Delirium Tremens: A Pre-Odyssey

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Delirium Tremens: A Pre-Odyssey

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By

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... All the immense
images in me — the far-off, deeply-felt landscape,
cities, towers, and bridges, and un-
suspected turns in the path,
and those powerful lands that were once
pulsing with the life of the gods—
all rise within me to mean
you, who forever elude me.

—Rainer Maria Rilke

“Tip the world over, and everything loose will land in Los Angeles.”

—Frank Lloyd Wright
Prologue

Two things happened. First, the convoy of Los Angelinos fleeing the leveled city limits along the I-10 East towards Phoenix, El Paso, Tallahassee, or some other safe harbor, reached an abrupt and vexing standstill, and second, some fifty miles north, the very last Joshua Tree burst into flames. In those days, it was not uncommon for the Joshua tree to burn, as this one did. The electricity in the air boiled over during the wet season and threw lightning across the desert plains, and daily dry winds swept dozens of small fires across the smooth hills and parched tangles of flora. The flames coiled around the hairy bark and climbed up towards the peduncles and gnarled branches, then ripped through the razor leaves and white wedding cake flowers, which turned to ash and drizzled down onto a bed of brush. The flames haloed the tree, the last tree. It collapsed. The fire spread to the Jojoba bushes, the Spineflower clusters, and the dry Carpetweed ground cover, until there was nothing else to burn.

Had this tree possessed the same kind of sex appeal as say the Brown Bear, the Coastal Redwood, or the wet whiskered Sea Otter, perhaps someone might have noticed that this, the last Joshua tree, had vanished without sentimentality from the face of the earth. But the desert was wide and waterless, and the well-meaning people who might have taken notice were stuck in traffic.

A long convoy of engines slouched left to right along the desert page. It was a real ratfuck. Car horns peppered the air so frequently that the few instances of silence set the motorists on edge. They had merged onto the I-10 from as far as the Los Angeles border, traveling into the outskirts of the county, through San Bernardino, the Redlands, Coachella Valley, and now, under the belly of the Joshua Tree desert. Out there, without a rest stop in sight
for miles, the freeway had folded itself into two neat lanes, separated only by the barrier of fading yellow paint. Everyone, absolutely everyone, was on the road, delirious and tired. Peak dry season, the mid-morning heat rose up off the earth, blurring the horizon on all sides. The malaise of desert trekking took hold like a parasite: a knot in the neck, a bead of sweat below the breast, the slow annihilation of heat and stasis swept through the vehicles on the road which carried them out and away from what was left of Los Angeles after the earthquake.

In a red boxy jeep, a woman in a blue tank top chewed nicotine gum while her husband cracked an egg on the dashboard. The egg was from the chicken coop of their co-owned urban farm, abandoned back in Silver Lake along with the rest of their livestock. The plastic novelty crystals hung from the rear-view mirror had melted onto the radio knobs, freezing them on an impassioned argument playing on the telenovela station. The woman at the wheel feigned apathy as she chewed, all the while eyeing the egg’s progress from behind a pair of opalescent sunglasses. The gum in her mouth had lost its flavor thirty miles ago.

“Did you wipe the dash?” she asked her husband.

He had not.

“Keith, you put your feet up there.”

¡O, mi amor! ¡Pensé que te quedarias conmigo para siempre!

“It adds flavor.”

¡Oye, paraguaya! ¡Haces trampa! ¡Mentiroso! ¡Tu corazón ladrón!

“You want to give us parasites?”

¡Eres una puta como tu madre!

“My feet don’t have parasites.”
The egg sizzled promisingly on the dashboard, but as the jeep approached the traffic jam, the yolk slid with a jolt backwards into Keith’s lap.

Just behind, a family of four from Van Nuys fought over the lyrics to “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” in a well-ventilated RV which lunged dumbly along the road. They carried, among other things, two bicycles, a barbeque cooker, three crock pots, six golf clubs, a ping pong table, an inner tube, four EZ chairs, a crooked canoe, an unfinished birdhouse, a BB gun, two coolers, a generous assortment of chips, a box of fireworks, a box of christmas lights, a golden retriever, two siamese cats, and, latched to the back, a Runabout boat with a bright orange hull. Taking only the essentials, the family had set out in pursuit of the northeast. In the crooked canoe, brother and sister arm wrestled while behind the wheel, father swore on his mistress that the happy little blue birds cry, not fly beyond the rainbow. “But why would they cry?” His wife demanded. “It’s a happy song.”

“Birds can be happy when they cry. You can be happy when you’re crying and—”

“I wouldn’t want to go somewhere where birds cried.”

“— it’s not a happy song, for your information,”

“But she’s dreaming—”

“Because she’s miserable— Jesus fuck we haven’t moved in ten minutes.”

“Daryl,” his wife hissed, her chin motioning in the direction of the teens in the canoe.

“Fucking assholes,” he said as he rested his palm on the horn.

Several cars behind, a five piece jazz band known among aging circles as the Soul Injection, had crowded into a minivan with their gear, on their way to the trumpet player’s sister’s husband’s home in El Paso, Texas. Where the drive east had been tedious for the first
few hours, now with the heat, the slow drip forward, and the ugly tempers brought about by so much closeness, it was downright intolerable.

“I need some water, man. It’s hot,” said the pianist to the clarinetist.

“He has it,” said the clarinetist of the drummer.

“I gave it to you,” said the drummer to the saxophone player.

“No, you gave it to him,” said the Saxophone player to the singer.

The singer looked down at his canteen, the final drop of which hung on the grey of his goatee. A silence spread over the band. The singer licked his lips and stared ahead, breathing. The drummer started rocking, forwards and back, tapping his knees, while the pianist chewed the inside of his mouth, threatening to bite through the gum. With a sigh, the trumpet player unsheathed his instrument, which had rested by his side between himself and the passenger door. He began to play taps, slow and somber, as the van baked in the desert heat.

“Don’t do that, man. That’s depressing,” said the pianist.

“I’m going crazy, man. Stop!” said the drummer.

“Save your spit, stupid,” said the clarinetist.

“Move!” shouted the singer. “We’ve been here an hour!”

“It’s been eight minutes,” said the drummer.

The trumpet player played faster, picking up speed and rocking forwards and backwards. The saxophone player, not wanting to be left behind, elbowed his way to his instrument, withdrew it from its case and joined in.

“Man, I shoulda left both your asses back in Beaumont,” said the clarinetist.

“If you don’t stop I’ll break your fucking arm,” said the singer from behind the wheel.
The trumpet player broke free of the somber music and began to riff, flying aggressive and dehydrated through a rapid fire of the William Tell Overture by Rossini before losing his breath and settling into a half-hearted So What.

“Why aren’t we moving?” the singer shouted over the music.

“I’m losing my mind,” pleaded the pianist.

“Move, horsefucker, go!” said the singer. “We’ve been stuck here three hours!”

“Ten minutes,” said the drummer.

“Three hours,” said the singer.

“I’m telling you it’s been ten minutes,” shouted the drummer, grinding his teeth. “I keep the time, dumbass.”

And the band inched on.

A quarter mile back, a woman was giving birth in the backseat of a Toyota. She was alone. Her companion, who had been at the wheel, was running up and down the road in search of a miracle midwife, or someone with Advil and scissors. She screamed, thrashing and tearing at the stuffing in the seats with the strength of one whose bones were warping wider and wider over the course of minutes. As the baby started to crown, the woman kicked involuntarily. Her foot went clean through the car window. This was the part in the movies when they told the mother to Push! Push! Adrenalized, she imagined a hospital around her, and started to hear it too. Give me one good push! A doctor would have told her while a nurse dabbed her forehead. She returned to the car in an instant as she heard first the quiet gasping and then crying of her baby. Push! Push! One two three push, she told herself. Just like the movies. Push! Almost there! You’re doing great. She screamed as her baby’s narrow hips passed through her and onto the car
seat. **Push! Go! Move! Move cocksucker!** The woman jolted out of her thoughts again and back into the car. Someone was shouting at her, screaming from the car behind. She heard a door slam and soon a short man with an unfortunate sunglasses tan peered through the window she’d kicked open. When he saw her, spread eagle, baby nearly through her, he shook his head.

“**At least have the decency to pull over next time.**”

One car behind, three siblings had divided the task of driving amongst themselves while Mamma took a sleep in the backseat. The littlest, Juan, curled into a ball beneath the wheel, controlled the stop and go pedals with his hands. Alicia, the middle child, sat above and turned the wheel, though she couldn’t quite keep it straight which way was left and which was right. The earthquake had come when she was halfway through learning what the different O’clocks were, so all told she was pretty useless. Big Brother navigated from the passenger seat, like a pirate or an army man, with an authority designed to inspire fear and cooperation.

“**Left. Left, Alicia!**”

“**Which one is that?**” Alicia asked Big Brother, scared of his outside voice.

“**That way! See that mountain? Mountain is left. See the fat man?**” he asked, pointing to a man who was peering critically through a broken car window. “**Fat man is right. Okay?**”

She nodded, determined to get it right and go the right left. Big Brother raised his chin.

“**Now, Alicia. Mountain! Juan, go!**”

The car rocked forward and then sped to the left in a terrifying rush which threw the siblings askew.

“**Fat man! Fat man! Juan, stop! Stop!**” cried Big Brother, putting his hands against the dashboard. Juan pressed on the stop pedal, and the car settled, inches away from rear-ending a
commercial truck in front of them. Juan and Alicia went topsy-turvy, and Big Brother fell into the steering wheel, his elbow colliding with the car horn. There was a stirring in the backseat.

“Wha?” Mamma, a phantom, groaned from the back, a thin line of drool dangling from her half-opened mouth. Three round faces peered at her from the front of the car.

“Mamma, go back to sleep.”

“She’s all blue again.”

“She needs the Nascar.”

“Narcan, stupid idiot.” Said Big Brother.

“You’re stupid!”

Mamma groaned again and collapsed across the backseat. Big Brother grabbed a plastic wrapped kit from the glove compartment. His siblings lost their curiosity at the sight of the syringe, and hid near the stop and go pedals until it was over. Big Brother withdrew the syringe from his mother’s nostril, and she began to twitch and mumble, her face still pressed against the back seat. Tired of the Driving Game, Juan crawled onto his mother’s lap and patted her face with his hand.

“Big Brother called me a stupid idiot, Mamma.”

Big Brother would have retaliated had he not been distracted by the roar of approaching motorcycles. Face and hands to the window, he watched as a cavalry of two dozen riders overtook their car, weaving in and out of traffic and off into the ravines on either side of the desert road. The engines revved in unpleasant unison across the freeway, noisy and crude, inspiring a wave of migraines, teeth grinding, and bird flipping from the surrounding cars. The riders hunched over, arms well-inked and sheathed in leather and denim, steel-toed boots resting
on shined footpegs. Across their backs, a large patch had been ironed and stitched on: two silver daggers crossed in an X, their tips each piercing a single wounded heart. An arc of text read in capital letters: *THE DIRT MARAUDERS.*

They’d been on the road since dawn, riding out from Laguna and bound for the Bonneville Salt Flats up in Utah. Their leader at the head of the pack was a middle-aged woman with a slick side-buzz and a crooked nose. Her hands wrapped powerful around the silver ape hanger handlebars of her bike, her fingernails painted black. Another woman sat directly behind her, her arms wrapped around the pack leader’s torso. The pack leader revved her engine and dodged a car which swerved through the gaps in the two eastward lanes.

“Learn to drive, Helen Keller!” she shouted, steering off the road into the gravely trench alongside the traffic. Her backseat partner held onto her waist tightly, watching the desert fly by beneath her feet. She squeezed her legs against her lover and groaned.

“Babe, I gotta piss,” she said, leaning into the pack leader’s ear.

“I asked you back in El Monte if you had to go and you said you didn’t,” said the pack leader.

“I didn’t then. Please, babe, just pull over. I’ll go out here—”

“You had your chance in El Monte.”

“Cunt.”

“If you piss on this bike, you’re walking to Utah.”

The backseat woman rolled her eyes and moved to raise her middle finger in front of her lover’s face. As she did, a car door swung open directly into the path of the motorcycle. The couple hit it head on, and the door flew off, a clean break. The bike went High-Side, skidding
into the trench, silver sparks flying. The leader of the pack barrel-rolled onto the gravel, arms over her face, eyes shut. Her lover went airborne, landing on the hood of a pick-up truck with tapestries piled up in the back and a family of five asylum seekers well-hidden beneath them. When she came to, her eyes looked towards the sky. Stars eddied and spun in her eyes, winking through a rush of tears. Her right fibula stuck out through her tight blue jeans, but she wouldn’t feel it for another several minutes. Unable to turn her head, she watched the sky and its snow of watery stars a while longer, shivering. On the ground, her lover’s stomach was peppered with turf burns, raspberry red, though nothing was broken. Her bike, which had skidded into a dusty desert shrub, was trashed.

A stout woman emerged from the car with the liberated door. She hustled a ways down the road to where the pack leader lay and stepped over her, a foot on either side. She gripped the wounded pack leader’s shoulders in her hands and shook her.

“Look what you did to my fucking car!”

The two occupants of the van parked alongside this scene did not take notice of their violent neighbor. One of them, an elderly man, sat crying in the backseat. Blind from diabetes, overheated and fragile-tempered, he was trying to escape the van. After attempting to wriggle out and signal for help at nearly every rest stop, he’d finally managed to get his seatbelt undone. His granddaughter steadied the wheel with her feet and leaned back towards him. Tears slipped from his clouded eyes as his hands swung this way and that, tearing at the seat belt, beating on the door, clawing his nails down his face. As his sight had atrophied, he’d developed a habit of perceiving in his mind’s eye his own persecution: he was hunted, stalked, laughed at, abandoned, or held at knifepoint and left for dead, sometimes all at once.
“Granddad, stay still.”

“Get me out! Get me out!” the old man sobbed. “I don’t wanna burn up!”

“Granddad, you’re not burning up—”

“They’re cooking me alive! I’ve got nobody to help me! Nobody to help me! There’s no time!”

His granddaughter tried to subdue him, to silence him with a familial coo and a firm and steadying hand on his shoulder. Feeling her touch upon him, the old man grabbed ahold of her right wrist and forearm. He had a carpenter’s grip, steady and precise, his uncut nails digging into his granddaughter’s skin. He began to squeeze.

“Grandad— Grandad that hurts. Let go! Let go of me!”

“You can’t kill me! Not that easy— not me!” At that, his wrists twisted sharply. Had it not been for sudden banging on the van’s exterior, he might have broken her arm. An alarming chorus of hands slapped and hit the windows and doors of the van, trying to get the young woman’s attention. Her grandfather let go of her and covered his face, crying again, perturbed by this new threat. A number of hateful voices spoke to them from the outside.

“Move! Move your ass! Move!”

“Get out of the way! Out of the way!”

“For fucksake lady move it!”

“ Fucking fuckstick!”

“Fucking potato brain!”

“Fucking dipshit!”

“Fucking jizz box!”
The sound of an approaching ambulance could be heard through the van walls. The grandfather began to cry. “Don’t hurt me! Don’t hurt me!” the old man begged, reaching for his granddaughter’s hand again.

The woman threw the van into drive and pulled off the road, following a few dozen other cars to clear a path. The two neat rows of cars split and skewed, with most off-roading, nearly bumping into each other, trying to drive around the traffic jam and getting caught up in unpaved ruts.

Outside the ambulance raced past the woman and her backseat baby, the narcan recipient, the motorcycle accident, past all of the stopped cars, directly towards the heart of it all: the source of the blockage. A few drivers tried to wave it down, tried to get its attention. They held their babies up in the air and blew their horns. The rest got out of their cars and stood delirious on the road, watching it pass. With nothing else to do, they began to follow.

Something had happened, something just beyond the bend in the road, just beyond their line of sight, and they’d get to the bottom of it. Whoever had blocked them on their way, whoever had made them sit in that heat for so many minutes, marinating in their own sweat, they’d make them pay. The trickle of ambulance chasers grew into a mob, egged on by curiosity, by fear, and a mounting rage.

At last the ambulance stopped at the front of the traffic jam. The crowd climbed up a slope in the road, and there it was. A single car, dark green with a wooden finish on the doors and a vintage rectangle-frame, had skidded, rolled, and landed upside down, blocking both lanes of traffic. The bumper and hood of the car, warped and mangled, had been thrown aside,
revealing an engine accordioned beyond repair. There, in the front seat, a woman in her early
sixties hung upside down, still belted in, dead as dandruff.

On the other side of the road, the empty side which snaked westward past the mob and
their stranded automobiles, a noisy compact approached the scene. It idled for a moment,
studying the crowd from behind a half-open window. Had one looked closely, away from the
dead woman and the hushed horde gathering around her, they might have noticed, in a swift and
unremarkable instant, a man poke his squarish head out of the compact. He squinted, mouth
agape, searching the accident for something. To his apparent relief, he did not find it. As the first
responders roped off the scene and waved the crowd back, the head retreated quickly. The
window rolled up, the gears shifted, and the car sped west for Los Angeles.
I

Two things happened, quickly. First, Ben’s mother called from Los Angeles. She was dying. And she needed him. Second, the phone company, whose bill had gone unpaid for three months took a stand, put their foot down, and cut his mother’s phone line. Ben stood in his living room blinking. He re-dialed twice, and each time the call bounced back, dead as dandruff. He dove for the landline on the kitchen counter and misdialed once before getting the number right. Three high, ascending tones sounded in his ear, then an automated voice which explained that the number he’d dialed had been disconnected. There was more to the message, but Ben didn’t wait to hear it. He left the phone sideways on the counter, grabbed his car keys, and ran to his bedroom to put on pants.

Superficially, Ben was a grown-up; the sort of man for whom it was difficult to imagine ever having been a child, much less a young person. The very shape of him, the rounding of his belly, the short spikes he gelled into his thinning hair, and the skin which had accumulated to form both of his chins — the second of which appeared only when he grinned or frowned when inspecting the state of his belly— obscured quite well the fact that Ben was just shy of thirty. He was a big man, not in size as much as in attitude, in the contrapposto, the relaxed ease through which he appeared to assess, handle, and order his affairs. A fixer by trade, Ben worked in IT at a local university and repaired laptops on the side. He was the kind of man who at restaurants finished a meal and asked his wife, “Are we ready to rock and roll?” It seemed that Ben was always ready to ‘rock and roll.’

In his bedroom now, he tripped in the dark. The room was a mess. Laundry in each corner, several copies of the Phoenix New Times lying half-read on the floor, and an impressive
pile of mail spilling across the dresser. It had the look and smell of a schlubby bachelor pad, save for the crib half built at the foot of the bed, and the immaculate ordering of his wife’s bedside table; a book, reading glasses well folded, nighttime medicine, and a glass of water. Ben found a pair of brown shorts, clean enough for the road. Fully clothed, he retrieved his emergency pair of sneakers from beneath the bed.

Lacing his shoes, Ben paused a moment, tracing over his mother’s words as he had heard them spoken over the phone; the words which had with a surreal ease broken five years of estrangement. Her voice had been tinged with a humility wholly novel to her son, grown and hardened to her. It was a shock she still had his number, much less that she was able to dial the phone and speak so sincerely. Her breathing was burdened by dry sobs, and she had bulldozed over his questions with the same four words: “It’s not looking good. It’s not looking good, you have to help me baby, it’s not looking good.”

There had been an earthquake out West a few days before, Ben knew that much. 6.9, or something like that, though he was not familiar with the scale. Severely fucked, someone at work the day before had described it. Another had tried to show Ben photos of the Hollywood sign, which had been rattled so hard its letters now spelt a corny and ironic H O L Y. Where he’d been mildly concerned at the mention of the quake, now the dots connected and the situation crystalized. The danger was real, and his mother was in the middle of it. A score of thoughts rushed at him, his mother wretched and without dignity, buried alive beneath collapsed buildings, struck by falling beams, shocked by power lines, knifed by looters, starved, strangled, humiliated and uninsured.
He turned to the dresser and knelt down to the bottom drawer. Inside, an assortment of documents labeled IMPORTANT, car registration, his birth certificate, high school diploma, piled on top of each other. Ben leafed through, tossing them onto the bed until he found what he was looking for. An envelope, yellowing from age and torn open carelessly, sat flattened at the bottom of the drawer. It had carried the very last correspondence he’d had with his mother, some five years prior. He flipped to the back for the return address. 2916 Arcadia— the rest had been ripped away when the letter had been opened. “Near the Stadium,” she’d told him once, though he was not sure which one. He was gambling that she still lived there, of course, but it was better than nothing.

As he went to shove the envelope in his pocket, a panic rushed at him, caught him off guard, and took the wind out of him. He hung there, crouched on the floor for a moment, eyes shut.

“Fuck her,” he said. “Fuck her.”

He rose to his feet, tucked in his t-shirt, and walked out, leaving the papers askew on the bed. In the kitchen, he found a scrap of mail, on the back of which he wrote, “Rachel, Mom trouble, real this time. Will call you from the road. Love, Ben.” He left the note on the counter where he knew she’d see it, put his keys and wallet in his pockets, and ran out.

That Ben drove straight from Phoenix to Los Angeles in the middle of the night was not a decision he made lightly: it just happened. It just happened in the way that water flows out of a dam once the dam wall breaks down. It was in this same way that Ben moved, floated really, from dark home to driver’s seat, started the car, and backed out onto the road which led to the freeway.
Theirs had been a well-practiced, disciplined estrangement, beginning at the moment his mother realized that her son would no longer prop her up, bail her out, dry her eyes, or cash her bad checks. For her, it was common sense—no use drawing from a well that’s run dry—but for her son, her only son, the math was not as simple. Knowledge that he could not save his mother from herself, from drink and subsequent destitution, was only tolerable when he realized that she would kill him before she killed herself. The woman had ceased to be his mother a long time ago, in an era sealed off to Ben like the moment before concussion. That mother was a relic; his adolescence reeked of all she could not give him, and the long walk into adulthood, into marriage, mortgage, the great improvisation of fatherhood which approached him sooner and sooner each day had placed an ocean in between him and the woman whose hand had in another life rested steady on his head as he slept.

This is what people do, Ben reasoned. When mothers are dying, only sons drop everything and rush to their sides. Night spread over Phoenix and the surrounding the desert. It was August. Monsoon, as it was known among the locals. As Ben merged onto the I-10, that long corridor which stretched from Tallahassee to the Santa Monica bay, a parapet of clouds lounged on the southwestern horizon, lobbing lightning across the sky. Over the Agua Fria River, past the Loop 303, the road broke free of Phoenix proper and into a stretch of suburbs and sprawl. Eventually, the pavement surrendered to the desert, and Phoenix disappeared in the last nod of twilight. Ben settled in, grateful to the leaking exhaust and aging engine’s huffing and heaving. At least the car was louder than whatever lurked beyond the path of his headlights. The road’s sameness and the night heat made monsters out of even the gentlest rustle of unseen
coyote, tumbleweed, long-limbed cacti, hairy scorpion, horned jackrabbit. “For the love of God,” he spoke to the roar of his engine. “Don’t die out here. Get me to LA, then we’ll talk.”

The drive from Phoenix to Los Angeles takes at best some six to seven hours, depending on the approach. A long southerly skirt down the I-8 West passes a stone’s throw away from the southern border before rising up through San Diego and then along the coastal palisades on I-5 North. For those with less time to lose, the I-10 is a nearly straight shot East to West, the way of the conquistadors, the pioneers of Westward Expansion, the forty-niners, the Okies, the Deadheads, the Doors, the Didions, and the screenwriters.

Uncreatively, Ben hated Los Angeles. Like many who hate Los Angeles, however, he’d never been. Why his mother had chosen to settle there in her golden years baffled him, though she’d made worse choices before. Even in photographs he could tell the place reeked. On the phone with her in her lucid, quasi-sober moments when she first moved out West, his mother had spoken of it with the nostalgia of a hostage situation; surges of high intensity—radical wind, freak surf accidents, celebrity sightings—obscured the reality of marathon commutes, unending concrete, and the tolerated despair of the homeless. All this seemed to comprise the daily grind, written off as facts of life on that final frontier. It seemed a risky city. After enough time, each transplant was baptized into the local fold by some disaster or another. They sucked oxygen out of the air at parties, slouching against the drywall of someone else’s apartment, cold drink in hand, shrugging knowingly when someone makes the grave mistake of asking how they could stand to live there for so long, where fires, mudslides, flooding, drought, inflation, cult warfare, water shortages, untreated sewage, smog poisoning, corruption, and now earthquakes threatened to level the city and cast it unsentimentally into the sea. Ben laughed at the thought of them
pausing at this inevitable question, lowering their gaze with a rugged thoughtfulness to stare at
the ice which thinned their drink. “In the end, it’s all a gamble,” they’d say. “Living in fear is no
way to live at all.” Perhaps that was why his mother was drawn so strongly to this place; all one
had to do to belong was to master the art of the lie.

Nearly midnight, Ben turned off the main road into a small city called Quartzsite, whose
sign announced it to be the Rock Capital of the World. It was the last gas he’d find before the
California border, and probably the last cell phone service. Ben pulled into a family-owned gas
station, well-crowded despite the hour, with a line of cars waiting for each pump. Pulling up in
line, Ben took inventory. His wallet held sixty dollars, plus a few extra singles he’d stored for
tolls in the glove compartment. Up front he had a few bottles of water, a baseball cap, and a few
CDs. In the trunk, a spare tire, and a blanket. After he gassed up, Ben parked on the street and
took out his phone. He dialed and held his breath.

“Where the Hell are you?” Rachel laid into him. “Where are you going?”

“It’s my Mother—”

“I know, I know, I saw your note but— Ben, what are you doing? You can’t just pick up
and go. What if something happened— I’m a fucking whale right now, you can’t just take off.”

Ben swallowed.

“We’ve talked about this,” she continued. “We’ve worked through this: you can’t drop
everything for her again.”

“I know— I know, I know we have— I know. She— Look, she called me—”

“She called you?”
“Yes— she called me and said she needed help— she was in trouble—”

“What kind of help?”

“Rachel, if you’d just let me talk— she didn’t say exactly but— but there was something in her voice. She didn’t sound… she sounded clear, almost. Like she was maybe better and— and it sounded like she really was in trouble so I thought maybe—”

“Maybe what— you’d patch things up?”

“No— no. Nothing like that—”

“— Ben!” His wife took a breath. “Remember what happened last time she pulled something like this? The ‘I’m dying’ showcase? We can’t do this again, honey. You can’t.”

“It’s different. I heard her talking.” He paused. “And I’m different this time. I know what I’m doing. If anything about it stinks I’ll be back sooner than—”

“— if for some reason she actually is dying— this is what lawyers are for. They handle these kinds of arrangements—”

“I don’t know where she is,” Ben snapped, harsher than he meant to. “I don’t— and if she’s dying— I think I’d like to… I’d like to know.”

There was a long silence on the other line. “Alright, alright. Call me when you get there, okay?” Ben didn’t answer. “Please, Ben. Call me.”

“I will.”

“Will you be back for the appointment?”

“The appointment?” Ben said, a beat too slow.

“Yes, Ben, yes the appointment. On Monday. You didn’t forget it, did you?”

“Oh— oh right— the appointment!” Ben lied. “I remember.”
“Yes, well, I need you there, Ben. I really do.”

“I’ll be there. I’ll be back.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

The coffee machine was broken, so Ben settled for soda. He strolled through the aisles of the gas station Food Mart, rubbing his eyes.

“We’re out of California,” a voice said from behind. A man with sunglasses resting forgotten on his forehead carried a sleeping child in his arms. He was speaking to another, older child, who concentrated on a row of packaged pastries and gums. “It’ll only be a few more hours and then we’ll be at Grandma’s.”

“When are we going back?” the child asked, picking up a swirling custard and then putting it back.

“Not for a while, angel. Not until things settle down.”

“What about school?” she picked up the custard again and the one behind it, trying to determine by a measurement of millimeters which one was bigger.

“No school for a while, yeah?” the man said. “We’ll figure out school when we get to Grandma’s.” He adjusted the child in his arms.

“Excuse me,” Ben spoke to the man. “Whereabouts are you coming from?”

“Los Angeles,” the older child answered, having made the final pick of custard.

“What’s— Excuse me for asking this but what’s the situation like... out there?”
“Helter Skelter,” the child said, matter of fact, before turning to her father. “Papa, will you braid my hair?” Her father took her hand and they left without buying any custard. Ben watched them go, slightly dizzy and suddenly very anxious. He shook the child’s words away and got in line to pay for his soda. A man stood behind the register, chewing gum. A woman with a perm sat beside him, playing lottery scratch-offs.

The man behind the register laughed. “You headed that way?”

“Excuse me?” said Ben.

“To LA?”

“That’s the plan.”

There was a murmur around them: a couple behind him whispered, a man behind them snorted. A young girl in red who examined the assortments of road maps for sale paused and glanced at Ben. She quickly returned to her maps, clearly listening.

“I hope you have a good fucking reason, friend,” the man behind the register said, laughing. “I don’t think you’ll find much left of it.” Ben felt eyes upon him. The door jingled open. The AC rattled. The woman playing scratch-offs cursed and threw her losing cards down. Ben took his receipt, pissed in a doorless stall, and left to find a place to sleep for a few hours in his car.

Parked in a public lot, it took a while before Ben could sleep. A monsoon blew through Quartzsite and pounded on his roof like a deluge. He was up at sunrise. An hour down the road, through a clay mountain range, the Colorado river appeared. It was a tamed waterway, cemented banks on either side with tufts of dry weeds, and Ben passed over it without a hitch, engine roaring all the way across.
The drive itself was a reprieve; the sameness of the desert, the lull of dehydrated miles, the occasional bend through yellow hills speckled with soft green weeds all required nothing from Ben but to remain on the road which would lead eventually to the rest of the world. The sun rose in his rearview mirrors and he kept ahead of it, tearing across the desert in his screeching compact. To stay sharp and alert for so many hours on the narrow freeways which bisect the California desert was no simple task. Out here, Ben got the sense that anything was possible. Somehow the sky was even bigger than the one they had in Arizona, which loomed large with haughty sunsets and flash floods. That sky was not as impressive as this wide, empty disk of blue stretched above the dry earth, where life emerged in audacity and remained through grisly stubbornness, and only sons tested their grit, crossing through a whole wasteland with nothing but a mysterious and never-visited address, the potential for a familiar face, for reconciliation or forgiveness or at the very least some understanding waiting on the other side. It was in this way that the desert policed its population, through rain that came in hot flashes, through soaring heat, thorned fruits, poisonous flowers, scaly bedfellows baking in dust from whirlwinds, tarantulas hunting on chapped rocks, red and orange and chalky white. It was pretty in the same way that clouds are pretty even as they carry storms and winds strong enough to blow the whole farm away. Upon that empty expanse, a person could paint in broad strokes the most outrageous colors of the mind. This desert was whatever a person wanted it to be, for in it lay the full scope of possibility, housed within a hostile body. No man is an island, yes, but in each man there is a desert, teeming with the drama of life, rich and unseen, and full of wide spaces, some of which are never, ever touched.
This was California. Or the start of it. Ben knew it was a big state, bigger than most. He imagined this place through his mother’s eyes, as she must have seen it some thirty years prior when she’d crossed it for the first time, braids in her hair, just married and five months pregnant, Phoenix bound. Ben had been with her then, or some blueprint of Ben, riding upside down across the desert. As the road dipped out of another nondescript mountain range and he faced another stretch of flat desert, he could almost see her, bare feet on the dashboard, window down despite the heat, talking and talking and talking. What had she seen, besides everything that lay beyond this desert, everything waiting for her once she crossed it? And two decades later, when she abandoned Arizona and crossed it again, west this time and riding shotgun with a beau who wouldn’t last, on funds which would run out, with an impenetrability, an unbreakable faith in herself which would fizzle out until the next toast. What had she seen then? Had she seen here some mirage of her son, watching her fold away into the steam which rose from the asphalt, stomping out the cigarettes she flicked out the window at the parched Joshua Trees? Ben shook this away. It was indulgent. She didn’t think about him, then or now.

Ben crossed through towns which sprouted out directly from gas stations and convenience stores, their services advertised for miles and miles in either direction. The closer he got to Los Angeles, the heavier the eastward traffic became. Ben passed a grizzly pile-up, a flipped car surrounded by crowds of travelers, their faces baroque and dazed. Closer to Indio and the Coachella Valley came a greater shock. He’d been fidgeting with the radio, trying to locate the Classic Rock station, when a shape appeared in his periphery. A car was driving on the wrong side of the road. Ben swerved sharp, veering off onto the dirt shoulder. The car kept going
on the wrong side, honking. *So this is California,* Ben thought to himself. Lawless in the name of convenience. For the first time in his life, Ben used his horn.

Signs began to appear more frequently. RUBY’S THROWBACK DINER, MANHATTAN IN THE DESERT, B&B, GASOLINE, MARY JANE, HURT AT WORK? NEED A LAWYER? MEDICATION? A MEDIUM? And finally: LOS ANGELES.... 135 MILES. Civilization beckoned, and the earth was no longer a slab for the unfettered imagination. All the real estate was bought up, the buildings and piping erected, the industries monopolized. Ben breathed a sigh of relief. The worst was over.

The I-10 carried Ben through San Bernardino, and he bought gas and coffee and fried eggs over hard, which he ate on his lap in three scorched bites. His car was wheezing by now, stressed from the journey. It was Saturday, not quite mid-morning. Traffic on the opposite side of the freeway was practically stopped. He passed a car with two women sunbathing on their stomachs, feet up. On a grey van, Ben began to read the words “LORD HAVE MERCY ON US SINNERS: HE HATH WROUGHT—” but he was moving too quickly and could not read the rest. A white compact blasted reggaeton so loud the bass shook the car. Directly behind, Ben saw a woman changing a baby’s diaper, and hurling the used one out the window and onto the shoulder.

West Covina, El Monte, Monterey Park, came in stops and starts. More signs emerged, zip-tied to overpass signs and flashing on orange traffic screens: “DONATION BANK: BLANKETS, CLOTHES, CANNED GOODS,” “OPEN BEDS AT COVENANT ST. SHELTER,” “RED CROSS VOLUNTEERS NEEDED,” “O-, O+ BLOOD NEEDED,” “SEARCH AND RESCUE NEEDED.” A helicopter flew overhead. He pulled over for two
ambulances and a firetruck to pass. Ben flashed by hitchhikers who slouched on the opposite side of the road, thumbs out, trying to put miles in between themselves and wherever it was that they’d come from. Some were clean, in good spirits. Others less so. Ben saw a truck stop for a woman carrying a dog in her arms. As she climbed inside, she began to cry.

The city was coming on now. A sign told Ben to keep left for the Los Angeles River. The closer he got, the more precarious the road became, with cement debris spilling out on all sides. The walls which flanked both sides of the freeway stood in various states of collapse.

A lone cluster of skyscrapers emerged on the horizon, and Ben was mortified, until he remembered that Los Angeles did not have very many skyscrapers to begin with. Still, the disaster became more and more apparent as he continued. He slowed to a crawl as the traffic funneled into one narrow lane to bypass a group of yellow-vested men working to clear the remains of a fallen overpass. Through the collapsed portions of the walls, Ben caught glimpses of shattered intersections, cars wrapped around telephone poles, telephone poles lying atop cars. The Los Angeles Police, or their outer-region equivalent, stalked the streets in black patrol cars, casting whole neighborhoods in the red and blue strobes of emergency.

In a quick maneuver, the freeway split in two. Ben kept left on the I-10 as it curved sharply towards the south. He was close. He pulled his phone out and began to plug in the address to his GPS, tapping the keys and glancing up every other second at the traffic. As he began to type out Arcadia, two red lights in the shape of a water droplet and a lightning bolt began flashing in unison upon his dashboard. The words CHECK ENGINE appeared shortly after. Ben looked up and yanked the wheel, having nearly veered into another lane. He began to sweat.
Here, the concrete lanes of the I-10, the I-5, and the 101 freeways intersected, like three fates tangled together in a concrete braid. It was there, with lanes above and lanes below, that Ben’s engine gasped and sputtered as the car began to slow. Ben pulled sharply over to the shoulder beside the fast lane, threw it into park, jumped out of the car, and ran. Not knowing much about cars, Ben took the red lights as some sign that the engine was set to explode, and the farther away he could get, the better. Adrenalized, he could see himself from above, running over shards of broken glass and food wrappers and smashed CDs which littered the shoulder. He got fifty yards away before he began to run out of breath, so he got down on his knees, curled into a ball, plugged his ears, and braced for impact.

The car did not explode. It did not even smoke. Quick and without much fanfare, it died. After a minute or so crouched on the road, Ben lifted his head, unplugged his ears, and slowly turned around, bracing for the moment that the whole thing would blow, and shards of metal and flaming tire would tear his head off. He’d go out in a tremendous blaze, a hero taken before his time. The blaze did not come. He got up on his feet, brushing off the gravel from his long cargo shorts, and walked back to the car.

“Shit.” Ben said, climbing back inside and attempting to start the engine. No luck. Just around the bend, the freeway crossed over the cement trench called the Los Angeles River, the water border which marked the start of the city.

Ben climbed out and began to wave to the cars which charged by. No one stopped, though one woman in a convertible screamed at him to get out of the road. In the distance he could see an oncoming police car, sirens blaring, which also did not stop, clearly on its way to some other calamity. Ben pulled a small bag out of the glove compartment which held a set of
reflective orange triangles. He got out of the car and began to prop them up around his vehicle, in the hopes that this small gesture might ward off further trouble, or at least get someone’s attention. He then sat on the freeway divider beside his car, pulling at his hair. In the midday sun, the gel he’d applied to his scalp in Arizona dissolved into the sweat which slid down the back of his neck.

Across four lanes of traffic, the road sloped up on a hill covered in whatever vegetation could grow amid the daily assault of car runoff. He found himself staring at the foliage, watching it shift in the breeze, candy wrappers and soda bottles caught up in the lower leaves. After a few minutes, the slope began to move. Ben squinted. There was an unmistakable rustling in the dry brush, one here, and another there. It dawned on Ben quite suddenly: he was not alone here.

Out of this brush, three figures emerged. It was bright out, and Ben had to squint to make out their features. Together, they began to scramble down the slope. They were not the kind of men one expected to emerge from the dusty bushes by the freeway, not haggard or shirtless. They moved in unison, stepping and sliding down the hill, large red jugs in their hands. As they got to the bottom of the slope, Ben realized they were each masked in balaclavas.

The three stared at him, directly at him, standing side by side on the lip of the freeway. None of the four men moved on either end, their gazes fixed on one another. Ben lifted a hand and gave a puny wave, pursing his lips in acknowledgment. Two of them, the ones standing on the outside, dressed in blacks and greys, were fairly thin. The one in the middle wore a navy blue t-shirt, his bulky arms stretching the sleeves. He was much shorter than the others. They continued staring, until one of the skinny men turned his head to look at the oncoming traffic. He turned back to the others and nodded. With a remarkable ease, the pack began to walk across the
freeway, missing cars by mere moments without breaking their slow and steady gait. All the time, they never stopped staring at Ben.

When they reached the shoulder, they walked right by him, setting their attention instead on Ben’s car. He fumbled with his keys to lock it, though the inside wasn’t what they were after. To Ben’s amazement, the three pressed opened the fuel dock, funneled a long plastic tube inside, and with their lips began to siphon gas out of his tank and into their red containers. All of this they did without a word.

“Excuse me? Excuse me? What are you— stop that! Stop!” Ben put his hands on one of their shoulders, the shorter one who oversaw the funneling, but was quickly rebuffed. One of the skinnier men shoved him without even turning to look, and the three clustered tighter together.

“I’m gonna call the cops, assholes! This is theft. This is theft.” Ben could feel his face heating up in the confrontation. He looked around for someone to intervene on his behalf, but the cars kept on towards the river, not even slowing down to watch. Ben approached again.

“Listen, I don’t know what the fuck you’re—” he stopped as the shorter man in blue turned towards him, looking him in the eyes through his homemade balaclava. He reached up and placed one hand on Ben’s shoulder, and stuck the other into his pants pocket. When he withdrew the hand again it held a pocket knife, which he opened with an artful flick of the wrist. The blade caught the sun for a moment, and Ben sealed his lips. The man showed off this knife with an air of indifference, almost friendliness, as though he meant no harm, wishing only that Ben understood his own position. The man patted Ben’s shoulder twice, closed the blade, and returned to his work siphoning the gasoline out of the tank.
Ben stepped away from the men and tried again to flag someone down, though he had a feeling that no one would stop. Noble as it had felt at first, the truth was, he had driven three hundred miles alone into a disaster zone on a whim. Even if he could call for help, help was not coming. Ben kicked over the orange triangle he’d set up so carefully and watched a windowless van run right over it, smashing it to pieces beneath the weight of the tires.

The pack had nearly siphoned the entire tank when one of the skinny men stepped away and began peering into the windows of the car. He wrapped his hand around the handle, but the trunk was locked. He turned to Ben.

“Open it,” the skinny man demanded.

Ben began to protest, but the shorter man with the knife raised his head to stare at him through his beady little eye holes, his hand hovering above his pocket. Defeated, Ben reached for his keys. With a click, the trunk popped open, and he watched as the three masked men turned together, and lifted it high to begin their excavation.

They froze. A beat went by, and they remained still, huddled together, stunned. Five seconds later, the spell broke and the three men quickly withdrew, as though an electric current had run through each of them simultaneously.

“Jesus Christ!” the short one shouted, falling onto his back, scrambling away from the car. The knife clattered out of his pocket and onto the ground. The others knelt down and hoisted him up onto his feet, and the three sprinted back across the freeway, nearly dropping their red jugs and plastic tube. A pick-up truck screeched and turned sharp into another lane, nearly mowing them down. When they made it to the other side, the short one turned to Ben again and called from across four lanes.
“We’re gonna remember your face!”

With that they turned and ran up the green slope, and disappeared into the shabby brush.

Turning towards his car, Ben noticed a stirring among the debris of his trunk. Someone, or something was alive in there. Tensing, Ben picked up the fallen pocket knife and approached. To his astonishment, he watched as a young woman, eyes wide like some bewildered Venus, emerged from the inside of his trunk, looked about her, and began to climb out.
II

The first thing Ben could say for sure was that he’d seen her before. The second was that she was close to fainting. He’d recognized her straight away: the round face which had turned to look at him, ears burning, when he’d mentioned in Quartzsite his plans to go west. Here was that same young girl, likely no older than fifteen, clutching a ratty blanket he’d stored in the back. She stared at Ben, a thousand-yard stare, her eyes sunken in with what appeared to be an intense fever. Her lips had chapped, her features drawn and severe, her two braids half-undone and knotted.

At this point, Ben’s shirt was soaked on both sides with sweat, and he could feel the first blush of a sunburn spreading on the back of his neck. As he approached her she withdrew, pressing herself back into the trunk, her dark brown eyes rounding like spoons. Ben stopped and put both of his hands up in front of him. The wind picked up. A fire truck thundered by. The morning turned to afternoon. Ben broke the silence.

“What the Hell are you doing in my trunk?” he asked, the only logical question he could think of. It was the wrong question, and he knew it right away. The young woman could barely hold herself upright, sweat beads dotting her mottled forehead. She looked at Ben weakly, opened her mouth to speak, and instead began to cry. The rhythm of her tears shook her whole body, each sob a small blow on her fragile frame. Ben shifted, fixed his face, and shook his hands frantically. “No, no, hey— it’s okay. It’s okay. I’m sorry— Look, I’m not mad. I’m not— Wait. Here. Stay right there.”
Ben darted around the side of the car and retrieved a bottle of warm water. She stared at his hand, her eyes tracing up his arm and to his face again. “Take it,” he said, unscrewing the small cap. “Please.”

She did, with great effort, struggling to hold the bottle up to her lips. She drank it down with a feral thirst, a third of the bottle running down her chin and into her lap.

“Do you want more? I’ve got another one.” Ben’s eyes darted about him in the viscous noon heat, aware at once at how the situation must have looked to the cars which flashed by. She shook her head, her eyes fixed on Ben, and as she did, her upper body began to sway. She leaned forward, face clouding over, eyes rolling, and as she lost consciousness, her body lurched forward and nearly fell out of the trunk.

Ben lunged, catching her by the shoulders. She went completely limp in his arms, like some dead thing. He lifted her back into the trunk, laying her on her side, then turned to the shoulder to flag someone down. Three or four cars darted by, nobody stopping for him. He ran back to her to reassess. The heat of the road and sheer lack of water would only make her condition worse. If she was going to recover, they had to get a move on.

All thoughts of his mother and his original mission had left him. He turned from the girl, took her wrists in his hands, and hoisted her up onto his back. With a groan, a push, and a strength which surprised him, he pulled her up onto his shoulder, turned around, and shut the trunk. Running around to the front of the car, he grabbed his wallet, his keys, two bottles of water, and a baseball cap. He adjusted the stowaway on his shoulders, her legs dangling over his chest, and began to run down the road. About a hundred yards away, he turned to his car again,
dead as dandruff on the shoulder, pointed his keys and locked it. He replaced his keys in his pocket and began to run towards the river, panting at each foot fall.

Around the corner of the freeway it was a straight shot to the river. The shoulder narrowed and the traffic swelled, drifting from four lanes into two. Had he not been half-blind with the sweat falling into his eyes or the rise and fall of the child over his shoulders, he might have noticed sooner that traffic was stopped. He ran alongside the cars, and drivers rolled down their windows and honked their horns at him. Ben shouted breathlessly at the cars, trying to get someone’s eyes.

“Emer-gency! I need-a doctor! I need-a doctor-please!”

The freeway turned to a ramp and Ben traveled up above the streets towards the bridge which served as a gateway into Los Angeles. Through a mess of shaggy palm trees and electrical towers leaning eskew, the cityscape stretched ahead, farther than could be seen in the smog and ashy smoke which rose above the sky scrapers, and the crouching lower buildings. It was less a traffic jam and more a parking lot; half cars were being directed off the road, and the other half had been parked and abandoned. Ahead, he could make out the cement trench of the Los Angeles River below the ramp. In between, a swarm of people milled and seethed. Men and women and children crowded together, shouting at one another, shouting over each other’s heads, conspiring, and climbing over the barriers which split the east and west arteries of the I-10.

Everyone was talking, quickly. Ben counted four different languages spoken on either side of him as he walked among the throng. A woman walked in between the lines of cars and hocked off long kebabs of mystery meat, grilled black and brown on a pushable cart. Another
handed out pink fliers which bore a series of faces beneath the word MISSING. Several police
officers with silver whistles between their lips did crowd control, trying to move the people off
the road. Everyone took photos. Ben and the unconscious girl were nearly knocked to the ground
by two slender women who fought one another for a shady umbrella. He dodged the fight and
walked by an older man with a salt and pepper beard who yelled into a phone, trying to describe
where exactly in the crowd he was standing. A suntanned woman swung her purse at a horde of
teenagers who had climbed on top of her car, parked off on the left side of the freeway. Ben
pushed his way through the masses, holding steady the limp young stowaway on his shoulder. To
his surprise, no one paid them much mind. Up ahead he spotted the night blue of a police
officer’s hat, bobbing above the crowd. Grunting, he moved towards it.

“You have to let me in,” a man in a baseball cap shouted at the young police officer
whose hands rested nonchalant upon his belt buckle. Ben’s eyes flashed at the man’s gun, locked
by a leather seal next to a taser, a baton, and a pair of handcuffs.

“I’m afraid I can’t do that, Sir,” said the officer.

“You’ve got people out there anyway,” he pointed to the other policemen and women
who scrambled up and down banks of the river trench, slipping over the refuse and rubble which
had accumulated there in the shallow water. On the other side, more civilians tried to wade into
the water and swim away from the city. They were quickly apprehended.

“Those are police officers. They’re inspecting the damage—”

“How am I supposed to get to my kids? They’re all the way in Culver fucking City. Can’t
you just get me in there?”

“I’m sorry, Sir. There’s no access here. There’s access down—”
“—down the river, down the river. Everyone’s trying to get in down the river. I’m trying to get in here. You want me to walk along the fucking railroad?” He gestured wildly to the railroad tracks which ran parallel to the trench.

A cluster of civilians had gathered around the two men by then and began shouting at the police officer, who remained stone faced. A shove came from the small crowd, then another, and soon the cluster was rolling around in on the gravel. Two more officers jumped on the pile, batons drawn, trying to break it up. Ben walked down further still towards where the freeway bridge crossed over the river, talking calmly to the unconscious girl, “Stay cool. Stay cool. You’re okay. We’re okay.”

Then Ben saw it; the reason for the traffic and the restless masses. Up ahead a wall of officers stood behind black bikes, locked together to form a barrier. Fifty feet beyond them, where the road was meant to continue up, over the river, and down towards the city’s Downtown area, the I-10 freeway turned to air. The entire bridge had collapsed.

Ben approached the barrier, soaked with sweat and burned from the sun, the child balanced on his shoulder. A petite officer with hair pulled back in a neat bun beneath her cap made eye contact and stared at him. Relieved at her attention, situation poured out of him as he approached her.

“Excuse me— Listen, this girl needs a hospital. She’s really weak and— and now she’s not waking up— I don’t know what’s wrong with her but— she needs a doctor.”

The officer turned left to her colleague, a man standing a comical three heads taller than herself. He knelt down as she whispered in his ear. As he listened, his face scrunched up, and the overgrown unibrow above his eyes furrowing. He nodded and turned to another officer, directly
to his left, and so on until all of the blue capped heads kept turning to and fro. Finally, the petite woman spoke to Ben.

“Here, give her here.” Before Ben could respond, the unibrowed man and two other officers extended their arms over the barrier, reaching for the girl. Ben slid her off his shoulder and held her upright, her legs dangling flimsily under her. The petite officer unlocked the bikes and parted them wide enough for Ben to pass her off. He stepped back, dizzy from the exertion and the abrupt shedding of his load. They laid the girl on her back, just beyond the barrier and began checking her vitals, fingers on her pulse, probing. Someone yelled for a stretcher.

“— Not a seizure I don’t think—”

“— water in at least twelve hours, severely—”

“— Breathing, so maybe it’s not—”

Finally, a definitive voice came from the petite officer. “Take her to the Stadium. More help there.”

With that, they lifted the young woman high into the air and carried her out of sight.

“Wait— where is she going?” he asked her.

“Dodger Stadium. She’ll be fine. Probably just needs an IV.”

The woman turned and moved in the direction of the stretched, but after a few paces stopped short. She turned to Ben.

“Come on, we need to go,” she said to him, exasperated. Ben stared at her, dumb. She stared back. Then, “aren’t you the father?”

Something happened to Ben. Something changed. An avenue, absurd and maybe impossible, but an avenue all the same, opened up to him. The noise of the crowd fell away. He
closed his lips and stood up straighter. *Somewhere near the Stadium,* he recalled his mother saying curtly when he’d asked where she’d settled. That single word, *Stadium,* swallowed him whole. At last, he knew exactly where he was going.

“Yes,” he said. “I am.”

“Alright then,” the officer replied, parting the bicycles again. “Come this way.”
A dinghy was summoned for Ben and the young woman, still nameless and unconscious. Standing beside her on the stretcher, Ben watched the boat appear from up the riverbend. It was a small yellow thing, with a bow that rose high into the air, offset by the weight of the motor and the two paunchy men in uniform who steered the dinghy around the shallows. The water itself was filthy. Black rings on the paved cement banks bisected several generations of graffiti which had piled like noise on top of one another. The water did not flow so much as slog, north to south down the trench, contending now with a collapsed bridge. A surge of swimmers, hoping to cross, waded in like nereid, though most were stopped quickly and dragged out. A sunburned officer handed Ben a life jacket.

“It’s a liability thing,” he said. “The city can’t be held responsible if you drown.”

They began to lower stretcher down onto the dinghy. This was a tricky business, as compromised sections of the river bank broke off in small chunks and plunged into the water. Carefully, two officers balayed the girl down and into the boat, where she was caught and secured. Thankfully, she remained unconscious, ignorant to the precarious swaying of the ropes, and the clumsiness of the officers down below in the boat, who nearly flipped the entire dinghy over as they settled her stretcher down. Her head faced starboard side, her braids hanging close to the foul water. Next it was Ben’s turn. He sat, legs dangling above the edge, took the officer’s rope, and began to scale downward, hand over hand. The life jacket, bloated and tight, chafed against Ben’s neck as he raised his arms high and dug the soles of his shoes into the flat pavement. As he did, his cell phone tumbled out of his pocket and landed with a splash, disappearing into the scummy water. He let go of the rope and fell in after it, trying to fish the
phone out. There was no time, and besides, even if it he did find it, it was sure to be broken. Leaving it, he climbed inside.

The engine revved and the motor puttered along, stirring the water and filling the air with the smell of gasoline. There was barely enough room for the three men and the stretcher, so Ben sat in a tight ball on the edge. He stared down at the young stowaway. Her face was very pale, still speckled with perspiration. Without thinking about it, Ben brushed the hair out of her face, tucking it neatly behind her ears. He caught himself though and pulled away, turning instead to stare at the water.

"Don’t worry," one of the officers offered, holding his cap steady. "She’ll be fine."

They rode upriver, north, away from the bridge debris. An officer gestured for Ben to move his hands away from the edge of the boat to avoid the splashing water, muttering something about E.Coli. The boat passed under four bridges, each in various states of collapse, though none as bad as the I-10. Up above, scattered groups of people walked along the river banks with tremendous bags on their backs, like something out of a DeLilloan fantasy. It was a jarring panorama, a landscape of emergency. Fucking severe, Ben’s coworker had laughed, talking then of headlines and grainy photographs clipped from the newscycle. Here was the event itself, or rather its aftershocks: people up and down the Los Angeles River, glassy-eyed and staggering their way out of the city.

The boat slowed and turned a corner, and the bottom of the boat scraped against the cement riverbed. The waterlevel had gone down significantly, and it was easy to see how. Up ahead, yet another bridge had broken apart and fallen into the water, blocking a large portion of the river. The boat approached the ruined bridge, and the engine idled.
On the opposite bank now, the officers maneuvered the girl off of the boat and ballayed her onto the west side of the trench. There, she was hustled into the back of a van a few yards away from the lip of the river. Ben followed her up, struggling to climb the coarse police rope.

Though sizable, the van was certainly no ambulance. The seats in the back had been ripped out to make room for the patients and bags of medical equipment. Ben climbed inside, squeezing between the girl’s stretcher and a gaunt EMT with two impressive tattoo sleeves and a bright orange vest. He grunted at Ben and kept his eyes on his work, taking the girl’s blood pressure.

“You’re the father?” a young man in the driver’s seat, probably no older than twenty, called back to him. Ben gave a weak nod. The young man raised his eyebrows, opened his mouth as though to speak, but changed his mind.

They turned up a ramp onto the 101 freeway just beyond where the second bridge had fallen, and began the slow crawl towards Downtown. Every hundred feet or so the road had cracked; chunks of concrete split and stuck upwards against each other with the drama of geysers. The EMT and the driver argued over directions to the Stadium.

“Take the 110,” the EMT called out, pushing the girl’s right eyelid open with one hand and shining a light in her eye with the other.

“110’s shot,” said the driver.

“Take it to Sunset.”

“Exit’s down.”

“Keep on and go residential.”

“Too slow.”
“Hill?”

“You tell me,” the driver said, waving one exasperated hand.

“Okay, well, take it and see.”

Old Downtown appeared, a collage of white rectangles, low to the ground. Beyond them, window-walled skyscrapers loomed large and charmless. Before the skyscrapers came a humbler assembly of squat office buildings, courthouses, and prisons; modest holdouts of the previous century. As the van crawled forward, Ben spied a grey concrete edifice, topped in several places with thick tangles of barbed wire. Beside it, a building claimed in uninspired typeface to be the IRS. To his right, he could see the remains of a community mural painted along a freeway wall. Thick brush strokes offered a profile of four obtuse cars, green, blue, red, and yellow, scooting beside beaming clay hills and fruit-bearing palms. Several hearts pulsed above each car with lines of white and blue and yellow stretching out like hair into the sky. The wall had cracked at its foundation, and the top had begun to spill onto the far right lane.

“Shit,” the driver said, spitting as he spoke. “It’s down. The fucking bridge is down.” All conscious eyes gazed ahead, where an entire overpass had broken apart into two titanic halves and fallen onto the freeway. Steel rod reinforcements sprang out of the exposed concrete, accordioned and bent in every direction.

“It’s fine,” said the tattooed EMT, testing the girl’s reflexes with the back of his clipboard. “Take the exit.”

“It’s back that way,” complained the driver.

“Then go back.”

“Why didn’t they tell us when we left?”
“Just go back,” shouted the EMT.

“Whole thing sucks.” The driver sat back in his seat, defeated. Ben eyed the out cigarette butts, the styrofoam cups of cold coffee piled up in the corners of the van. Under his feet, a blanket and pillow were stained by a colorful energy drink. The driver rubbed his eyes and groaned. A voice from the radio in the passenger seat spoke unintelligibly.

With no other cars on the road, the van made a sharp k-turn, and began driving the wrong way up the freeway. Ben felt his whole body tense as the van retraced its steps, driving perversely against the grain of traffic and the rule of law itself. He held his breath until the right exit was reached. The driver whipped the wheel around and the van faced the proper direction, rattling past a green sign which read “N. LOS ANGELES STREET,” onto the off-ramp which led up to the city sidewalks.

The van made a wide right onto a commercial street, tires skidding as the vehicle steadied itself. Ben looked out the window. The buildings here appeared mostly stable, though many had lost their windows. The road, worn from the regular tread of commuters, had a generous shoulder and a serene, lime colored bike lane. Deciduous trees lined the sidewalks, lush and deep green, charming and well-kept, leaves rustling with a mellow indifference.

A short ways down, the road began to curve, revealing on the left a large plaza. Within its parallelogram frame, a circle of Moreton Bay Fig trees had been planted, thick-trunked and Atlas-armed, reaching high into the air and casting the whole plaza in shade. Like most things in Los Angeles, it too was a transplant. At the plaza’s center, a roofless gazebo stood lopsided and adorned with papel picado and long strings of lights, circling its interior and continuing over the red lines on the ground, painted for each point of a compass.
The plaza was in crisis. A few dozen people had climbed like oread into the Fig Leaf branches, and below them, a tight and quick-moving mob had formed. Some of its factions spilled into the street ahead, blocking the way. Mothers, fathers, grandparents, teachers, veterans, businessmen and vagrants alike stood shoulder to shoulder, their collective attention turned to something which Ben could not see.

“I told you we’d hit the Plaza,” the EMT said to the driver, peering over Ben to look out the front windshield.

“No you didn’t,” said the driver.

“Now we’re fucked.”

“Did he tell me?” the driver asked. “Am I stupid?”

“Flash the lights.”

“Not once did you say the word Plaza.”

“Flash the lights.”

With the flip of a switch, a siren blared from the van. The outskirts of the mob turned their heads and receded on their heels from the street. Some ran, others tried to climb the trees, falling over one another and onto their backs. The van was forced to stop, and as it did, enough people cleared away for Ben to see the source of the crowd’s attention.

At the foot of the tree, a middle aged man held a small boy in his arms. The man’s lips were moving very fast, veins in his temples visible even from a distance. His black hair was matted to his forehead and his face warped in anguish. The child in his arms appeared no older than ten. His shirt was soaked in blood. When the man’s eyes fell on the van, his face changed. He rose, wounded child and all, and flew towards the road. The crowd cleared out of his way and
then followed him, pushing, shouting, eyes to the sky or buried in their hands. The man held the boy up to the driver’s window and spoke quickly, his voice lost in the swell of the crowd. In his arms was a fair child, his hair recently buzzed, his body just beginning to stretch into adolescence. He had been shot in the abdomen, a few inches beneath his rib cage. His eyes flickered. On his arm Ben could see a peeling temporary tattoo of an orange dragon, dousing his skin in green fire.

The crowd pressed against the van, shouting for assistance, rocking the vehicle from side to side. The gaunt EMT unlocked the door on the side of the van and slid it just wide enough to take the child from the man’s arms. Ben pressed his back against the driver’s seat, trying to make himself as small as possible. The boy’s father attempted to follow, but the crowd began to push him aside, trying to climb in themselves. Ben held an arm out to the father, and with the help of the EMT, yanked him out of the crowd and into the van. Elbowing a few loose hands, Ben helped the EMT pull the door shut.

The EMT laid the boy beside the girl on the stretcher, and they began moving again, slowly pushing the crowd away, siren pulsing out of the top of the van.

“¡Oh Dios! ¡Oh Dios! ¡Oh Dios! ¡Mi hijo! ¡Mi hijo! ¡Mi hijo!” The man wept, tearing at his own hair, his shirt, anything he could hold onto, as he crouched over his child. “¡Oh Dios mio! ¡Salva a mi hijo! ¡Salva a mi hijo, Dios!” Ben put a hand on the man’s shoulder, though he did not notice. He kept babbling, unable to catch his breath. Ben withdrew.

The EMT went to work, totally unfazed. He ripped the child’s shirt away and exposed his wound. As the van lurched forward through the crowd, he grabbed a white towel and threw it at Ben.
“Apply even pressure over the wound,” he said, rummaging through his supplies.

Ben scooted closer to the boy and fell into vertigo, both at the sight of the hole in his chest, and something else. The whole scene was the stuff of high, electrifying drama, and here Ben sat in the very heart of it. Time slowed and came apart all together, the whole world shrinking to the inside of the van. Ben, historically squeamish, took a breath and planted the towel down firmly over the wound. As blood soaked through the white fibers, the van began to spin.

“¡Oh Dios!” the father pleaded, speaking now to Ben. “Estaban luchando. No pude pararlo. No pude…”

“What’s he saying?” asked Ben.

“Not my business,” said the EMT, brushing Ben’s hands away to clean the boy’s wound.

“¡Mateo!” the father gasped, doubling over to touch his forehead to his child’s. He raised his head some and placed both hands on his son’s shoulders. He began to pray. Mateo, Ben thought. The name ricocheted through his head: Mateo, incanted like a prayer, a declaration in the raw of love itself, and terror.

The EMT shoved Ben’s hands out of the way, removed the towel, and began his work, examining the wound with a precise and unflinching eye. Now Ben could not look, at the boy or his father. He was grossly out of place, ill-equipped, mortified. Unsure of how to be useful, Ben returned his hand to this man’s shoulder. The father turned to Ben, and then to the girl lain out beside his own child. He looked at Ben again and asked, “¿Su hija?”

Though Ben barely knew enough Spanish to wish the man a good afternoon, he understood the question. He blushed, choked up with his shame, his stomach turning. He could
have vomited. The boy’s father reached over and held onto Ben’s hand, covered with the still-wet blood of his own child. In careful, accented english, he offered, “we pray for her too.”

Ben was not a religious man. He did not pray, even for the things in life he really wanted. That sort of thing had never quite fit him. Here and now, in this van at the center of the world, he swallowed and closed his eyes, as though he had been touched by the light of Grace itself. Ben placed his large hands upon the boy’s head, lowered his gaze, and joined the father, clumsy and quiet, in prayer, as the van turned onto Stadium Way and climbed haphazardly uphill.

The first thing to notice about Dodger Stadium was that it was haloed by long and unbreaking stretches of paved lots. The asphalt spread on and on in every direction, enough to accommodate over a thousand cars. As the van tumbled past the entrance gate, though, it passed no more than twenty, parked at odd angles or left idling with the lights turned on. At the center of this parking halo rose the Stadium itself, a citadel at the top of the hill, high and airy beside clusters of well-sunned palm trees. Atop the stadium, ten American flags sat limp in the absence of wind. Below them was a row of painted-on portraits of the heavy hitters, Valenzuela, Gibson, Hershiser, and Puig, mid-catch or poised to swing a silver bat. A white sign bore the famed LA in azure blue, the letters locked together, a part of one another. Other signs pointed towards restrooms, concession stands, souvenirs, Dodger Dogs, Dippin’ Dots, sodas, and smoking sections. Here and there, people milled about, carrying trash bags, suitcases, pushing shopping carts full of random possessions, crucial documents, precious photographs, changes of clothes. The van drove around the back, to a vehicle-sized gap in the Stadium walls, following behind an
actual ambulance. The van drove through the gap and emerged directly into the pristine, grassy outfield, just beyond third base.

What once had been a place where baseball was played regularly, anthems sung, green grass cut to regulation, stands of spectators stretching into the blimped sky, had transformed in just a few days into a triage hospital and homeless shelter. The grass was covered in tire track marks from incoming and outgoing ambulances and cars, and clumps of exposed dirt had been kicked up by the tread of doctors, nurses, volunteers, patients, and the rows and rows of beds, tables, and medical supplies on wheeling carts. All parts of the field and the dugouts were occupied by medical personnel, Red Cross, National Guard, police, and plain-clothed volunteers.

The stands themselves were another story all together. The upper half of the stadium directly to Ben’s left had folded on top of itself, with behemoth advertisements for car insurance, home security systems, and Coca Cola collapsing into the upper-level cheap seats. Below them and throughout the untouched parts of the Stadium, thousands of people, families, couples, fiancées, unaccompanied children, bachelors, babies, pastors, rabbis, imams, gurus, life coaches, models, accountants, teachers, burger flippers, bounty hunters, carnivores, herbivores, activists, personal assistants, lawyers, screenwriters, drop-outs, butchers, drummers, lovers, fighters, pilates teachers, librarians, public defendants, producers, ex-gangsters, day laborers, migrants, and gentrifiers, crawled over and under and beside one another, huddled together on the mattresses which had been lain out across the stands. Their numbers were so great that it was difficult to tell them apart from one another; rows and rows of displaced spectators, gawking down at the field or up at the sky, sleeping atop their belongings to keep them from vanishing. They stood in amoebic lines which spanned the length of the Stadium, attempting to use the
bathroom and charge phones, to eat, to drink, to exchange goods and trade necessities, to locate relations, and to shade themselves with sheets and metallic trauma blankets. Members of the National Guard stalked to and fro, avoiding questions and maintaining order through a variety of practices poses, each meant to accentuate the tremendous weapons in their hands or the tasers strapped to their utility belts.

Ben and the father had remained locked in prayer throughout the drive. Now the van’s double doors opened wide to the field, and the two helped the tattooed EMT slide the stretcher out. Medical personnel appeared, and the bleeding boy and the unconscious girl were immediately separated. The boy, who remained on the van’s stretcher, was taken near to where a first baseman ought to have been. The girl was placed in a wheelchair and hauled off to center field. As Ben and the father walked dazed out into the light of the field, the EMT grabbed the latter’s shoulder. “Él estará bien,” he said, surprising Ben with his Spanish.

“Gracias,” the father said, squeezing the EMT’s bony hand. He looked at Ben, his eyes bloodshot and ferocious, and gave one nod. Ben watched him go, then looked around him, spotted the girl and her wheelchair, and sprinted off to accompany her.

All around the drama and dischord of injury filled the field. Here and there a person shouted, sometimes for someone, for a more merciful God, or more morphine. Many more were unconscious, sleeping, or dimly awake, staring at the sun. By far the patients outnumbered the doctors, with one woman or man tending to whole rows across the field at a time.

The patients were arranged by the urgency of their injury, with the most severely injured treated closer to home plate, and the milder ailments lined up in the outfield. He found the girl on the outskirts, lain in a freshly opened bed between a concussed twenty-something man with long
hair and a lumberjack beard, and a middle-aged woman with a deep cut on her arm. The woman spoke casually over the unconscious girl to the concussed lumberjack.

   “Really, because I swear I know you from somewhere,” she fished, cradling her arm.

   “Maybe,” said the concussed man shortly, his hands covering his eyes.

   “Do you belong to a gym?”

   “No.”

   “Do you live near the Reservoir?”

   “No.”

   “Do you have a dog?”

   “Yes.”

   “Oh! That must be it. Is it a Welsh Terrier?”

   “No.”

   “Oh,” the woman frowned. “Sorry for talking so much. You probably don’t want to talk.”

She looked away, then, histrionic, “talking makes it a bit easier, you know? You do know what I mean, don’t you?” The man groaned and rolled over on his side, holding his head.

Meanwhile a wide-eyed nurse in an open white coat approached the girl’s bed and without a word or even a nod of acknowledgement to Ben, began to prod up and down the girl’s neck and arms, assessing the urgency of her needs. Methodically, she wrapped a blood-pressure device around her arm and pumped it full to satisfaction. She took copious notes, never speaking. Ben tried to explain the situation. Dehydrated, probably. No external injuries that he knew of.

The nurse listened and took off down the aisle to put the child on a list to receive an IV drip.
“She’s not your kid, is she?” the woman with the cut arm said to Ben. He turned, unsure if she’d meant her words for him, and frowned. Her aggressively red and crimped hair reminded him of his mother. She stared up at him smugly from her bed. When Ben didn’t respond, she added, “yeah, I figured.”

Ben turned bright red, instantly flustered. He gave a tense laugh smiled at her.

“Excuse me?”

“She’s not your kid,” the woman repeated, narrowing her eyes at Ben. He looked away and she smiled. “It’s okay. Not like anyone cares.”

“How’d you know?” Ben asked quietly.

“I mean I don’t know— it’s different with men, I guess. It’s the way you talked about her.”

“Just trying to help.” Ben blushed, turning to the girl, before adding, “I had to get here.”

“To Dodger?”

“Nearby.”

“Good God, why?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Ben said quickly. “Will she be alright, do you think?”

“Do I look like a fucking doctor?” the woman laughed, genuinely amused, a hint of the East Coast on her tongue. She chuckled to herself and looked out at the field. The child began to stir, just for a moment, her brow furrowing.. Ben moved closer to her bed, hopeful. The woman’s face changed.

“Hey,” she demanded suddenly, her tone suspicious. “You’re not a creep, are you?”

“Excuse me?”
“You heard me,” she said, waiting for Ben to catch on.

“What—? God no! No! Jesus— She just— I was just—”

“Listen, I just ask because, you know, something happens and everything gets scrambled and there’s a lot of people who try to take advantage of young girls who—”

“No. No. I’m not—” Ben was horrified, completely flustered.

“It’s just a little strange—,”

“I don’t understand what—”

“—I’m just asking, is all. No need to get so defensive.”

“—look, she was in my trunk—” Before he could finish explaining, the nurse reappeared, IV in tow. Ben swallowed the rest, unable to continue. The woman with the arm cut blanched. Even the concussed man turned to look at Ben, disgusted.

Then, just as the nurse was poised to plunge the needle into a good vein in the child’s arm, the girl began to stir. She tossed her head to one side, moving her arms, breathing deeply. She opened her eyes, the same blood shot red which had peered at Ben from a nest of dusty blankets, and blinked twice. The noise of the Stadium lapped against her slowly, its volume increasing. Her face quickly fell into a panic, eyes darting as she tried to sit up. The dizziness quickly overtook her, and she slumped back into the bed again.

“Where am I?” she asked. Then her eyes fell on Ben, more disheveled somehow than when they’d first encountered one another, earlier in the day. He gaped at her, dumb-lipped, forgetting himself a moment. He smiled and her gaze changed. Though she did not understand it all, neither where she was or how she’d gotten there, the child grasped Ben’s good intentions well enough to know that somehow he had helped her. She looked at him and croaked out a
small offering, an even “thank you.” They held one another’s gaze for a moment more, and then the nurse took her attention then, preparing to administer the IV.

The concussed man rolled back over. The hour changed. A helicopter circled high overhead. The woman with the cut arm stared at the two of them. Unsure of what she might accuse him of next, Ben ducked out of sight when a nurse came to redress the woman’s wound, slipping past the foul line, and out towards the exit to find a phone.
IV

There were six phones in all, three on each side of the blue wooden kiosk, and a line wrapping around the Stadium to use each of them. A sign, painted in quick red letters, read in English, Spanish, and Korean, “FIVE MINUTES ONLY.” Ben waited a nebulous amount of time in line— nebulous, because no one seemed to be aware the hour itself, counting only the minutes that a stranger up ahead had spent talking— fidgeting with his cap, shifting his weight from foot to foot, and trying unsuccessfully to strike up conversations with his neighbors. The five minute rule proved surprisingly difficult for most of his predecessors to honor, to the point that a scrawny officer with goofy ears was stationed beside the kiosk, encouraging callers to use their time and move along under penalty of law. Even with a regulator, the line crept forward at an infuriatingly slow pace, until at last Ben’s turn came around. He dialed on the metal number pad and held his breath.

“Hello?” his wife answered immediately.

“Rachel—”

“Ben?”

“Rachel, it’s me—”

“—Ben? Oh my God Ben— oh my God— Where are you? Are you safe? I can barely hear you.”

“It’s— I’m fine. I’m fine. I’m okay—”

“Jesus, fuck Ben. What were you thinking?”

“— I know, I know, Rachel. I know—”
“No, Ben. No,” she said, disturbed. “This— this is different. This is… I don’t even know what this is. Is it the baby? Is it me? Is there something you’re trying to tell me, or—?”

“There’s nothing I’m trying to tell you but—- if you’d just let me talk—”

“Please come home, Ben. I know you want to find her but—”

“I’m close, honey, I’m really close—”

“— It’s not worth it.”

“—Rachel, could you just listen to me for one second, please?”

The line grew quiet for a moment, then came a few faint sobs.

“I’m sorry,” he offered. “I didn’t mean to raise my voice at you.”

“I just don’t know what you’re trying to do,” his wife said, straining to control the tears in her voice.

“I’m— I’m sorry, honey. I’m really sorry. I know this is a very stressful time. I— I just called because I wanted to let you know I was alright. And I’m coming home soon.”

“When?”

“I’m not—.”

“By Monday? The appointment’s at three. I’m taking off work to—”

“I’ll be there,” Ben said quickly. “I will.”

“Sure you will,” she said dryly.

“Honey.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, in a tired voice. “I’m sorry. I’m just— I’m throwing up again.”

“Right now?”
“No, no. In general.”

“Oh... again?”

“Yes. I thought I was past that part but—”

“—Well... hang in there, angel,” Ben offered weakly.

“—I don’t know what to think anymore.” She paused, then added, “listen, Ben. I can’t make you do anything you don’t want to do. You’ve shown me that time and time again. I just—I need you to ask yourself, and really think about it. Are you there for her benefit, or are you there for you?”

Ben felt someone tapping on his shoulder. A man in a mohawk stood behind him, and the big-eared officer beside him. Time to clear out.

“—Listen, Rachel, I gotta go— I’ll— Hey I’ll call you, okay. I’ll call you when I get there.”


Dazed and sunburned, Ben headed out of the sweeping parking lot, down the road towards Stadium Way. Beneath the arching sign for Dodger Stadium, he passed an elderly man leaning heavy on a cane, howling a smoker’s laugh. The man, who wore a bulky thick coat over cargo shorts and a t-shirt, threw his head back so high his cavities were showing. Ben tried to scoot quietly out of his way, but the man caught sight of him. Their eyes locked, and he immediately began speaking.

“Sixty years ago— that’s ‘Six’ ‘O’ years— I lived here. Right over there on that hill. They threw the people out— bastards, bastards—threw us out of our homes. Well that’s what
you get, that’s what you get for, for throwing people away like they don’t, like they don’t matter. The people came back. Eighteen thousand. We came back.” This last phrase he repeated to himself, laughing again. Ben left him there.

Dodging a few oncoming ambulances, Ben crossed the road onto Vin Scully Avenue, which climbed uphill a ways, peaked, and dropped off in a steep decline. On either side, the buildings sat in various states of disrepair. Wooden balconies on apartment complexes had fallen onto one another, tiles had slipped off of roofs and shattered in shrubberies and gardens, and palm trees had plunged through windows and screen doors. Other lucky structures looked relatively sound, tucked away behind sublime trees loaded with papery purple bougainvillea. Ben passed a man and a woman who sat on a grass plot in front of their apartment building. They were situated atop a picnic blanket, beside which sat bundles of clothes wrapped in bedsheets, a cardboard box, a mirror, and a small number of books. On the blanket itself they had lain out a bag of pita bread, potato chips, peanut butter, and two sodas. They sat, somber and dignified, their heads bowed in mutual prayer over this meal.

Down the hill further, a green sign hung high and lopsided, announcing that the street ahead was none other than Sunset Boulevard. Head East for the 101 and 110. Head West for the 2 and the 5. The 101 and the 110 were untenable, Ben knew that much, so as he approached the famed boulevard, he made a sharp and decisive right.

Ben’s conception of Los Angeles was largely abstract and convoluted. Somewhere there was a sign which reminded everyone that they were in Hollywood, somewhere there was a beach, somewhere still there were red and gold canyons and a boulevard where five-point stars
collected gum and cigarette butts. Nobody walked in LA. It never rained in Southern California. Ben didn’t get more savvy than that.

He spotted a hole-in-the-wall Sunset Souvenir Shop at the end of the oncoming block. Though the criss-crossed metal gate had been left half down, a young man wearing a hoodie despite the heat stood inside dutifully behind the register. Ben bent his way in.

The place was a wreck. Shelves collapsed, the ceiling caving in at some spots, the overhead fluorescent lights flickering like strobes. On the floor, novelty Oscars, license plates, Route 66 signs, key chains, shots glasses, *Dia de Los Muertos* sugar skulls, and the innards of snow globes lay strewn atop one another. The ceiling fan too had fallen out of place and hung precariously by three chords, emitting a low buzz.

Wading through the souvenir wreckage, Ben approached a rotating stand with a wide selection of postcards, each featuring various hot spots in the city. Here a full moon rose high over the snow-capped Angeles hills. There a tanned, curvy woman in a bikini reclined on a beach towel beside a bright and cheeky “Wish You Were Here.” Another featured a fotron quality image of Downtown and the skyscrapers Ben had seen from the van. Just below, the Santa Monica Pier stood over the beach sand, its roller coaster jutting out over the sea.

Beneath the post cards, Ben found a small cardboard box labeled in sharpie: STAR MAPS. Inside, a pile of maps proclaimed themselves to be the most up-to-date map to Los Angeles’ movie stars, complete with directions and aerial views. He unfolded the map on the top, laminated and stretching a full three feet long and two feet high. What he saw was a crudely drawn, cartoonish map of Los Angeles, peppered throughout with arrows and circles and stars connected to the heads of sharp-chinned celebrities. Flimsy as this map was, it also held a small
selection of landmarks, drawn in exaggerated caricature. There was Universal Studios, Downtown, Hollywood, Beverly Hills, the Los Feliz Murder House. Ben spotted Dodger Stadium, then traced a short line to Sunset. He scanned the surrounding streets for any sign of Arcadia, but found none.

“Excuse me,” Ben said to the man behind the counter. “Do you have any other maps besides these?”

The man did not hear him. He remained bent over the register, hard at work with something Ben couldn’t see. He began to repeat himself again to the man when he noticed the crowbar in his hands, which he was using to pry open the register. Ben backed away quietly, grabbed one of the Star Maps and a novelty Oscar for Rachel which read “World’s Best Mom,” and took off out of the store.

After putting enough distance between himself and the store, Ben stopped and sat on the curb, examining the Star Map again. The little eyes of celebrities stared up at him, familiar strangers grinning at his plight. No Arcadia anywhere. He combed through his memory to the last conversations he’d had with his mother before she stopped calling, but there wasn’t much he could drum up. He remembered the worst of what she’d said to him then, the worst of it all, but not the little details.

She had been doing well, his mother. She’d coasted through nearly every rehab center and sober-living arrangement that the greater Arizona area had to offer, and after over a decade of chutes and ladders, the chip she carried in her purse announced that she’d been sober for an entire year.
Then began the familiar decline, quick and violent. She lost her footing. She lost her licence. She landed back in rehab on Medicare’s dime and called Ben every night, livid. This program sucked. The people were bullshit. All they did was arts and crafts and sit in circles and smoke cigarettes. She was sick and tired of the slogans, the speakers, the Steps. All this ‘Higher Power’ business made her want to vomit. She could do it by herself. She didn’t even want to drink anymore. Didn’t have the cravings. Didn’t want to die. She’d open up a business. She’d take up yoga. She’d forgive everyone. She’d move away.

The last one, the moving away, the change of scenery, stuck in her mind. She met someone at the last facility. They’d move to Nevada, or maybe California. He had money. Came from it. They’d get out and get married. The West was the Best. Arizona was a drag. Ben had not believed a word of it, but he’d nodded along from his perch on the other end of the phone, night after night. When her doctors said she was well enough to go home and she stopped calling for a few weeks, he assumed the idea had slipped her mind.

Shortly before their honeymoon, Rachel found Ben’s mother asleep outside their apartment, stretched across the doormat. She had missed the wedding a few days prior. Rachel screamed for Ben, who ran out in his boxers, half of his chin covered in shaving cream. His mother was plastered, teeth black from tobacco, eyes watery and bloodshot, face beer-bruised and puffy, and skin ravaged by eczema. She couldn’t walk, so Ben sat with her in the vexing morning heat, and slid square ice cubes down her back. He rolled her on her side to keep her from choking, and saw the itchy pattern on the doormat pressed into her face. Rachel left to call the hospital.

“If you’re not going to call an ambulance, why don’t—”

“Don’t bother,” Ben called to her, cool as a cucumber. “She can’t afford the ambulance.”
“What do we do?” Rachel asked.

“I’ll drive.”

“Ben—”

“I’ll drive.” Crouched outside of his door, half-shaved and late for a work, Ben shrugged his shoulders. This rescue ritual was well-practiced. He knew all the lines. The parts of him that might have been afraid were nowhere to be seen. He couldn’t have reached them if he’d tried. Had you asked in that moment, he would have been proud to tell you that he felt nothing at all. Dutifully, he’d taken her to the hospital, where she was a regular among the staff, and hadn’t seen her since. The next time she called, it had been from California.

Ben shook his head and rose to his feet, already sore from the day’s travels. He pocketed the map, drank from one of the plastic bottles in his pocket, and continued down Sunset on foot, feeling in his gut that he was close. Up ahead, a portion of the asphalt had burst open, water rushing out of a busted main pipe below the street. The torrent had turned into a downhill river, lifting cars from the ground and sending them sailing unmanned down the road. They moved with ease in a graceful chaos, striking one another as they went.

Just uphill of where the pipe had burst, where the water was shallow enough to squelch through, three narrow children dressed in peach looked at Ben with open mouths. They stared passively, as though they had no language. Something about their tableau struck Ben; they appeared to him like figures he might encounter in a dream. In their faces he recognized instantly that tiring state of sustained emergency. These would be the days they remembered the best, the days which would bind them to one another. They would look back on these days, when houses could be gathered up in boxes, when women cried on stoops to no one, when the sun could still
come out again and again, after the whole world had come apart. These were the days of food packaged for catastrophe, of freeze dried black beans, canned peas and milk and sardines, of marshmallows, pretzels, beef jerky, boxed water, Gatorade, cocoa, cashews, spam, and tang, donated from pantries across the country, handed off in disposable packages which piled up in the doorway after weeks of no garbage collection. These were days when intense and inescapable boredom hung dry and tasteless on the tongue. Not much in the way of fun or even distraction. No one to make merry with. Curfew and rattling doors and shattered windows and a relapse of bedwetting. Coyotes had been spooked out of the hills and whined in the street at night. Some neighbors shared generators. Some neighbors did not. They would remember it all. All around, the innards of the houses that did not make it piled on the curb. There they would stay, preserved and unchanging in the formaldehyde of disaster.

Years later, some trace of these hours and days, the sight of a roof caved in, the smell of palms fried in power lines, would bring about a distinct cold sweat. They would recall the way the water lapped against their sandaled heels on the way to the storm drain, carrying in it the dust and detritus of their first neighborhood. They would remember then how they watched it go, dragged off to sea with the rest, a part of the world again.

Unsure of what to say, Ben ducked down a side-street, away from the Hell and high water of the Boulevard, and renewed his search for Arcadia.

After thirty minutes of wandering up and down steep residential hills, the street hit up against the edge of an attractive, oblong park, surrounding a man-made body of water. The grasses sloped down to the water’s edge, stopping short of a paved path which wrapped around
the algae-topped pond. A short distance away, a small shack sat at the water’s edge. Several plastic paddle boats, each in the shape of a coy white swan with a long orange beak, bobbed against a nearby wooden dock. A few of the swans had gotten loose from their mooring, and drifted solemnly along the surface, their hollow bodies tugged by the wind or trapped in the weedy shallows. On the surrounding grass, small groups of people sat in folding beach chairs and stretched across blankets, bare knees curled up and facing bonfires and portable grills. Across the park, children ran up the rusted slides and ladders of a once-teal playground and perched like raptors atop the monkey bars, taking votes on which one of the brood would be banished into the lava river which flowed beneath the jungle gym. A sign by the water told onlookers that the park was home to red-winged blackbirds, egrets, trout, and most famously, the rare red-eared slider turtles, pictured sunbathing on saucer-sized lily pads. Had it not been for the din of sirens, the earthquake cracked pavement, and the stacks of smoke rising from the adjacent streets, the whole scene might have resembled a serene summer barbeque. The smell of unknown meats browning over open fires caught Ben’s attention as he made his way down the slope. He had not eaten since morning.

At the base of an old Eucalyptus tree, a group of five well-groomed twenty-somethings—three men and two women—sat around a fire with two hunks of meat cooking above on spits. The men were dressed in pastel tones, billowing button downs with grandfather collars, linen shorts and leather boat shoes, and the women in sleeveless mauve rompers and wide-legged silky pants, chilly in the cool afternoon. As Ben got closer, he noticed a shabbiness in their dapper ensembles; wrinkles in the silk, grass and sweat stains beneath armpits and along elbows, shirts untucked, faces unmade, shoes scuffed. A slight woman with thorough highlights slept alongside
one of the men, their heads resting on overstuffed backpacks. The other woman stared at a book, picking her nail polish off. The last two young men, with hair bleached bright white, sat pretzel-legged by the fire. One of them pulled his long hair back into a tight bun, the other turned a metal spit, scratching his scalp with his free hand.

“Hey there,” Ben began. The fire-gazers looked up at him in unison. “I was wondering if you could—”

“Keep moving, man,” said the man with the spit. “It took forever to catch these.”

“We’re just as hungry as you are,” added the man with the bun.

Ben noticed the cracked pieces of two green turtle shells discarded beside the fire. He looked closer at the meat impaled on the slow-turning spit, pinkish, fatty, popping as it cooked.

“Just move along, friend,” the head-scratcher said, digging his nails along his scalp.

“I’m just lost,” Ben began. “Can you help me find—”

“We just moved here, man. We can’t help you,” the man with the bun waved Ben away.

“Hey,” said the woman with the book, speaking with a heavy vocal fry. “Andrew’s been here a bit longer. Let’s help the guy out.” The man with the bun punched one of the sleepers, Andrew, on the leg. He sat up and made a few incoherent grunts before punching his friend back in the arm.

“I was sleeping—” said Andrew.

“This guy needs help,” the man with the bun began, before turning to his friend and smacking his hand. “Will you stop that, idiot, you’re gonna rip all your hair out—”

“We’re not sharing,” Andrew said quickly before lying back down.
“Fuck you, I think I have lice or something,” the scalp scratcher snapped at the man with the bun, punching him back in the arm. He turned back to Andrew. “He needs directions or something.”

“Oh.” Andrew sat up, sighed, and looked at Ben. “Yeah?”

“Do you know where I can find 2916 Arcadia?” Ben asked, as the scalp-scratcher and the man with the bun began to tussle in the grass, trying to pin each other down. The man with the bun had a lot more bulk to him, and pinned his friend down easily.

“No idea.” Andrew said, lying back down.

“I was told it was near the Stadium,” Ben said, eyeing the turtle meat hissing on the spit.

“Which one?” Andrew asked, turning to the wrestlers. “Hey, assholes, the meat’s burning.”

Ben swallowed. “There’s more than one?”

“Yeah, dude,” said the man with the bun, straining to pin down his friend. “There’s like… like twelve, right?”

“I think more,” the scalp scratcher added, trying to get away.

“Yeah, you’re right,” said the man with the bun. “Probably fifteen.”

“Uncle! Uncle, you dick!” cried the scalp-scratcher, flailing his arms to get out from underneath. The man with the bun pumped his fist in victory and called a truce, scooting back to the fire and dusting himself off.

“Arcadia… I don’t know…” Andrew shrugged before withdrawing the spit from the fire and cutting off a chunk of turtle meat. “Sorry, man. I’m not from here.”
Andrew blew on the meat and took a careful bite. The wrestlers sat beside him, adjusting their shirts. Ben’s stomach groaned, painfully empty, but the hip young men paid him no mind. Rejected, he turned away without a parting word and continued along the grass.

Closer to the water, a few different parties of the newly minted homeless had gathered together to build a larger fire. They burned papers, dry palm leaves, and chunks of hairy bark ripped clean off of the nearby trees. Ben sidestepped a pack of barefoot children who, having failed to regulate the monkeybars through democratic means, chased one another out of the playground and through the grass with long sticks. Ben stood close to the fire, warming himself and working up the nerve to ask for help again. On a nearby blanket, two middle-aged men chatted noisily. One of the pair, with bright eyes, rosy cheeks, and a rim of black hair on either side of his balding scalp, talked quickly while ripping cardboard boxes apart for the fire. The other, a robust man with bushy salt and pepper hair, a square jaw, and thick glasses sitting at the tip of his nose, tugged at the twine knots wrapped around a parcel labeled FEMA, cursing.

“You’d think they’d make this easier,” said the man with the glasses.

“One would think,” the other agreed, tearing at the boxes.

“Do they assume everyone in LA walks around with pocket knives?” He shook his hand out, red from tugging at the twine. “I think it’s got staples in it too. Jesus.”

Ben stopped, chuckling at this bit of kismet. He reached into his pocket, felt around, and withdrew the knife that the short man in the balaklava had flashed him several hours prior.

“Need a hand?” he said to the two men, clicking the button and pulling the blade out. The couple looked up at him with a deep reverence.
“Thank God!” the man with the glasses gave a hearty laugh, taking the knife. He glided the blade back and forth over the taut twine. It snapped apart.

“Thank you,” said the other man, setting down a cardboard box to shake Ben’s hand.

“You have no idea.”

“No trouble.” Ben said, watching as they tore the parcel open, revealing several packages of beans, canned peas, a bag of rice, candy bars, and fruit cups the color of the sunset. They began to empty the box and take stock of their bounty, separating most of the food into an edible pile, and the rest—the fruit cups, a bag of chalky marshmallows, and a badly bruised banana—into a reject pile. Ben stayed standing over them, eyeing the silver packages and cans. What he would have given for that fruit cup, or a creamy candy bar. The men glanced at one another.

“Alright, have a seat then,” said the man with the glasses, making a space for Ben. “I suppose we owe you one.”

The couple, who shared the name Mark—though the one with glasses spelled it with a C and went by Marcus for convenience—began to cook the beans on a grill propped over a portion of the fire. Had Ben encountered them at a different time, in different circumstances, he imagined that they might have been very warm to him. They were charming, certainly, and witty with one another. But there was an edge to them both, a fragile temper brought on by sun exposure, irregular sleep, and the tension of displacement. Still, they carried the conversation, recounting the past few days for their new captive audience, who fished chunks of slimy fruit out of a small plastic cup.

“It’s been awful,” began Marcus, wiping his glasses.
“—A nightmare,” Mark agreed.

“We were at work.”

“—On different sides of the city—”

“—Exactly. I hid in a fucking doorway.”

“I was outside. Outside— imagine!”

“Everything came crashing down—”

“All of these car alarms, I thought I was going to go deaf—”

“And I’m desperate to call Mark.”

“Tell him what you did—”

“— I’m getting there— So I walked from Westwood to Echo Park.”

“I thought I had it bad, I just had to walk from Los Feliz but—”

“It was pandemonium. I walked along Wilshire and everything was destroyed. It was like a warzone. People were running around, trying to get information, trying to get help, looking for their—”

“And we agreed that if anything bad ever happened, we’d meet at our house—”

“I’m telling him—”

“—Sorry—”

“— Right so I’m headed there, and it’s nighttime when I finally get there.”

“And I’ve been there for hours just, my god I nearly lost my mind.”

“So I get there and he sees me and we’re both balling.”

“And he’s not the cryer. I’m the cryer.”

“But we’re both crying so hard and I don’t even notice at first that our house is gone.”
“Not damaged, not destroyed. Just gone.”

“We tried to rescue what we could but there wasn’t much.”

“We came here because, well, everyone’s here. It’s at least a little safer.”

“We lost everything,” Marcus said, his voice shaking.

Mark sighed and put his hand on Marcus’ slumped shoulder, warmed by the fire beside them. “Not everything.”

Ben looked away. He stared at his shoes a while, then at the fire. When he looked back at the couple, he was surprised to see them both staring at him.

“Do you know where I can find Arcadia? I think it’s near one of the stadiums.” Ben blurted out.


“I think it’s definitely near a Stadium,” Mark began. “I’m not sure which one.”

“Try the Coliseum,” Marcus butted in. “I lived down there ages ago after college, and I swear I always walked by an Arcadia-something—”

“—Yeah I think there’s great barbeque nearby—”

“— We could look it up—”

“— No service—”

“— Right. Dammit—”

“—I swear it’s down there—”

“—Got a map?”

If there was one thing a Los Angelino loved, it was telling other people where to go.

Direction-giving was an art form, the rattling off a list of freeways and boulevards, side-streets,
and short-cuts with a cool assuredness, or comparing horror stories of all of the special events, weddings, birthdays, mitzvahs, and quinceñeras missed completely because of the ill will of the ‘traffic gods.’ Who those ‘gods’ were and how exactly one secured their karmic favor was a mystery. For Los Angelinos, nothing topped the rush of divulging the poorly-kept secret of an obscure route to the Bowl, the Beach, the Valley, or the perverse pleasure of informing a tourist that a true local did not say Will-Shy-Er but Will-Sure, not Pike-Oh but Peek-Oh. These were small badges of belonging, the stuff of community-building in a city without a center. Of course there was a comfort to this art form too, as though when locals traced their fingers over a map of the convoluted grid of streets lain atop a gnarly desert basin, they really knew where they were, and where exactly they ought to go.

Ben pulled out his Star Map and the three gathered around, holding the map up to the light of the fire. Marcus borrowed a Sharpie from one of their fireside neighbors, and the route ahead was labeled in detail. From this park, which Ben learned was called Echo Park Lake, the path to the Coliseum and the alleged nearby 2916 Arcadia Something was fairly straightforward. To get there, he’d have to cross under the 101 Freeway overpass near the park and find his way to North Alvarado Street, which turned into South Alvarado Street, which turned into Hoover. “Keep on that,” he was told, “and you’ll hit it. Really easy.” He’d pass east by what the map claimed to be Whoopi Goldberg’s home, and west of Susan Sarandon’s penthouse Downtown. The map ended where Alvarado intercepted Wilshire Boulevard, so the rest of the route was drawn on the map’s index in wobbly Sharpie lines. All told, it was about a five mile walk.

The sun was setting. Bare feet found socks, chairs folded, jackets zipped, children’s names called and called again, branches added to the fires. Within thirty minutes, the sky purpled
and turned black. To the west, the ash and smoke in the air caught the last light as it bent around the earth and disappeared somewhere into the Pacific. Bonfires lit up the park as their keepers drew closer together, their backs to the dark. Someone near Ben busted out a guitar but couldn’t play, and the instrument was passed around the fire. As it went around the circle, Ben became better acquainted with his neighbors.

A pasty woman named Janis, whose head was dominated by a shock of unfortunate dreadlocks, tried to get through all of McLean’s “American Pie,” but lost interest after the second verse and passed the guitar off. A large man named Carl took the guitar and plucked out an intricate flamenco refrain, then a lively cover of “Sitting On A Dock On The Bay,” by Otis Redding. Finally, a woman named Tanya took the guitar and strummed out a chords-only cover of Willie Nelson’s “The City of New Orleans.” She’d practically been raised by her local gospel choir, she said, and sang the song with an astounding sorrow, eyes closed, the contours of her face aglow in the orange firelight. The noise of the park and the city beyond it seemed to yield to her heavy cadence and the chill of her vibrato. When she finished, the circle erupted in applause.

A case of beers was passed around, and at Mark’s insistence, Ben took one. As he sipped, a small child with long, unruly blond hair wandered barefoot over to Janis and poked her.

“Mama? She asked. “Mama, will you braid my hair?”

At these words, a strange and familiar cold sweat came upon Ben. An immediate urge to run from the fire struck him for a moment, to get away and hide himself. The inner ictus vanished as soon as it had arrived. Embarrassed, he looked away as Janis sat the child in her lap and began to braid her hair. Thankfully, nobody in the circle seemed to notice his small crisis. The case of beers reached Tanya and she smiled and waved it away.
“No thanks,” she said, rubbing a hand on her belly. Ben hadn’t realized before, but Tanya was very pregnant.

“When are you due?” asked Mark, taking a sip from Marcus’ beer.

“End of September’s what the doctors said,” said Tanya, smiling at the man who reclined beside her. He smiled back.

“Really?” Ben asked from across the flames. “That’s when my wife and I are due.”

“Where’s your wife?” Marcus asked, taking his beer back. Ben looked at the fire and mumbled quietly.

“Where?” asked Mark.

“Phoenix,” Ben repeated.

“Shit,” said Janis. “What are you doing out here then?”

Ben opened his mouth to answer, when the panic seized upon him again. Quite suddenly, he felt very dizzy, sitting fireside with these strangers, singing covers, sipping warm beers, eating emergency food in the middle of a disaster. What was he doing? The Marks huddled together, hand in hand. Tanya stared at him, a man Ben assumed to be her husband sitting beside her, stoic and solid. Janis stared at him over her child’s head as she braided, trying to catch his eye, but Ben was gone.

Instead, Ben found himself in an office he had encountered once, many years ago. He was sitting on his mother’s lap, his feet dangling over the edge of her legs. He had not seen her in a few days; he’d been left at a classmate’s home and never collected. A woman in blue sat across from them, and Ben had spent most of the meeting staring at her earings: two pink dream
catchers which draped over her shoulders and tangled in her hair. His mother had jostled him.

Was he listening?

“Mama made a big mistake, she didn’t know how much she was having. But it will never happen again.”

“That’s right,” said the dreamcatcher lady, looking over Ben’s head. “Never again.”

“Things will be different for us,” his mother had continued, reaching for a tissue. She dabbed a few times below her eyes, though Ben had not been able to spot any tears. The dreamcatcher lady kept talking, and Ben rested his head against his mother’s chest, listening for her heartbeat. He was only half aware that his mother was speaking to him again.

“Thu-thud, thu-thud, thu-thud—It wasn’t that I wanted to go away, Benny,” she said. “I was scared. I didn’t care anymore.”

The dreamcatcher lady had put a firm hand on her shoulder and leaned in to her, whispering sharply in her ear. Ben strained to hear. His mother had frowned, rolled her eyes, and brushed her off.

“He’s fine,” she hissed. “You’re okay, Benny, right?”

Ben had looked up at his mother, her hair swept back by a bandana, red spidery lines in her eyes. Long before he knew what a drunk was, he’d learned how to talk to grown-ups in offices and waiting rooms, what to say when asked, how to avoid the questions all together.

“Yuh-huh,” he said, playing with his mother’s necklace.

The dreamcatcher lady had smiled and returned her hand to his mother’s shoulder. As he watched them chat for a while longer, Ben recalled the way his heart sank, the opportunity to tell
the truth sealed off from him forever. That phantom of doubt had passed over him then, a chink in the armor of his childish logic: *what was he doing?*

“She must be worried about you,” Tanya’s voice jarred Ben out of his thoughts. He looked around at his new acquaintances. Mercifully, the wind shifted and blew smoke in Ben’s face, and he turned from group and wiped his eyes.

“Do you have a place to go tonight?” Tanya asked. Coughing, Ben shook his head.

“Don’t bother with the shelters,” said Mark.

“Stay here. We’re sleeping in shifts,” added Marcus. Janis offered Ben a hotdog.

“Better than eating turtles, right?” Ben offered, trying to shake off his vertigo. Mark laughed.

“Oh God, you saw those idiots?” Said Marcus, holding up the empty FEMA package.

“You know they’re handing these things out on Sunset and Golden Gate?”

An hour past dark, they’d all grown tired of talking, and seemed content enough to sit beside one another in silence. Marcus laid his head in Mark’s lap and shut his eyes. Mark sat upright, staring at an old newspaper, not reading any of the words. Eventually he tossed it into the fire.

Ben laid down, his back to the fire, his legs and shoulders aching from the day’s events. As he lay there, he noticed a commotion by the water. The five young turtle roasters he had spoken to first in the park, who had guarded their catch with such fervor, sprinted one by one to the edge of the water, nearby one of the liberated swan boats. They stumbled weakly onto their knees, bent their heads above the pond, and retched. The man with the bun had it particularly bad, vomiting and scratching his scalp furiously. As Ben drifted into sleep, he watched their
silhouettes, the five gentrifiers bent over the pond’s edge, their shoulders hunched as they threw up turtle meat onto a bed of lily pads.
When Ben awoke, his whole body had been covered in a drizzle of black ash. It was Sunday. A blanket of clouds rolled in from the far off ocean, diluting the early light and trapping the smoke of still-burning fires in a dome over the city. Somewhere a dog barked, jangling a metal chain. A stranger sleeping beside a nearby fire began to hack with a wet cough. A helicopter circled overhead, its engine drone rising and falling as it made laps over the neighborhood before peeling off. The fire had died. As Ben rolled over and brushed the ash away, a rush of nerves overtook him. All at once, he recalled where he was, what had happened, and critically, where he needed to go.

Ben roused himself, cracking several joints as he did, hoping to hit the road before it got too hot again. He looked down at the Marks, wrapped up in each other on the soft grass, their plan to rest in shifts overridden by exhaustion. Tanya snored heavily, asleep in a fold-out beach chair. Her husband slept by her feet. Afraid of disturbing their rest, Ben left them where they were.

The houses at the edge of the park sat in a spectrum of disarray. A few of the homes had been remarkably spared, with only a shattered windows or a garage door left askew. Beside them, blue tarps flapped flimsy on properties where roofs had once been. Doors hung off hinges where the walls above had buckled. Entire façades tilted and broke apart into wood and piping and brick. The sheer level of destruction gave the situation a bleak, insurmountable air. Sofas and cabinets and picture frames, once central in the landscape of private homes, lay out in the gutters along the road, gathering mildew and maggots, rotting in the sun, awaiting unforeseeable
collection. The earthquake had happened, had started one minute and stopped some definitive
time after, but the disaster was ongoing, unfurling like a labyrinth.

As Ben examined the wreckage, his eyes fell upon a child-sized bicycle lying abandoned
on its side, painted-on red flames climbing up along its body. Ben looked around. No children in
sight. He lifted it up and inspected the bike’s condition. Air in the tires. Reliable inner tube.
Functioning breaks. He looked around one last time, and as the morning sun broke through the
clouds and spilled across the park, Ben took off downhill on the tiny bicycle.

Ben was not an athletic man by any meaningful measure. Within minutes, the muscles in
his legs strained, hamstrings taut, calves groaning as he struggled to keep his feet from slipping
off of the small pedals. Following the map, Ben made a right on Temple and headed up a
miserably steep street to North Alvarado. As he lumbered uphill, he began to hack and wheeze,
his breath labored by exhaustion and a sudden influx of ash. Far ahead of him at the intersection,
the glare of red fire engine lights were subdued by a hellish orange light and a pillar of smoke.
Ben dismounted at the behest of a firefighter, who waved to him frantically from behind a
breathing mask. The entire right side of the road was blocked off by five trucks, two ambulances,
and three police cars. Up above, a helicopter dropped water onto the fire, attempting to smother
it. Ben watched the flames for a few minutes, ferocious as they parried the oncoming assaults of
water. Soon the smoke was overwhelming, and he lifted his t-shirt over his nose and took
shallow breaths, ducking into the parking lot of a fast food drive-thru across the street from the
flames, and from there, snuck onto Alvarado.

Past the fire, Ben headed uphill again on a wide deserted street. How rapidly the
landscape changed after passing beneath just one freeway, as though he’d crossed through a gate
into another city. First came stucco houses without roofs or even blue rain tarps, then lots completely turned to rubble, furniture poking through piles of wood and drywall. Empty parakeet cages swung from broken porches, their occupants released to find new nests and fend for themselves. Here and there, people tiptoed through ruin, retrieving deeds and dolls from underneath furniture and toppled walls. Packs of collared dogs of several breeds and sizes roamed the streets together, digging through sidewalk refuse and lapping up turbid puddles. As he glided through this new neighborhood, Ben kept his eyes peeled for anyone that might resemble the shape and disposition of his mother. At one point, he was almost certain he saw her in the doorway of a half-standing apartment complex, but he was mistaken. He returned his gaze to the road and swerved at the last moment to avoid crashing into a telephone pole.

Residential streets morphed to stretches of warehouses, superstores, and office buildings. Ben climbed up one ungodly steep hill after another, gasping each time for air. Just when he was about to dismount and rest his legs, the hill topped off, and he glided down again, warm wind in his face, hunching his back to pick up speed.

Ben kept down Alvarado, the sun upon him now, and as the street narrowed all the business signs began to speak Spanish. At the intersection of 6th street and Alvarado, he came upon another park which spanned two city blocks. This had to be Macarthur Park, which meant he was about to drop off the face of the Star Map. Ben rode through the intersection and peeled over to the sidewalk across the street from the park, dodging a slew of rainbow beach umbrellas which had toppled over one another and drifted upside down into the street. As he did, his socks were splattered by the insides of a watermelon, which had fallen out of an overturned fruit stand. There were more people here, standing in huddles and facing the wall behind him, talking
quickly or not at all. Up ahead, the wide strip of Alvarado intercepted with Wilshire Boulevard in a four-way cross, with the park and soccer field to the west, and a bustling marketplace to the east. As the sun crept towards its zenith, the scene possessed the same kinetic energy Ben had encountered out in the desert: hot and unregulated. Anything was possible.

Ben stepped towards the wall behind him to rest a moment in the shade, only to find that the brick had been covered completely in paper and photographs. Leaning the bike on its side, he moved closer to the pictures. The elderly smiled at the camera, their faces lit with the glow of many birthday candles. Young men and woman posed stoic beneath firefighters helmets. Others stood moodily before a mirror, cell phone in hand, their heads tilted, abs or eyeshadow on display. Accompanying each of the signs was a small paragraph of text, and the words MISSING, written in several different languages. Ben stepped closer to the wall on the off-chance he’d see his mother’s face. She was nowhere.

A stout woman with long grey hair tucked under a pink sideways sun hat stood close to him. Her hand reached forward and touched one of the faces on a flier, the other hand rested on her clavicle. She was talking very quietly, eyes closed. Ben recalled the praying he’d done just the day before for Mateo and the young girl whose name he’d never caught. He stepped a few feet from this woman and shut his eyes. *Whoever you are,* Ben thought to himself, *I hope you’re alright.* He pursed his lips and nodded, content with this prayer. When he opened his eyes again, the woman was gone.

Ben turned to remount his bike, but that too had disappeared from the curb. He whirled around, looking up and down the block, just in time to notice a lanky teenager in an oversized grey shirt rounding the corner on the tiny bike. Ben sprinted after him.
“Hey! Hey! Asshole!” Ben shouted. “Stop him! Somebody stop him!”

He ran a block further, but the teen and his bike disappeared. Exasperated, Ben cursed and looked around for sympathetic eyes. The street was crowded, but no one seemed aware of the grave injustice which had just taken place. Ben sat on the curb, elbows on his thighs, and took out his map again.

So fixated was he on his map, that Ben hardly noticed the new bedlam he’d wandered into. On the corner across the street stood a squat drug store, red with white tiles lining the windows, and a large red sign reading BOTICA DEL PUEBLO: Prescriptions, Vitamins, Cosmetics. Abierto Los 7 Días 9 AM á 9PM. Steel black bars lined the windows, and metal grate was bolted down over the entrance. Unlike most of the establishments Ben had passed, this one had not been touched by the earthquake or by opportunistic looting. It wasn’t hard to see why. Above the store, three figures— two young teenagers and an older gentleman— stuck their upper bodies out of the row of ornate windows on the building’s second floor. They were holding rifles. Out front, crowds milled about, chatting and trying to place phone calls, keeping their distance from the building, while the three figures scanned the sidewalk.

The area was tense, the people pressurized by the heat, unsure of where to go, where to put their energies. Unbeknownst to Ben, he’d wandered into the scene at a critical moment. The older gentleman, who had been stationed at the window above the store since Friday, had grown weaker and weaker as the days wore on. Now his eyes fluttered, his head drifting to his shoulder then snapping upright, only to drift sideways again a moment later. Eyes on the street remained fixed upon him and the two boys in the adjacent windows.
“Wait— just wait—” a man’s voice close to Ben’s head whispered. Ben looked up from his map to see who had spoken, just in time to watch the old gentleman fall limp in the window frame, the gun sliding from his hands and onto the sidewalk. The two young teenagers darted inside to drag him in, abandoning their stations.

“Now!” a voice shouted. Then came a burst of bodies, running across the street towards the pharmacy, followed by a swift squeezing of tools and the crushing of a padlock. The grate in front of the store doors sprang up, and a shirtless man rushed forward with a plank of wood, held it high above his head, and swung it straight into the glass. The door cracked and shattered. He swung again, knocking the rest of it away, and darted inside.

Ben leapt to his feet. Next came a great fury of movement, a manic dash, as people ducked their heads and poured into the store. As rapidly as they entered, men and women emerged clutching boxes and bags of food, paper towels, bottles of water, medicine, supplies of all shapes and sizes. The shirtless man appeared again, carrying three packs of diapers under each arm. Two young girls emerged carrying a cooler between them, lifting it off the ground with all of their strength. A woman ran out with a shopping bag bulging with what looked like granola bars. It was mesmerizing: looting in broad daylight. Those who had been on the fence at first quickly fell into the queue to push through the door. Soon enough, someone had smashed the store’s other windows in. Some hid their faces as they stole, edgy as muskrats, and others strutted out with their goods, grinning unashamed.

Ben started to move away from the looters, back up the street where he’d come from. There was a loud pop— a gunshot fired as one of the teens returned to the window— then another, and then everyone was running, stampeding over each other. Horrified, the people
scrambled, climbing the cars, ducking behind trees for cover, then running again. There was a 
peel of sirens, and up ahead Ben spotted a police car. Officers in riot gear leapt out of their 
vehicles and sprinted towards the store. More arrived, backup, reinforcements, forming a line on 
either side, closing in on the crowd and pushing everyone together.

The air began to fill with a thick white smoke which burned Ben’s lungs. One of the 
looters ran into him, knocking Ben to his knees. He could barely see, couldn’t breathe, couldn’t 
protect himself. He pulled his t-shirt over his mouth, scrambled to his feet, and ran blind out of 
the street and towards the sidewalk. If he ran fast enough, Ben thought, he could slip around the 
police and out of the tear gas to safety. He crouched low, preparing to make his break, when he 
spotted the hatted woman whom he had prayed with, stuck in the middle of the road. She 
coughed, her hands covering her eyes, groping through the throng of looters and police and 
smoke. Without thinking, Ben ran to her. Seeing stars, he lifted the woman up over his shoulder 
and ran with her to the sidewalk across the street. She began to punch his back with her little 
fists, tearing at his hair, and kicking his stomach.

“Help! Help! Put me down!” she screamed. She sank her teeth into the back of Ben’s 
neck, drawing blood. He stumbled and let her fall to the ground, her hat falling off of her head.

“Rat Bastard!” she said, then spat at him. A set of hands came upon Ben’s shoulders and 
pushed him to the ground face first. Disoriented, he raised his head. There was a sharp yanking 
of his arms behind his back, a tight grip around his wrists, a rattle of gears, then the grim click of 
two round handcuffs, sliding into place.
Of each situation Ben had found himself in in the last forty-eight hours, each heat spell, adrenaline rush, and confrontation with destruction, the paddy wagon was by far the worst. His eyes still burning, Ben was tossed into the back of a large police vehicle with about twelve other men in an equal state of confusion. There they waited in the dark oven, catching their breath for about an hour before the wagon moved at all. The movement only complicated things; without seatbelts, the prisoners knocked uncontrollably into one another.

This lasted four hours. The first hour, the wagon continued around the city making arrests. Officers lobbed about ten more handcuffed men into the back, then spent another three hours driving over potholes, looping through roundabouts, and making turns sharp enough to send all of the men in the back flying into one of the wagon walls. One bug-eyed man who had cried and pleaded with the officers who threw him in eventually fell into worse favor by vomiting halfway through the ride. Another man fainted. When the van finally stopped and the men were unloaded into the light, haggard and queasy, a few of their number broke into applause.

“You got pink eye?” a voice croaked from beside Ben. It was the man who had vomited.

“Excuse me?” Ben said.

“Your eyes are all red,” the stranger snickered. The others around Ben laughed.

“Watch out for this guy,” somebody else jeered. “I saw him pick this old lady up and throw her on the ground.”

The Santa Ana Jail, situated in the armpit of Orange County, had become so overcrowded in the days following the earthquake that new inmates were housed on small cots spread out in
the cafeteria, the auditorium, and eventually out on the Yard. The quake had made hell for the
prison administrators. A number of Los Angeles’ finest jails and juvenile halls had been
significantly damaged in the initial shakedown— one even saw its walls affected so dramatically,
half of its prisoners were able to escape before the area was secured. Now, the Santa Ana was
one of the few jails just outside of the Los Angeles area which had not been incapacitated, and as
the police continued to round up violators, looters, and provocateurs, it quickly grew from jail to
human warehouse.

Booking took ages. After surrendering his wallet, car keys, baseball cap, star map, and
novelty oscar, he waited in a crowded holding room with roughly eighty other men. One by one,
each member of the group was called by name and led down the hall to have their photo and
prints taken, their bodies examined, and their clothing exchanged for baggy grey jumpsuits.
When at last they called on Ben, he was led through a labyrinth of fluorescent hallways to a
beige and windowless office which reeked of cigarettes. To his relief, he didn’t have to talk very
much. One of the arresting officers, a clean cut young man with a widow’s peak and a hook
nose, filled out his paperwork quickly, chewing sunflower seeds. He took Ben’s name, his
birthdate, his address, then motioned for the officer in the door to take him away.

“But what am I being charged with?” Ben asked.

“Looting,” the officer said with a shrug.

“But I wasn’t—” Ben began, but the officer at the desk turned back to his paperwork,
taking another handful of sunflower seeds from his bag. Before he knew it, Ben was back in the
pen for more waiting, more jeers from his fellow ‘perps,’ as the officers referred to them.
Night arrived, and Ben still hadn’t been released. Eventually, a guard strolled by, and Ben was told he’d have the option to make one phone call. He followed an officer to an archaic phone hanging from the wall in one of the main offices. Behind him, officers in uniform sat with headsets in, each phone ringing nonstop. Ben turned his back on the noise and carefully dialed his wife’s phone number. The phone rang, rang again, again and again, the single harsh tone buzzing in his ear. Eight rings. Twelve. Twenty one. Nobody picked up. He replaced the phone in its dock, turned, and walked down the hall again, his head hung low.
VI

Time dissolved in the jail. The lights stayed on all night, illuminating every leaky pipe and scuttling cockroach. Someone was always awake, making rounds and counting the sleeping bodies on the floor of each overcrowded cell, whistling and knocking their baton against the iron bars. Only the small sliver of light which filtered in through the window indicated that the sun had come up again. When Ben awoke at dawn on the floor of his cell, a soft blue filtered in. As he lay there, it occurred to him with a chilling calm that it was Monday, three days since his mother’s phone call, and several hours before he was meant to be back with Rachel.

He sat up. Another night sleeping on the ground had not served him well. His body ached, his head still smarting from the riot. A voice echoed on the other side of the bars, an officer, counting again. Ben turned away and waited for the man to pass. The counting stopped.

“Benny? Well fuck me. Is that Little Bennyboy?” It was an unmistakable voice, fratty and highly resonant. Ben blinked his eyes open. There, in full prison guard regalia, a Cheshire grin stretched across a schlub’s pouchy face. Two beady eyes met Ben’s. It was Bruce.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Bruce said, revealing one golden front tooth. “I thought I’d seen everything but— Damn, it must have been— how many years has it been?”

Bruce. Beery Bruce. Belligerent Bruce. Bruce, who for eight years of step-fatherhood had demanded that Ben call him Sir. That Bruce, overweight, underemployed, untalented and multi-chinned. Bruce, who insisted Ben teach himself how to shave and laughed at his razor burns. Who popped ruby red pills and drank whisky fireballs, who mooched and cheated frequently. Bruce, who one day had up and vanished, to his mother’s dismay and Ben’s delight. Two alcoholics were worse than one. Especially when one of them collected guns.
“Thirteen,” Ben said, grinding his teeth.

“Thirteen years. Well, you’ve definitely grown a lot,” Bruce laughed, gesturing to Ben’s belly. Bruce was jovial, oddly casual given the setting. “Out with it, kid. What are you doing in my neck of the woods?”

“I’m looking for my mother—I was at least—”

“For Robin?” Bruce asked, calling her by her first name. “Good Lord— I haven’t seen her since she first came west. How is she?”

“I wouldn’t know.”

“What do you mean?” Bruce asked.

“We haven’t talked much,” Ben said flatly.

“Well, you picked a helluva time to visit.”

“She called me,” Ben said. “She asked me to come.”

The two stared at one another from between the bars. There was some relief, Ben found, in speaking to a familiar face, having wandered around for days at the mercy of total strangers. Without intending to, Ben launched into the entire story. He told it all, the phone call, the desert drive, the car breaking down, the masked men and the stowaway, the river and Mateo, the triage stadium, flooded Sunset, the turtle roasters, the bike, and his accidental place in the riot. When finished, he looked up from his shoes at Bruce, whose face had twisted into disbelief.

“Well that… that has to be about the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard.”

Ben’s face fell. This was not what he expected.

“You came all this way— you did all that— because of one phone call?”

“She said she was in trouble—”
“And you were going to—to what? Help her?”

“Well—yes. That’s—”

“Son, you know we’ve got the National Guard for that. You drove from Phoenix—Phoenix—to L fucking A? You know that her part of town was barely even scratched by this thing, right?”

All of the air flushed out from between Ben’s lips. Had he heard Bruce right? There had to be a mistake? He felt cold, so cold he could barely manage a feeble “Excuse me?”

“Yeah. Last I checked, she lives down on Arcadia. Arcadia Terrace—on the boardwalk along the beach. They got shaken up but—I mean to my knowledge, nothing fell down.”

“Well—that doesn’t mean she’s not in danger—” Ben attempted to reason. He leaned up against the bars to keep himself standing.

“I hate to be the one to tell you, Benny boy, but you’re not going to help anyone with anything until you start thinking like a goddamn sane person.” Bruce leaned closer to the bars, his expression softening some. “Listen, I’m sorry, kid. Your mom’s a unique kind of woman. Slippery, and I mean that in the best possible way. But she’s stubborn, too. She always managed to land on her feet. We had our differences but I always respected her, in my own way.”

“Bullshit,” Ben muttered.

“I know you and I didn’t have the best time together back there and—well a lot’s changed. I got clean—told a few tries but I did it. Don’t even smoke anymore. Moved to the OC even—me, of all people. I found my peace, but I didn’t start to do that until I was able to take a good look at my life and my choices—you understand me?” The other men in the cell began to grumble and stir awake.
“I just wanted to help her—” said Ben.

“Yeah well, here we are,” Bruce replied, tapping the bars with his baton. Ben hung his head.

“You really want to find her?”

Ben nodded. Bruce sighed, and scratched the back of his head.

“Give me some time— I’ll see what I can do.”

“Hey, Pink Eye. Pink Eye—” a foot kicked Ben in the ribs and he sprang awake. After Bruce had left, Ben fell asleep again on the cell floor, still exhausted from his two days of wandering. Now the man who had vomited in the paddy wagon, one of Ben’s current cell mates, stood over him. He was grinning. “The pigs are after you, man. It’s all over!”

Ben sat up to tell the man off, when he noticed two stocky officers standing on the other side of the cell bars. They were staring at him, waiting.

“What is it? What’s going on?”

“Move your ass, I don’t have all day,” one of the officers said, impatient and underslept.

Ben obeyed, the laughter of his cellmates echoing down the corridor as he followed the officers down the hall. They continued through a labyrinth of cells, whose inhabitants spat crude obscenities at Ben as he walked.

“Fucking asshole.”

“Fucking fairy.”

“Suck my dick.”
Ben kept his eyes on the shoes of the officer ahead of him, who walked faster and faster as they progressed down the corridor. They passed through three heavy doors with oversized locks and crossed over into the administrative side of the prison. They continued down a maze of wide, square-tiled hallways, until Ben found himself ushered into the same office he’d been processed in. The officer with the sunflower seeds was gone.

“You have thirty seconds,” one of the officers snapped at Ben.

“To do what?” Ben asked.

“Get changed and clear out,” the officer replied as he slammed the door shut. Ben turned and spotted his own clothes resting in a rumpled pile on one of the chairs. He scrambled out of his prison uniform, tugging the sweatshirt over his head and the pants down to his ankles. He switched back into his old clothes, a plain white t-shirt and cargo shorts, which reeked of sweat. Beside the clothes, a plastic baggie contained the rest of his belongings. As he tugged the shirt back over his head, the officer opened the door and ordered Ben outside.

Back in his civilian clothes, Ben was hustled towards the jail’s main lobby, through metal detectors and a security checkpoint just before the entrance. They led him out of the entrance and around the building’s cinderblock-like exterior. It was a larger jail than Ben thought at first, with multiple wings and a large back lot. It was to this backlot that he was headed.

Passing through a tall metal fence, they emerged onto a paved air strip the size of a football field, with small planes and police helicopters parked in rows on the periphery. Standing beside a long row of choppers was Bruce.

“Hey there, jail bird,” Bruce said, patting Ben awkwardly on the back.

“What’s going on?” asked Ben, eyeing the runway.
“Well… these guys owed me a favor and— they’ve got to run a shift on that part of town so— I figured they wouldn’t mind some company.” Bruce gestured to one of the police helicopters, where two pilots loading gear into the cockpit. Ben’s eyes widened and Bruce laughed.

“Hope you’re not the same little pansy you used to be,” Bruce said.

“They’ll take me to her?” asked Ben.

“As close as they can get.” Bruce said. Ben turned to look him in the face.

“Thank you. Thank you for doing this,” Ben said.

“Yeah well…” Bruce looked down, chewing the inside of his lip. With one shoe crushed a pillbug which had wandered into his shadow. He laughed, uncomfortable, then put a paw on Ben’s shoulder and gave him two tough pats. “Take care of yourself.”

Inside the chopper, Ben squeezed into the cramped back seat behind the cockpit. Two men sat in the front, both grey and good humored. They chatted casually as Ben belted himself in, drawing two straps across his chest. One of them turned to Ben and handed him a pair of bulky headphones.

“Thank you for doing this—” Ben began, but the pilot waved his comment away.

“Just don’t tell anyone about it, alright?” he said, leaning into Ben.

“We’ll be out of here soon, just as soon as I get the green light from—” The other pilot pressed two fingers to his earpiece, listening. “Copy that. Alright. Prepare to get underway.”

Ben sat back and stared out the window, taking quick breaths. As the seat began to tremble and the engine began to hum, he caught himself gripping the headrest in front of him.
The propellers stirred up the detritus on the launch pad, spinning faster and faster until they created one fluid and unbroken rotation. Slowly, the helicopter lifted up and off the ground.

Ben pressed himself close to his window as the chopper rose eyelevel to the treetops, then above them. The landing pad disappeared from sight, swallowed by the grid of buildings, streets lined with toy-like cars. From up there, the palm trees appeared like long hairy towers, their shadows draped over crowded streets. Ben looked out at the horizon, at the developed grid of buildings and streets which stretched remarkably as far as he could see. The helicopter hurtled over the city, picking up speed. Ben held onto the headrest in front of him, intensely aware of the hundreds of feet between him and the ground.

He recognized the tuft of skyscrapers stretching through the smog of the city. They were back where he started. A few minutes later, the helicopter passed above a long trench which snaked north to south through the city. The great portions of concrete and warped steel still sat in the water. He followed the freeways with his eyes, searching unsuccessfully for his car. Past the river, the chopper glided west, level with the skyscrapers.

From this height, the city was still, almost peaceful. Beyond the rolling hills of houses and sweatshops and plazas and parks lurked the purple Angeles hills, their snow caps bordering a cloudless sky. From up here, the emergency sirens below softened under the chopper roar, and the terrain was blanketed by a thick smoke scrim. He thought of the people he’d met, the parents and children and lovers and friends, lost somewhere down there in that network of streets.

“Ugly, ain’t it?” the officer riding shotgun called back to Ben. “Wish you’d caught it on a clearer day.”

Ben laughed, “bad timing, I guess.”
“Any other time of year, really any other time,” he continued, “it’s the best city in the world.”

“LA is like Vegas,” the pilot butted in, “except in Vegas, the losers go home,”

“I thought you liked it here,” said the man riding shotgun.

“Love it,” said the pilot. “Wouldn’t want to be anywhere else in the whole world.”

“Guess that makes you a loser then,” the shotgun officer laughed.

“Guess so,” agreed the pilot. “A big happy loser.”

As the chopper glided over a small mountain range in the middle of the city, the earth dropped off into a revelation of bright blue water. Here, at last, was the Pacific. Ben leaned forward between the two officer’s heads to look out the front window, scanning the horizon. As they drew closer, the water glittered emerald and teal and liberty blue. Atop the surface sat a corridor of sunlight, stretched from the shore all the way to the horizon. Ben gawked until his eyes stung from the glare; he’d never seen the ocean before.

There was a distinct change in the buildings below, and Ben realized that Bruce had been telling the truth. The disturbed landscape of the eastern half of the city gave way to relatively untouched rooftops and streets. For every slanted building or caved in roof, there were two more buildings in solid condition. The buildings even further west appeared immaculate by contrast, with rooftop gardens, blue swimming pools, and uncrowded streets. Clearing the buildings, they flew parallel to the shoreline, up the beach. To his surprise, the shore was packed with people, colorful umbrellas open beneath the midday sun. White waves broke and charged towards the sand, and beyond them, sloops and ketches listed in the wind of the open ocean. Up ahead, the beach was divided by a large wooden pier, adorned with a colorful ferris wheel, roller coaster, a
high-spinning swing set, and rows of carnival games and concession stands. The pilot spoke into his headset and nodded, and the chopper began to sink towards the earth.

The propellers blew sand in every direction as the chopper touched down. A few beachgoers stared at its slow descent, covering their ears. When the chopper was safely on the ground, Ben unbuckled himself, thanked the pilots, and stumbled out of the door. Dizzy and nauseous from the ride, Ben’s knees gave out, and he fell forward into the uneven sand. He swallowed and tried to steady himself as the pilots motioned for him to clear off. He half-walked, half-crawled as far away as he could manage before plugging his ears and turning to watch the helicopter climb into the sky again and take off towards the city.

The sand was fine and full of footprints. A tractor nearby dragged a metal sifter over the sand, collecting cans, wrappers, and glass left over from the weekend beachgoers. It was sublime; a blue sky resting on the surface of the sea and topped too by a crown of sun glare. Surfers vaulted over the waves as they barrelled by, a movable front of water walls, conceived by storms in the far out Pacific. The indifference and blissful ignorance which pervaded the scene was both hilarious and bizarre. The dissociative stroll of sandaled tourists, the hawk eyes of the lifeguards who scanned the surf from baby blue towers, the popsicle melting into a child’s hand, the long glide of cyclists on the paved path by the boardwalk, and the continued rounds of the roller coaster on the Pier, all gave no impression, no impression at all, that just a few miles inland the very same city lay prostrate in gross devastation.

Walking parallel to the Pier, Ben headed across the hot sand towards the boardwalk which hugged a line of attractive buildings, each in sound condition. The Pier, too, had survived the quake and continued, business as usual. Ben could hear the sensational noise of arcade
games, bells and buzzers sounding from a one story building on the far end of the Pier, closer to the boardwalk below. A blinking sign, bisected by a large yellow lightning bolt, read in capital letters: **PACIFIC STADIUM ARCADE.**

As Ben crossed the bike path and stepped onto the paved boardwalk, he could hear the dissonant croon of an untuned guitar, played by a grimy beach bum who sang covers for change. Nearby a playground in the sand, bodybuilders stretched and lifted one another into the air for sport. A man wearing nothing but an American flag Speedo rollerbladed by, a boombox balanced on his shoulder, blasting Bruce Springsteen, and a shifty woman with her skirt pulled up to her breasts and large Coke-bottle glasses asked Ben for fifty cents for the bus.

Waving her away, Ben spotted a family of four. A mother and father pulled a small red wagon and talked idly. Inside slept a bald baby boy, wrapped in a blanket. Ahead of the adults, a slightly older child, big sister to the baby, did cartwheels. Ben approached the parents.

“Excuse me— do you know where I can find Arcadia Terrace?” he asked.

The couple looked at each other and laughed. Ben panicked for a moment— maybe he’d been left in the wrong spot— until they pointed towards towards a street perpendicular to the boardwalk. The cartwheeling girl did two in a row and ran to the stroller to tell her baby brother, and the four of them continued down the boardwalk, walking in a marvelous calm towards the Pier. Ben thanked them and took off running.
2916 Arcade Terrace sat on the corner of the street, facing the boardwalk and within earshot of the rowdy arcade. It was a long building, painted a pleasant sun-bleached camel brown with wavy metal bars covering the first story windows. A pair of tall double doors faced Arcadia, unlocked. Pushing against one of them, Ben found himself in a narrow hallway with mail boxes and a steep stairwell. He squinted at the names on the slots. Fowler. Capielli. Sponto. Raidar. And there it was, handwritten in blue ink and taped over the previous tenant. Moskowitz. Apt. 2E.

Ben mounted a flight of stairs, two at a time, and came to a low, narrow hallway without any light fixtures. He ghosted down the hall, hardly breathing, so nervous he ended up passing 2E without noticing. Turning around he saw it there, a tired doormat in front of the door.

Ben cleared his throat and knocked. He waited, straining to hear, then knocked again. No sound, not even a stirring.

“Hello? Mom?” Nothing. He put his hand on the door knob and twisted. It was open.

The place was sparse. Bare wooden floors. A round table, a creaky chair, and a dusty, green cabinet. Ben recognized a few odds and ends; items which had once folded into the landscape of his childhood home. The tall standing lamp whose chain was half-lost, the plastic Bugs Bunny TV tray, the red picture frame with the roses carved in the corners. Here they were, ripped from their original context, tacky and ill-suited when thrown together here with so much space in between. The table was covered in mess: two pizza boxes, piles of mail, an unplugged toaster, and spilled coffee which had dripped over the side. Grains of sand spread out all over the floor around a pair of kicked off sandals, and beside the shoes, a cell phone had been thrown
onto the ground, its black screen badly cracked. A few liquor bottles stood in various states of empty on the counter. The room was still, save for the curtains, white with blue seashells, which bobbed in the breeze through the window.

There was a person lying beached across the couch, wrapped up a blanket, her back to Ben. He recognized the curl of red hair, grey at the roots, which poked out from the half hidden head. He floated closer to her, the floor creaking under his feet. Towering over her, he will her to stir, to make the blanket rise and fall with the rhythm of her breathing. The blanket did not move. He could see her legs poking out from the other side of the couch, the flesh pale, the muscles atrophied. The bottoms of her feet were unclean, and her hair was tangled. Ben felt the room begin to tilt sideways. It was his mother. She was dead.

Dust milled overhead, passing through the beams of sun and settling on the couch. A clock ticked in the kitchen area. On the street below, someone palmed a car horn. An engine growled, followed by a wash of tires on the road. A child screamed on the boardwalk nearby. Somewhere below the window came a cluster of cooing, the beating of wings. All the birds flew away.

Ben stayed standing over her body, his hands by his sides. Of all the times he’d imagined her death, all of the absurd drama he had thought would accompany the scene, the terror which had propelled him to her side time and time again, no fiction in his mind could have prepared him for the real thing. How senseless; this quiet, unremarkable end. His mother wrapped up on the couch, not a soul around to see her off, gathering dust for who knows how long. Twenty five years of alcoholism, pill popping, chain smoking, heinous boyfriends, payday loans, and
shocking recklessness had ended here, in this small, unfamiliar apartment. It was neither shocking nor devastating. It was disappointing.

*So this is how you leave me,* Ben thought, *his jaw tight, this was all the time we had.* Had she put up a fight? Had death come as a surprise? Had she taken its hand and gone willingly, uncaring, unafraid?

Daylight drained out through the window and the room fell away from Ben. The wood beneath his feet turned to old carpet, the walls warped and changed color, and the room grew smaller. Without warning, Ben found himself standing in his childhood living room, many years ago. It was just after nine in the evening, a school night, and he was on his way out to meet friends for a game. He was more boyish then, not yet able to hide his fears within the guise of an adult male body. He’d moved like a phantom from his room and through the living room, dodging creaking spots in the floor as though they were landmines as he made his way towards the front door. Three steps away, so close he could have reached out and turned the knob, a voice croaked from the couch.

“Benny?” he froze and held his breath. *Don’t move,* he thought. *Don’t move.* Too late.

“Benny.” This time no question in her voice. “Come braid my hair.”

It was the same request, repeated in the same wounded voice, night after night. Ben stayed still. *Don’t do it, Ben, you spineless sonofabitch,* he’d thought to himself. *Don’t you dare.*

“Benny, now,” his mother called to him, the liquor loud in her voice. His will deflated, and he stepped back into unlit the living room. There he’d stood before his mother, dressed in his favorite shirt, late already for the hockey game he was meant to attend. She lounged across the
couch, a pillow over her head, her body like a bag of sand. A thick-necked bottle of vodka rested beside the couch.

*What are you doing, Ben? What are you doing?*

He sat on the arm of the couch, removed the pillow from over her head, and began to braid her hair, knotted already from the tumult of day drinking. She cursed as he pulled the knots apart with his adolescent hands, trying to divide them into three separate strands. He began to overlap them, attempting to add some symmetry to her appearance, the suggestion of self-care. All the while she lay there, inert and slurry, talking at the television.

She was a helpless thing. Night after night, the same request, and night after night he’d return to her side, negotiate his rage and remind himself that this was the least he could do. From death she was never far. It was the least he could do.

Ben stared down at his mother’s body, rigid and cold. He reached to move the blanket, then stopped himself. Better to phone first, let someone know that she had died. He let his gaze wander unfocused around the apartment when something caught his eye. In front of the right side of the couch, near his mother’s head, a small thread of smoke slinked up from a blue ashtray on the floor. Ben looked closer. There was a lone cigarette balanced on the side of the tray. It was still lit.

He knelt down closer to be sure, and as he did, a glass near his foot fell onto its side, clattering noisily and rolling in a half-circle on the floor. Under the blanket, his mother’s body began to move. Ben jumped back. She grunted, mumbled something indiscernible, then turned her body around to face the room. He could see her whole face now, rapidly aged, puffy, and distinctly pink. Her eyes were shut, her nostrils shifting minutely. She was sleeping.
Ben rose to his feet and took a step forward. All of the things he had wished he could have said to her only a moment ago flew away from him, replaced by an unimpeachable clarity. She had not asked him to sit beside her deathbed. She’d simply called him, asked him to come. Incredibly, he had.

His mother stirred again, fussing with the blanket. She grunted. Ben cleared his throat. Nothing happened. Neither the words nor even the noise to stir her came to him. Staring at her hard, he became spontaneously aware of a raised mole beside her left eye. It was new, a small disruption in the memory he’d had of her. Her arm, which poked out from the blanket and rested across her chest, had some words tattooed on it, illegible. Her hair was more grey than red now, and a good deal thinner. Traces of her held true— the nose which Ben had inherited, the thin eyebrows, the full lips— but overwhelmingly, she appeared to him like a stranger.

Ben turned away from the couch. Crossing the room, he found the doorknob and took it in his hand. He looked back at her. The light shifted onto her face and she stirred yet again. As she did the blanket slipped off of her upper body and onto the floor, leaving her exposed. Ben began to move back to the couch, to lift the blanket over her again. He stopped himself. He took a breath and nodded to her, crossed over the threshold, and shut the door behind him.

The boardwalk had quieted. Children still swung from the filthy metal rings of a playground in the sand, and surf rats lounged and watched the waves from the shade. People took pictures. Ben wandered a ways, past souvenir stores and a Hotdog-On-A-Stick shack, towards the splintery Pier. By a flight of wooden stairs, a row of payphones sat in disrepair, their innards tagged in indecipherable script, their phonebook cases stuffed with used needles and razor
blades. Half of the lines had been sliced. Ben fished out a quarter and tried his luck. The line hadn’t rung twice before his wife picked up.

“Ben?” she said, cautiously.

“Rachel—”

“Ben.”

“Hi, honey.” Silence. He looked out across the beach and bit his lip.

“I don’t even know what to say, Ben— I don’t even know where to start.”

“Rachel, I’m so sorry—”

“No, Ben. No,” she interrupted him, grounded in her anger. “I’m talking now. I haven’t heard from you in almost 48 hours. I’ve been sitting here, practically glued to my phone going crazy and praying that you’re not hurt, or dead, or not coming back on purpose, because you drove to a disaster zone without even—” she lost control of her voice and broke off. He heard her collecting herself, rubbing her temples and taking a deep breath. After a moment, she continued.

“Of all the things you’ve ever done, this has to be the most stupid, inconsiderate, mean thing, Ben. It was mean. And I’m sitting here thinking, is he coming home? You said you’d be back for the appointment with the OBGYN but I didn’t hear anything from you and I’m thinking, seriously considering, should I go after him? Should I go stay with my sister or—”

“I’m very sorry,” Ben said. He spoke in a sobered voice, low and humble.

“Somehow I don’t buy that.”

“Rachel.”

“What?”
“Do you want me to come home?” his voice broke.

“What?”

“I’m coming home but, but I won’t if you don’t want me to—”

“Of course I want you here, you fucking asshole… Ben, are you crying?”

There was a long pause on both ends of the line. They breathed together.

“Did you find her?” Rachel asked.

“Yes,” Ben said. “She’s okay.”

“Oh Ben—”

“Yeah…” his hands shook so hard he nearly dropped the phone. “Rachel, I’m so sorry. I can explain it—”

“It’s alright, Ben. You can explain later—”

“I fucked up— I fucked up so bad— I just hope it’s not too late to—” at this he nearly came apart. The line began to beep, and he composed himself enough to fish another quarter from his pocket. Rachel let out a deep sigh.

“Ben?”

“Yes?”

“It’s a boy.”

“What?”

“We’re having a boy. If you’d been there today you’d have known that.”

“We’re having a boy,” Ben repeated, her words sinking in with accelerated lucidity.

“Ben, I really need to know. I need to know right now. Are you in this?”

“What?”
“This baby. Me. Us, Ben. Are you in it? Because if not—”

“Yes,” Ben said immediately.

“Are you sure?”

“I’ve never been surer in my life.”

“Because I need to know—”

“I’m in it, Rachel. I am,” said Ben. He waited for her to speak. To his surprise, she let out a faint and tired laugh.

“Jesus, Ben,” Rachel said. “What the hell happened out there?”

“I can’t explain it all exactly but... I’ll be home soon. And I’ll tell you all about it.”

Ben hung up the phone and walked towards the sand. Beachgoers wandered from one shaded spot to the next. The rides on the pier sat mostly still; the gears and beams of the West Coaster, Pacific Wheel, the Sea Dragon and Frog Hopper, Shark Frenzy, and Seaside Swings grew hot in the sun. The roller coaster wound along its yellow path, around and around and around. The arcade was empty now, and outside, lone seagulls picked at pretzels and zig-zag fries dropped along the path. Sea winds blew spray off the crest of wave barrels and sand off of the tops of the dunes.

A boy. A baby boy. A son. The words chimed in his ears. The breeze kept coming off the water. Pails and shovels were collected, chairs folded. Small feet darted over hot sand.

Ben turned away from the Pier, wiped his brow, and set off for home.