone electric light at the edge of the gray barn.

“Have you ever seen a pig?” He asked her curiously, “Are they big or small?”

“I don’t know, Luke, why don’t you go and see,” she began to cry, “just leave me alone!” She jogged the final few steps into the building, heading inside. Luke waited alone in the darkening plot, eyes fixed on the barn. Another squeal, much lower this time, found its way toward him. He steadied his breathing, peering around to check if anyone was looking, before cautiously shuffling along the fence towards the barn.

Inside the dark building, Athena quickly began to gather up her things into her bag. She pushed in a few cans of food and her extra sweater. She went through Mira’s bag afterward, searching through the bathroom supplies. She took a toothbrush, a tube of paste, and two plastic shavers. When Athena moved the shavers, she felt something at the base of the bag. It felt like two plastic bullets, which she lifted up to see. They were the two tampons Mira had kept earlier. Athena paused for a moment, holding them, before tossing them into her own bag. She also pushed towels and extra blankets underneath the ones already on her bed, arranging them in the vague shape of a body. Her breathing pounded loudly in the dark room as she finished her hasty packing job. She tucked her necklace into her dark sweater before heading back outside. Light still poured through

the cracks in the tent, and she could hear Ainsworth telling a story, which was followed by murmurs and laughter. She slipped towards the gate they had come through, the increasing breeze pushing at her back. The gate was closed and latched with a padlock. Her eyes darted about, glancing over her shoulder to check on the tent. Nobody had come out. There was a narrow gap between the fence and the gate; she could hear the river moving just beyond it. She tried to slide between the gap, but it was too narrow for her to fit with the bag. She paused for a moment, looking back at the tent as tears welled up in her eyes. She unslung the backpack from her back, letting it fall gently into the dust, before she squeezed her thin body through the gap. Her feet splashed in the water briefly, as she scrambled onto the deck of the bridge. She heard voices beyond the fence, coming from the tent. She began to run, downwind from the community, crossing the bridge quietly and slipping away into the dusty darkness.

Luke had made his way over to the barn, inspecting the front door which was locked with a heavy steel padlock. He circled the barn looking for another way inside, creeping low in the shadows. He could hear shuffling inside the barn, with the occasional grunt and whimper. A stench of manure surrounded the barn but didn't deter Luke's curious pursuit. He rounded the back of the barn, which was completely in shadow. Feeling along the rough wooden slats, his hands eventually found a gap in the boards. It was too narrow to fit through, so he tugged at the board's base. The wood groaned against the rusty nail that held it in place as Luke tugged. His heels dug into the dirt as he leaned back against the wood. It crumpled with a twisting squeak as Luke toppled over into the dust, board fragment in hand. Discarding the board, he picked up his hat which had fallen off, and crept close to the dark hole in the wood. He wriggled against the ground, eventually getting his torso inside the dusky barn. He sat up, pulling his thin legs inside.

The barn had a heavy stench of manure, and was eerily muffled from the wind. It was too dark to see anything, except for the light from the outside lamp sneaking under the door. Luke pawed his way toward the light, feeling on the ground for anything in his path. He heard a muffled grunt to his left, darting his vision in that direction, but it was too dark to see anything. He continued crawling towards the door, eventually his hand grasped onto the leg of a wooden table. Using the table, he stood up, feeling across the surface of it. It was wet, and his hands met something sharp and metal, so he continued more carefully. Something thin and hard sat against the wall. His hand recognized its shape instantly. It was a lighter. He grinned as he flicked it in the dark, sparking it several times before the flame took. The small glow illuminated the table, which had a host of saws and knives lying in it. He turned around slowly, careful not to blow the flame out. The ground was soft, and the sound of the flies buzzing in the barn became more apparent as he approached the far wall. He heard shuffling ahead of him, and then a low grunt. The light caught something moving against the wall, which shuffled away from him as he approached. He could see its flesh, dirty and caked with hay, as it writhed on its short legs, hiding its face from him. He crept closer.

“Hey little pig, I’m not gonna hurt you,” Luke whispered, lowering the lighter closer to the animal. He inspected its back, which was bonier than he had imagined. Its stubby legs wrapped underneath it. He noticed that each leg was bound with stained rags at its end. He couldn’t tell where the tail was, so he crept around to see its pig's face. Its eyes opened slightly, but it had a stained rag tied over its mouth. Luke’s hands moved almost involuntarily, pulling the cloth away from the pig’s flushed lips. Inside its mouth, the remaining stub of its tongue wriggled between black gums and yellow teeth. Luke stared petrified at the pig’s face as it turned to face his.

“Hel...” A voice choked out from the pig’s mouth, the stub of a tongue writhing in the light. “Plee...” Luke stammered back, tripping over something and dropping the lighter. The pig began to howl, its voice bouncing off the wooden walls. Other squeals and shrieks joined in, as Luke frantically crawled toward the illuminated door, banging on it desperately. He covered his ears, whimpering, as the shrieks continued, while flies landed on his dirty face.

Athena clambered over rocks in the dark, looking over her shoulder once to make sure the community was out of sight. The breeze had picked up, which muffled the scraping of her feet on the rough ground. She could hear the stream nearby but did her best not to stay too close to it as she walked through the dark. She thought Waister and the others may have stayed near the river. She panted as she walked, afraid to stop. She was thirsty, but tried her best to put it out of her mind. She climbed over a steep embankment, before carefully traversing the far side. Ground became more level as she slowed to a steadier pace. The wind at her back was stronger here. She shivered without the extra jacket she had left behind. Ahead in the dark, she stumbled into an old rest stop, with two outhouses standing on a level patch of dirt. She wanted to rest, but thought this place would be too obvious had she been followed. After taking a moment to catch her breath, Athena continued along the uneven terrain. Eventually she reached a higher point that overlooked the valley where she had left her sweater. She stopped to rest in a hollow dug out by the wind underneath a heavy dark log. Although she shivered, her fatigue eventually prevailed and she drifted into a quick slumber.

When she awoke, the gray dawn had barely arrived. She lay for a moment, tears beginning to well up at the edge of her eyes. She sniffled, but pushed them back, crawling out from underneath the log. She surveyed the valley, where she could see the two outhouses in the distance.

There was no sign of anyone. Relieved, she took a moment to plan her next move. The stream twisted away up from the outhouses, and beyond into the distance. She decided to follow the stream, but not too closely. Her march continued as two black birds eyed her from a nearby stone.

She walked for several hours over the uneven terrain. Ridges hid tiny fragile bushes that burst under her feet. She swatted through swarms of flies, keeping her eye on the river off to her left when she had higher vantage. The ridge she was on dipped into a shallow slope, before turning gradually uphill. She trudged up the hill, panting, her pace slowed by incline and fatigue. Two figures stepped out from behind a dip in the ridge. Athena exhaled relief, thinking she had caught up to Waister and the others, collapsing onto her hands and knees. The two men approached her, their feet crunching on the gravel.

“Well, well,” an unfamiliar voice squawked, “what’s this we got here?” Athena froze, her eyes fixed on the ground, before she slowly dragged her line of sight upwards. Two wiry men approached her, both had loose jackets and shabby beards. One of them wore a tight wool cap, and stood farther back. The nearer one, who was larger, grinned as he plodded over, his dark gums flashing in the grey light. Tears began to crawl down Athena’s face, as she clasped her hand around the cross that hung from her necklace, before she yanked it off its chain.

The glow of the flashlight pressed against the floor softly illuminated the pinks of their hands as they found one another in the dark.

“What was it like, to kill somebody,” Athena turned to Waister, “what was it like the first time?” Waister paused for a moment, gently pinching Athena’s finger with his.

“I was at a farm, I think,” Waister began, “it was more like a junkyard. I lived there with my brother, and my cousin Rooney. I wasn’t very big yet. Maybe as big as your brother is now,” Waister cocked his head. “My brother was older than me, but my cousin was the oldest. They liked to drink and smoke powder sometimes. My cousin made powder in the basement, with bottles and boiling things. I don’t remember very well, he didn’t want me to go in the basement. He gave me powder sometimes though; it made my head and ears hurt, I didn’t really like it.” Waister shook his head as Athena listened. “One day, I was home with my brother and cousin, and a guy drove up to the house, older guy. He walked inside and started beating up Rooney really bad with a crowbar. My brother,” Waister paused, “my brother Lou woke up first. He ran downstairs and pushed the guy off Rooney, but the guy was bigger than him, and he started to choke Lou. I watched from the stairs, I didn’t know what to do, but Lou was trying to scream for help. The guy on top of him had a tattoo on his neck, it was a fish, and even though I was little, I had killed a fish before. So I ran to the table and grabbed a knife Rooney had been using to cut up powder. I don’t think the guy even saw me.”

“What happened next?” Athena asked.

“I put it here,” Waister probed his index finger into the base of Athena’s neck, “right where the fish was, then I gutted it.” Waister finished the story, returning to silence.

“And then?” Athena asked more curiously.

“He died really fast. He fell over onto his side, and all his blood came out, and then he was dead. Rooney and Lou buried him behind the house in the morning.” Athena said nothing for a moment.

“What did it feel like? Weren’t you scared?” Athena asked.

“I was scared,” Waister admitted, “but I was scared the first time I gutted a fish too. It’s not as scary after that.” A long silence followed. Both Athena and Waister looked straight ahead.

“I’ve never gutted a fish,” Athena said finally. Waister half smiled.

“You will someday. Maybe soon.” Waister spoke calmly.

“How...” Athena started, “how do you do it?” Waister looked over, his eyes meeting hers in the darkness.

“Let him get close.” Waister began, “He will be bigger than you, and he will try to get close to you. He will want to get close to you, so let him do it.”

“And then?” Athena tried to sound brave.

“Here,” Waister probed the soft base of Athena’s neck gently, “or here.” He dragged his finger down the length of her body to the upper inside of her thigh. “He’ll bleed a lot. And then...”

“Die.” Athena finished, gulping. Waister withdrew his hand, reaching into one of his pockets.

“I took this from you,” Waister pulled her chain with the cross on the end, “take it back.” Athena reached out to grab the cross. “Careful,” Waister advised. Athena carefully plucked the cross and lay in her palm. The end of it had been filed into a sharp point.

“You broke it?” Athena asked, feeling the filed end of the cross with her finger. Waister looked at her, not saying anything. He closed her hand around the cross.

“Now maybe god can protect you.”

Tears began to crawl down Athena's face, as she clasped her hand around the cross that hung from her necklace, before she yanked it off its chain. She hid the cross in her fist, which was balled against her right thigh.

"You're a pretty thing," the man's grey teeth flashed again, "and look how clean you are." The second man stayed back, surveying the land behind Athena. "You're all alone out here?" The first man asked, stepping closer to Athena. She said nothing, looking straight ahead. "Ah, don't be shy. You can come with us," the man was only a few feet from Athena now, "we've got some food. Got some water too. I'll treat ya nice. What do you say?" By this point the man stood right in front of her. Slowly, Athena raised her eyes to meet the man's. She said nothing; her tears stopped. Small flies landed on the man's scalp as he watched her for a moment. "There's a good girl," The man cautiously reached his hand down, cupping her cheek. He lifted her hair, before gently letting it fall. Steadily, Athena rose to her feet. The man was a few inches taller than she was. He leaned in; she could feel his sour breath on her neck. Planting his lips on her skin, he sniffed her hair heavily, dragging his hand slowly up the side of her hip. Athena began to undo the man's pants. He drew his face back, looking her in the eye again. "Right here?" The man asked surprised. Athena chewed her bottom lip, nodding her head twice. "If you insist," the man grinned, undoing his pants the rest of the way. They fell with a thud onto the dusty earth. Athena maintained eye contact before slowly kneeling in front of the man. He grabbed onto her hair with his fist, pushing her downward.

"Hey Ross, what're ya doin'?" The man standing back asked.

"Shut up," the man in front of Athena hissed over his shoulder, "can't you see I'm..." The man stopped mid-sentence, turning again to face Athena. He looked down at her crouched in front

of him as blood ran down her right arm, dripping onto her sleeve. She pulled the cross out of his thigh, thrusting it in again two more times quickly. The man grunted awkwardly, trying to cover the wound on his leg. When he moved, blood squirted out in a black geyser, splattering on Athena's neck and chest. She stood up quickly, jabbing the bloody cross into the base of his neck several more times.

“What the fuck?” The other man squawked, drawing a folding knife from his pocket clumsily. Athena stood above the bleeding man, who didn't scream, but crumpled to the dusty hillside in front of her. Flies were on him immediately, drawn to the thick stream of blood slipping down the bank. Athena was shaking, tears began flowing down her cheek, but were obscured by the blood on her face. She wiped her nose with her forearm, smearing more blood across her cheeks. The other man held his knife out straight, shaking as he did. Athena's right hand still gripped the cross tightly, as blood ran down the chain in a dark vine. The other man stood quivering for a moment, before turning and running back up the hillside from where he had appeared. Athena watched his silhouette disappear over the ridge in a final plume of dust. She began to cry again, and then tried to walk, but after only a few steps, she vomited into the dirt. The vomit came out as a long clear stream, slightly yellow at its end. She wretched heavily, spitting out a final chunk of yellow, before standing up to wipe her face another time. Feeling suddenly better, she continued walking, without looking back to where the man lay.

“Someone's down there,” Waister said, crouching as he looked down the bank. Jefe shuffled awake, peering down the hill to where Waister was looking. A thin figure clambered through the dusty ridges below them. Waister stood up, narrowing his vision on the figure. He recognized the gait and hair to be Athena. “I'm going down,” he said to Jefe, and began to descend

the ridge. Jefe hastily grabbed both his and Waister's bags, following him down the ridge. He caught up to Waister, kicking up dust as he did.

"She's alone," Jefe said quietly. Waister didn't answer.

Athena heard a sharp whistle, and it wasn't long before she spied Waister farther up on the hillside. Tears began to streak her blood caked cheeks again as she panted to mount the hill. Waister descended, eventually closing the gap between them beside a large boulder next to a withered tree. Athena fell into Waister's arms, where she cried quietly into his sleeve. The stream's rush could be heard coming over the ridge. Jefe had stopped in his tracks.

"Are you okay?" Waister asked, inspecting the blood on Athena's face.

"I'm..." Athena choked, "it's not..." She couldn't finish.

"Fish blood," Waister said. Athena nodded, wiping tears away from her eyes.

"Where are the others," Athena asked. Waister turned around, but Jefe was nowhere to be seen. A sharp crack split the calm sound in the valley, ricocheting off the hillsides. Waister and Athena dropped quickly to the ground, hands over their ears.

"I told you there were rules about where you could explore, and the barn is strictly forbidden. Juan's work is delicate, didn't I say that?" Ainsworth barked at Luke, who cried, huddling next to Mira.

"Reverend please, he's just a boy," Mira defended, "he's just curious."

"He's pulled a board off the back of the barn, now I gotta fix it," Juan groaned, leaning against the doorframe.

"Thank you, Juan, I'll handle this from here. Please, leave us," Ainsworth said in a much calmer tone. "Luke, why did you go into the barn?" Luke cowered behind Mira.

“It’s okay honey,” Mira pat his head, “Just tell him the truth.”

“I wanted to see the pigs,” Luke muttered quietly. Nathaniel, who said nothing, shook his head.

“And did you see the pigs?” Ainsworth spoke flatly, lowering his eyes to meet Luke’s. Luke nodded nervously. “What happened next?” Luke began to cry as he spoke.

“When the pig saw me, he started screaming,” Luke said quietly

“Squealing,” Ainsworth corrected.

“They all started screaming together. I got scared. That’s when the man came and took me out.” Luke buried his face in Mira’s pant leg. Ainsworth paused for a moment, his finger on his forehead.

“Luke, I’m sorry I shouted at you. I understand you’re curious. I was a little boy too once,” Ainsworth knelt down to face Luke. “I know you didn’t mean to scare the pigs. If you scare them, they won’t grow up right, and then they’re not as good to eat.”

“Apologize please, honey,” Mira urged him.

“I-I’m sorry,” Luke sobbed.

“It’s okay Luke,” Ainsworth smiled, his pale gums flashing, “just don’t visit the pigs again, okay?” Luke nodded. “Did your sister go with you to the barn?” Ainsworth asked.

“No,” Luke croaked, “she went to bed. I think she’s mad.”

“Probably just tired,” Ainsworth smiled at Nathaniel.

“Definitely,” Nathaniel agreed, “I’m sure we all are.” He glared at Mira.

“Of course,” Ainsworth said, “perhaps we’d all better get off to bed. I’ll see you all in the morning. If you need me, I sleep in the chapel.” He turned to walk back toward the army tent. Nathaniel followed Ainsworth.

“Nate,” Mira called after him, “aren’t you coming to bed?” Nathaniel ignored her, following Ainsworth into the tent. Mira gripped Luke’s shoulders softly.

“The pigs tried to talk to me,” Luke said.

“What?” Mira asked.

“The pigs,” Luke yawned, “they talked to...”

“Come, honey. Let’s get ready for bed.”

Mira returned to the room she and Athena had claimed. She could see the outline of Athena’s silhouette curled up on her bed.

“Ath,” Mira whispered, “I’m sorry about dinner. The Reverend, I think he means well.” There was no answer; only the hum of the river could be heard. “I know this is different, but it’s for the best. They’ve got food, water, and power here. We don’t have to stay here forever, but for now, this might be the best for us.” Mira waited, but there was still no answer. “I love you honey, I’ll see you in the morning.” Mira left the room, joining Luke on his bed across the hall. She brushed the salty stains of his tears from his cheeks before she drifted to sleep.

Mira awoke to a pale dawn peering through the clouds beyond the window. Nathaniel lay sleeping in the bed beside her, while Luke remained curled up in her arms. Gently, she loosened her grasp on Luke, standing quietly in the room next to him. He looked peaceful in the blue-gray light. Even Nathaniel looked finally comfortable to her. She turned around, quietly crossing the hall to her and Athena’s room. She saw the lumpy silhouette of Athena lying motionless on the bed. She hesitated for a moment, before walking over to jostle Athena awake.

Mira's screech tore through the hallway. Nathaniel twisted himself awake, while Luke spun about in his blanket.

"She's gone!" Mira shrieked, stumbling through the building, "Where is she?!"

"What is it, honey?" Nathaniel wheezed from the door, coughing into his sleeve. "Stop."

"Athena," Mira turned, racing over to Luke. "What did she say to you? Did she say where she was going?" Luke shook his head, beginning to cry. Ainsworth had emerged from the tent, his hair slightly disheveled.

"What's the meaning of all this?" He yawned.

"I'm sorry, Reverend," Nathaniel began.

"Where is my daughter?!" Mira shouted at Ainsworth. "Where did she go?" Mira collapsed into a heap, crying.

"Please, Mrs. Sturges, calm down," Ainsworth walked closer, trying to console her, "I'll have everyone search the buildings." Tran appeared at the entrance of the large building. "Tran, check the building for the girl. Tell Roland and Juan to check the greenhouse and barn." The young man nodded, turning around back into the building. Sean also appeared in the doorway, making his way over to the gate. Nathaniel knelt beside Mira, stroking her back as she sobbed.

"Ainsworth," Sean called from the gate, holding up Athena's plump backpack. Mira looked over, recognizing the backpack. She lunged to her feet, dashing over to snatch the backpack from Sean. Mira yanked back the zipper, rifling through the contents, before dropping it to the ground.

"It's hers, it's Athena's," she looked over to the place beside the gate where Sean had found it. Gray light reflected off the creek through the narrow gap in the fence.

"I'm going to find her," Mira trudged toward the long building.

“Mira, please,” Nathaniel stepped in her way, but she pushed him aside.

“I’m going!” Mira snapped at him. “She’s out there now, Nate. Alone.” Mira’s eyes began to tear up. “I’m going to find her, before she…” Mira croaked, “before she gets too far.”

“Mrs. Sturges, please,” Ainsworth spoke. Mira stopped at the doorway, listening over her shoulder. “I won’t stop you, but please, take Josh with you. He’s got a keen eye.” Mira nodded once, before dashing inside to get ready. Luke followed her inside.

In a few minutes, Mira reappeared from inside the building. Luke was with her, and she turned to him. “Wait here,” she said, before crossing to the army tent. The main room of the tent was empty, and a dim light shone from an auxiliary room at the back. As Mira approached it, she heard someone brushing their teeth. Once she got close enough, she saw Ainsworth brushing his teeth over a small sink basin that drained outside the tent. She paused for a moment, observing him, as he pulled a white jug from beside the sink. He unscrewed the blue cap, which unleashed a potent chloric scent into the air. He poured it over his toothbrush and continued brushing. Mira felt a wretch of unease build up in her stomach, and turned around to exit the tent.

Back outside, Josh stood next to Nathaniel and Luke near the gate.

“Mira, honey,” Nathaniel cooed, “are you sure about this.” Mira nodded swiftly, walking over to them.

“I’m ready to go,” Josh grinned, wincing in the gray light.

“Thank you,” Mira reluctantly said to him.

“I wanna go too,” Luke said. He was dressed and prepared already.

“Luke, honey…” Mira began.

“No, I wanna go too. I don’t want to be alone,” Luke sobbed, “I wanna see Ath.” Mira held him close to her. Ainsworth pushed through the tent flaps, making his way over to the group by the gate.

“It would be best to head upriver, Josh,” Ainsworth said, “She probably hasn’t strayed too far. And thank you, Joshua. Bring her back safe.”

“You got it, Reverend,” Josh grinned, scuffing his boot on the pavement.

“And what’s this, are you part of the search party too?” Ainsworth knelt down, smiling at Luke. His teeth gleamed between his lips. Mira looked down at the two of them. She smelled the faint chloric scent on his breath, watching his gaunt hand clutch Luke’s shoulder.

“If she sees her brother, she will probably want to come home,” Mira said, trying her best to sound genuine.

“Mira...” Nathaniel began.

“It’s true, Reverend.” Mira began to feign tears as best she could, “I know Luke can help. And I know you want her back safe as much as I do.” Ainsworth looked at Mira, frowning at her tears, before turning to Josh. “Very well, just make sure to stay sharp.” He tapped his finger on Luke’s ball cap. “I’m sure you’ll be back with her in no time.” Mira sighed with relief, hugging Luke gently.

“Why are you bringing Luke? It’s too dangerous.” Nathaniel began to cough as he asked.

“The Reverend is right, Athena can’t be far away. Especially without her bag.” Mira looked down at the upturned backpack in the dust. She saw the two tampons among the other supplies. “She’s probably just upset. When she sees Luke, she’ll be fine. She loves her brother.” Mira turned back to Nathaniel. “Nate, things will be okay.” Nathaniel nodded reluctantly.

“Stay close to Joshua, and keep your eyes open for your sister,” Nathaniel said, kissing Luke’s forehead, “God’s protecting you. Now and always.”

Ainsworth had walked over to Josh, speaking to him quietly. “Head along the bluffs, I’ll send Ed along the riverbank. You’ll meet around the T point.” Josh nodded. “I need you to find her, Joshua.” Josh slung his rifle over his shoulder and headed towards the gate. Sean unlocked the heavy padlock, sliding the groaning gate aside. Josh led Mira and Luke across the bridge, heading up the dusty hillside. The gate groaned shut behind them as they disappeared from sight over the ridge.

Athena looked over to Waister, who lay flat on his stomach in the dust. A second crack pierced the air, after which Waister scrambled to his feet.

“Don’t fuckin’ move!” A voice barked from above on the ridge. Joshua carefully paced closer to Waister, who stood motionless. “Lay down on the ground,” Josh commanded, and Waister steadily obliged.

“Ath,” Luke’s voice carried down the hill. He stumbled over the ridge holding his cap on his head with his hand. “Ath!” Athena looked up to see Josh standing over Waister with his gun drawn, as Luke and Mira descended the hill. Athena rose to her knees, shaking, as Luke finally reached her.

“Ath,” he hugged her tightly. She began to cry. “What happened Ath? Are you okay?” Mira arrived in a few moments, tears streaking down her cheeks.

“Athena,” she knelt to hug her son and daughter, “oh, Athena, you’re alright.” Athena said nothing, her eyes still on Waister who lay motionless in the dust. “Athena?” Mira asked, cradling her daughter's face in her hands. She followed Athena’s gaze, looking at Waister who lay on the ground at Josh’s feet.

“Mom,” Athena exhaled softly.

“Where are...” Mira looked around, but saw nobody else.

“I said don’t fuckin’ move!” Josh stepped closer to Waister, who had placed his palms in the dirt. Waister’s eyes looked up to meet Josh’s. The barrel of Josh’s rifle pointed into Waister’s face. Josh’s breath was quick and heavy as he wrapped his index finger around the trigger.

A crack echoed across the dusty gulch. Waister hobbled to his feet, pouncing onto Josh who tumbled backward, clutching his abdomen. Blood stained Josh's blue shirt as Waister straddled his writhing body. The others cowered together as Waister lifted Josh's rifle into the air, plunging the barrel into Josh's neck. Gurgles spewed forth as Waister rammed the rifle again and again into the front of Josh's neck. With a soft snapping, the barrel planted in Josh's neck, as blood began to pool at its base. Josh kicked his feet two more times before lying limp. Flies swarmed the blood. Mira, who shielded her children from the sound, slowly lifted her eyes at the sound of boots crunching on gravel. She saw Jefe sliding down the steep embankment, rifle in hand. She let go of the others, standing upright, inhaling softly.

"Mari," Jefe grinned, "you got away from them." Mira couldn't help but grin. The dressing on Jefe's shoulder dangled to one side.

"Your bandage is off," Mira smiled through tears, "I'm going to have to..." Jefe pulled her close to him, kissing the side of her face.

"Hmm," Jefe smirked, "clean." Athena walked over to Waister, easing him away from Josh's corpse. He slung the bloodied rifle over his shoulder. "Ey, sorry Waist," Jefe pointed at Josh, "I saw him before you did, so I stopped."

"I see," Waister panted, "good shot then." Jefe laughed to himself, spitting towards Josh's corpse. Luke looked up the hill expectantly.

"Where is he?" Luke asked. Jefe exchanged a look with Waister, before speaking.

"Come on, this way." Jefe led the others up the steep hillside. They soon reached the perch Jefe had fired from where the bags still lay in a heap. Jefe pulled the long hunting bow from Waister's bag, along with the arrows.

“Crowsey’s gone, little man,” Jefe said, holding the bow in front of himself. “He didn’t make it very far after the shot.” Luke gulped, looking down at his feet. The toe of his shoe dug into the dirt. Waister gently took the bow and arrows from Jefe, kneeling down to Luke.

“He told us to give this to you,” Waister held the bow out. Luke looked up before reaching out to grasp the black bow. “He wanted you to have it. It’s yours now.” Waister handed him the arrow bag as well. Luke wiped his cheek with his sleeve, slinging both over his shoulder. The wind began to pick up, kicking dust into the air. Jefe looked uphill, shielding his eyes with his hand.

“So where now?” Mira asked him.

“Up,” Jefe pointed uphill, “we’re going up. You’re gonna come with us?”

“We aren’t your prisoners anymore?” Mira half grinned.

“We aren’t gonna be prisoners. Neither are you Mariposa.” Jefe swatted at the dust.

“Dad’s not coming,” Athena said plainly. Mira looked at her, and then to Luke.

“Your father...” Mira began, “no, your father isn’t coming.” She patted Luke on his shoulder.

“Let’s go,” Jefe said, turning to lead them up the hillside, “we’ll find a way up that river.”

Jefe lead them up the dusty hillside, over the ridge, and down into a deep ravine. As they moved lower, the river came back into view. The narrow stream from before joined a much wider one up ahead.

“Look,” Jefe pointed at the larger part of the river, “we’ll go there.” The five of them marched onward, descending gradually onto the more level ground near the stream. Clouds of small flies lingered in the air beside the river, and above them in the sky, three vultures circled. Jefe walked several metres ahead of the others, scoping out the stream as it widened to meet the larger one. He waited there for the others to catch up.

“Up that way,” Jefe pointed to the wider part of the river. The hills in that direction gradually rolled into taller mountains in the distance. The clouds beside the mountains seemed higher in the sky than the clouds had been everywhere else. They neared the water’s edge where the river ran more swiftly and the water was deeper. Jefe dropped his bag on the ground and began to undress. “Little swim?” Jefe grinned over his shoulder. Mira sighed, before heaving her sweater off her shoulder.

“You can clean off the...” Waister said to Athena. The dried blood on her face and clothes was caked with gray dirt. The blood-encrusted hair clung to her bared shoulder. She ran her palm over her shoulder, feeling the roughness of the collected dirt under her palms. She and Waister approached the water’s edge before undressing. Luke quickly undressed, dashing forward to splash into the river. Jefe paddled out far into the river, repeatedly dunking his head and scrubbing at his face with his palms. Mira stood waist deep in the stream, cupping water and letting it fall down her body through her hair. As Athena submerged herself in the cool water, flakes of dirt and dried blood peeled away from her skin, leaving a speckled mosaic behind. Waister rinsed his tangled hair beside her, watching her as she scrubbed at her bloodied cheek. Luke returned to the shore, dashing up to where he had left his things on the ridge. He squatted behind a rock, where flies found his wet body, but he remained unbothered, looking skyward at three circling vultures.

A whipping snap echoed from beyond the ridge, followed by a spray of water in the river a few feet from Jefe. He crouched low in the water before a second splash split the space between Waister and Athena.

“Mira!” Nathaniel yelled, appearing from a ridge downstream from the river’s fork, rifle in hand. Ed was with him, his rifle raised towards the river. Jefe made to return to the shore.

“Stay back there!” Ed screamed nervously, pointing his rifle at Jefe, before waving it back toward Waister.

“Nate,” Mira called back, using her hands to cover her breasts, “what are you...”

“I’m here to take you back,” Nathaniel interrupted, pacing closer to the river, “and Athena.”

Mira looked over at Jefe, who was panting heavily in the water.

“Nate, I...” Mira began.

“You!” Nathaniel shook the rifle at Jefe, “back up, go farther out. I’ll kill you!” Jefe paused, before gradually backpedalling into the stream. “Ed, go get Athena,” Nathaniel said. Ed walked down the dusty shore to where Athena and Waister were.

“You too. Out into the river,” Ed said, jostling his rifle. Waister didn’t move. Ed fired the rifle, splashing a few feet from Waister, who crouched in fear. Athena clasped her hands over her ears. “Out!” Ed shouted. Waister looked at Athena, who began to cry, before gradually wading back into the river.

“Nate,” Mira said calmly, “we’re not going with you.”

“Shut up,” Nathaniel growled, “come here, now!” He coughed into the air, jostling a small cloud of flies.

“Alright, let’s go,” Ed said to Athena, wading a few steps into the river, “get dressed, we’re gonna take you back.” Athena trudged toward him, covering herself as best she could. She continued to weep.

“Nate,” Mira said calmly, “put it down.” He ignored her. Ed grabbed onto Athena’s upper arm, keeping the rifle gripped against his body. He clumsily started dragging her back to the shore.

“Nate,” Mira said once more.

“Where is...” Nathaniel began. A sharp click startled him as a black shape skipped across the stony earth to his right. He looked down at the upturned dust where it had landed, before twisting around, rifle raised.

The second arrow hissed from the ridge, slicing across the shore, before planting itself in Nathaniel’s extended wrist. Nathaniel wailed in pain, his arm crumpling back toward his chest. The rifle thudded into the dust.

“Hey!” Ed shouted, releasing Athena as he turned to face Nathaniel. Athena wrapped her arm around his neck, pulling him closer to herself, before they both plunged into the shallow water. Waister thrashed through the water toward them, plunging his hands into the frothing water. He pulled Athena to the surface, but as Ed’s head breached the water, Waister shoved it back underneath, holding him beneath the muddy stream.

Luke stood up from behind a cluster of rocks on the ridge, his pale body stark against the brown earth; black bow in hand. Nathaniel writhed in the dust far below him, groaning as he tried to pull the arrow from his arm. Mira trudged to the shore, collecting her clothes from the ground, before hastily pulling them onto her wet body.

“Mira,” Nathaniel whimpered, “Luke. Why don’t we go back? Why did you...”

“Nate,” Mira stopped him. She stood over him, watching the small flies land next to his eyes and mouth. “We’re not going back there.”

“Mira,” Nathaniel wheezed, “I prayed...”

“Enough, Nate!” Mira screamed, her face reddening. Luke had descended the hill, quickly dressing himself when he reached the bottom. Jefe made his way back to the shore. Waister let go of Ed once he stopped moving; his body swaying as it floated slowly downstream in the muddy water.

“We’ll keep going. We’ll find clean water. That’s what we’re going to do.” Mira stood tall against the clouds, as a breeze tossed her wet hair across her face. “We won’t go back. We won’t get sick.” Mira paused for a moment, “We don’t eat people.”

“We aren’t like them, Mira, we aren’t...” Nathaniel tried to speak again.

“We don’t eat people!” Mira’s voice echoed across the moving water. Four vultures now circled overhead. Lower down on the shore, Waister and Athena dressed themselves. Mira marched over to Jefe’s bag, rummaging through it for a moment, before pulling out the roll of duct tape and the pistol. She handed the pistol to Jefe. “How many bullets are in it?” she asked. Jefe slid the clip out of the pistol’s base.

“Four,” he answered.

“Give me one,” Mira held her hand out. Jefe plucked one of the bullets from the clip, gently placing it into Mira’s open hand. Without hesitating, she turned and threw the bullet far out into the stream. It landed with a muffled plunk before disappearing beneath the surface. “Now give me the others.” Mira tossed the remaining three bullets far into the dirt behind Nathaniel. They landed with gentle thuds somewhere out of sight.

“Nate,” Mira said to Nathaniel in a much calmer tone, “we’re going to keep moving. With Athena...” Luke approached, still holding the bow, “And Luke.” Mira nodded at Luke. Nathaniel shuffled in the dirt, squinting up at his son.

“Luke,” Nathaniel coughed. Luke didn’t answer; walking past his father to collect the first arrow that lay in the dust beside the river.

“Come with us, Nate,” Mira said, leaning over Nathaniel. Mira held the roll of duct tape in her hand. Nathaniel stared at it with a look of desperation. Behind her, Jefe dressed himself and retrieved his gear from where he dropped it. Beyond them, Waister and Athena readied themselves

to leave. “Or you can stay here,” Mira said, tossing the pistol into the dirt a few feet away from them. Ed’s corpse floated gradually farther away, as a swarm of large black flies hovered after it. One of the circling vultures had perched on a flat rock on the ridge, eyeing the group as they stood above Nathaniel. His eyes fixed on the duct tape momentarily, coughing hard before he scrunched his face, and turned to crawl towards the pistol.

“Come on Luke; Athena,” Mira called out. Athena walked close beside Waister as they passed by Nathaniel. Nathaniel scowled at Athena, who looked at him only for a moment before joining the others. Luke walked by Nathaniel slowly, considering the arrow in his arm, but looking away.

“Luke,” Nathaniel wheezed, still scraping himself closer to where the pistol lay, “come back with Dad. Come back where it’s safe.”

“We don’t eat people,” Luke had a look of sadness in his eyes, which turned to disgust. He turned from his father, walking ahead to join the others. They ascended the ridge to where the river was wider, where they crossed the shallowest point of the narrow stream. Mira looked back over her shoulder, but she could no longer see Nathaniel. The dark shapes of four vultures gradually lowered themselves to the space where they had left Nathaniel, twirling in an uneven column, and eventually out of sight. The river was much wider ahead, and at its edge the water looked clearer than it had before. Jefe stopped, taking off his backpack, and removing one of the small bottles of powder. He lowered his pants, the stream of urine mixing with the small cloud of powder at the water’s edge. The cloud darkened, but only slightly, before being carried away into the stream. Beyond the ridge they had ascended, a gunshot cracked, muffled by the river’s flow. The shot was followed by two more, quickly. Jefe scooped a handful up to his mouth. “Cleaner,” Jefe said as he looked back over his shoulder. Waister grinned, handing his sweater to Athena, while Luke

scanned the water with curious eyes. Jefe looked past them to Mira who smiled at the clouded water, her hand held against her belly.

The river would wind itself toward grey-green mountains that held the sky higher up from the earth. This river's face would gleam with a gilded film, sliced wide where a slab of sunlight finally breached the clouds. The river's rush would smother the song of a million tiny wings. A single voice above a chorus.