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HYPE WOMEN

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty
of the University of South Alabama in
partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

English

by

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ABSTRACT

Haller, Meggan, M.A., University of South Alabama, December 2022, *Hype Women*.
Chair of Committee: Annmarie Guzy, Ph.D.

The savior has spoken: *I'm gonna go ahead and lube this vaginal probe for insertion. It's time to examine your darkest cavity and determine what you're made of.*

With these sacred words, a long-awaited prophecy is fulfilled. A would-be messiah, a pair of followers, a scholar studying the origins of an enigmatic cult, and an investigator attempting to bring a fraudster to justice find themselves on parallel journeys through the desolate plains of future Nebraska seeking a paradise promised by a cryptic radio broadcast.

Behold, the Hype—a confounding dung heap of catchphrases and vague assertions, parables with double meanings, and hoards of freeze-dried food passed down through generations of Hype Women awaiting with irreverent certainty their deliverance from the profane world of 2442, a globalist utopia in which penises are out of fashion and brains are all connected.

From the dark, empty shaft of a decommissioned missile silo to the Prick of the Prairie—an erection formerly known as the Nebraska State Capitol—this wicked farce journeys across the rural heartland of America, a mostly-abandoned landscape scattered with relics of modern humanity, encountering ferocious “Acts of God” that raise doubts about heaven and fears that a force more powerful than anyone imagined is working against its own people.

INTRODUCTION

“There is a theory which states that if ever anyone discovers exactly what the Universe is for and why it is here, it will instantly disappear and be replaced by something even more bizarre and inexplicable. There is another theory which states that this has already happened.” Douglas Adams’s epigraph in *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe* is a thought experiment that wrestles with the muddle of existence in a way that encourages acceptance of its fundamental weirdness. It promotes the search for answers while admitting there are none. In a similar way, *Hype Women*, a science fiction farce about a doomsday cult, embraces contradiction. It considers the dystopian edge of a future utopia in which gender is a choice one never gets to make, people are sick of health and wellness, one’s private thoughts can be publicly held against them, animals are smarter than humans, and the existence of God is disdained for lack of evidence only to find he exists in the form of an eternal donkey with self-serving motivations. It gifts a strange fictional world to a strange real one and challenges readers to compare them. The narrative begins hundreds of years in the future, but it ends in the present day, weaving together strands of QAnon lore into a closed system with a god-like power of self-genesis. *Hype Women* contends that even if many of the problems of the modern era can and will be solved, they will be replaced by something Douglas Adams would describe as “even more bizarre and inexplicable.”

The narrative follows the journey to the promised land of five point-of-view characters whose connections to the Hype range the belief spectrum from devotion to ridicule. Willie, the self-appointed savior, is a charlatan experienced in making promises

she can't keep. Scotty is a scholar in search of the scientific truth behind a faith she doesn't understand. Larry is an investigator who views the Hype as just another scam. Germain is the narrative's true believer. She's on a tight deadline to get to the promised land, and she's dragged her deaf granddaughter, Pru, along for the journey. Despite their various worldviews, they converge around Hype ideology in ways that feel beyond their control. Thus, *Hype Women* argues that belief has weight. It is self-perpetuating, and like a black hole, it can consume reality.

I have written *Hype Women* in third-person limited point of view. Though the work has only one narrator, each chapter adopts the point-of-view of one of the main characters who describe events and actions from divergent perspectives. In the story, the characters travel a single path to a common destination, but they travel independently, they have different goals, different stakes, and different challenges. Through the course of the narrative, they encounter each other in various ways allowing for conflict and confusion to arise and revealing the comedy of errors that plagues their journey.

All of *Hype Women's* human characters are female as the book takes the satirical position that if people have the freedom to choose their gender, in the future everyone will be female. Identity is often a result of cultural norms, and even in a world in which people technically have a choice, they may feel constrained by expectations. It is crucial, therefore, that I acknowledge that despite appearances, some of the characters are biologically male. In fact, as blithely feminist as the narrative is, the character arcs make clear that there is no single performance of life to suit the diversity of the world. Accordingly, the animals that appear as secondary characters in the story are granted extraordinary agency to affect the plot. By contrast with the humans, they are all male.

For each of the characters, something personal is at stake, but they must all contend with obstacles that can be interpreted as either natural or supernatural. In particular, successive environmental disasters (range fires, rat plagues, stampeding wild boars, mudslides, flooding, and ultimately a super-tornado) make their journey to the promised land treacherous and uncertain. The appearance of a catastrophic tornado at the Nebraska State Capitol during the story's climax calls to mind the Kansas tornado in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, which serves as vehicle of fantasy, transporting Dorothy to a land of equal parts beauty and abomination that in the end is nothing but a dream. In *Hype Women*, much of the external conflict comes from these escalating "Acts of God." They position the work as a climate change fable, commenting on the risks of the god-like impact humans have on ecology. Additionally, they strike with a ferocity and intentionality that suggests perhaps the Almighty himself is working against his people.

Hype Women's narrative features a distinct physical hyperrealism meant as a contrast to its focus on "paradise." In my observation, fiction traditionally highlights characters' interior motivations and emotional conflicts at the expense of the daily discomforts experienced by all humans. Society, in fact, does this too. Sometimes our unacknowledged physical motivations have outsized impact on our behavior. At the risk of repelling readers, the narrative tackles some of these taboo topics with an emphasis on the human body. Despite being our oldest technology, it is still our most advanced to the degree that many people cannot accept that it is the work of evolution and not an intelligent designer. The narrative itself refers "a period of literary hyperrealism in the 2200s in which AI writers experimented with narratives of excruciating detail. This technique, taken to the extreme, resulted in anti-narratives. Rather than transporting

readers out of real life, such books exacerbated the discomforts of reality. They made real life unbearable.” Religions have utilized real life’s unbearable aspects since the dawn of humanity to entice people into believing there could be something better, a place where one never has to carry a tampon or get a canker sore or a twitchy eyelid to name very minor examples that have nothing whatsoever to do with my own life.

From its origins with H.G. Wells at the end of the nineteenth century, to the golden era novels of Isaac Asimov, the dystopian work of Margaret Atwood, and the speculative fiction of Neil Gaiman, the genre of science fiction has grown to include a variety of narrative techniques addressing big questions of what it means to be human. Across the range of the genre, science fiction utilizes tropes and conventions to teach readers how to read its narratives. The expectation is that readers benefit from the lexicon of the genre as they navigate narrative worlds. *Hype Women* makes use of these expectations to ground readers in the future Nebraska territory of Norte America, a continental nation state. Because the Nebraska territory is largely abandoned and no longer served by public resources, the narrative is a disorienting mash-up of historical pioneerism with futurism in which some characters are not familiar with telephones and others utilize various speculative technologies. The most important of these is the brain-computer interface, Newerlink (an iteration of Elon Musk’s Neuralink). Newerlink operates through a magnetic field created around the wearer’s head by a pair of advanced earrings. In the story, these devices are ubiquitous in mainstream society. They are not however in use among the Hype Women. The earrings enable a world-wide networked interface that operates within the human field of vision. Information is collected and displayed seamlessly by sight. The utility of the devices is nearly limitless as it interacts

directly with the brain. It also records the wearer's thoughts and actions allowing readers deeper access to some characters' histories and motivations.

Though science and technology play a vital role in *Hype Women*, their functionality is irrelevant. I make only a bare attempt to educate readers on how future technology works. The science behind it is vague and ridiculous. For instance, the micro black hole that sends the Hype Women back in time is caused by a 3-DNA bust of Colonel Sanders written into a parallel processor as an office prank. This sounds like bullshit because it is. A far-fetched conception of technology reflects the tone of the project.

Though *Hype Women* is a soft science fiction novel, its postmodern style and absurdism place it on the periphery of that genre. *Hype Women* utilizes dark humor, irony, and intertextuality like postmodern writers Kurt Vonnegut and Thomas Pynchon. It is silly, like the work of Douglas Adams, and it treats temporality with a similarly light touch—past and future are fluid and connected. *Hype Women* rejects the conventions of realism, and I'm leaning into the freedom afforded by satire to comment on the values at work in late-stage capitalist societies. The real world, as it stands, lends itself nicely to nonsense.

Michael Chabon's work in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* provided me with a useful example of the kind of stylized world-building my own work demands. Chabon has created an independent Jewish state in Sitka, Alaska. It is a clever alternative history based on an abortive proposal for the project during World War II, and it requires Chabon to lay ground-work that can both engage readers and provide enough clarity to keep us reading. Similarly, *Hype Women* depicts an eccentric community isolated from society. In

both stories, the Messiah is revealed to be more a work of man than God, and ultimately, a tool of oppression.

The Yiddish Policeman's Union is a literary detective story rife with crime-noir imagery. I took particular notice of how Chabon makes use of genre conventions without limiting his style. Chabon pressures his prose to pull double and triple duty, combining characterization, world-building, and plot exposition. In working his language so hard, Chabon's writing sometimes comes off campy, but the tone suits the crime-noir trope and provides stability to readers unfamiliar with Chabon's world. I have no hesitation describing my own work as campy—certainly more so than Chabon's—but the language's mock-grandeur echoes the reverent formalism of religious texts and sermons and clashes wildly with the plot's lewd bodily obsessions.

Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* also served as an influence on the development of *Hype Women*. Reed writes an alternative history of the Jazz Age in which the United States is gripped by an epidemic of jive. Jes Grew, the virus at the epidemic's center, is a seductive full-body religious practice of music and celebration from the Egyptian god Osiris. It is not a virus of pathogens; rather it is a virus of ideas, fusing genetics and information science to undermine established white power structures through control of media technologies. However, the “music” of the virus that sets the nation dancing is missing its words in the form of the Book of Thoth, a holy reference text that serves as its liturgy. Throughout the narrative, the virus and the Book of Thoth seem to be seeking each other. Like *Hype Women*, *Mumbo Jumbo* runs on the perceived power of a sacred message.

Additionally, Reed has long been recognized for his use of technoculture to center the role of Black innovation in the history of Western civilization. In *Mumbo Jumbo*, his narrative thread reaches from the “Grapevine Telegraph,” used by enslaved people to spread information by word-of-mouth during the Civil War, to radio and television, cutting-edge communication technologies of 1920s Harlem, where the book is set. *Hype Women* employs a similar method of embedding technology in a fundamentally analog narrative.

Finally, the writer whose work has impacted me the most on this project is Willa Cather. My husband is from Cather’s hometown of Red Cloud, Neb., and over two decades, I have visited Red Cloud numerous times. Cather had a genius for narrative ecologies, and her ability to connect readers to the stark beauty of the prairie is why I read the opening chapters of *My Ántonia* to my grandmother in the final moments of her life. There is something very pure about a land of sky and grass that is akin to mainstream conceptions of paradise.

In Cather’s personal life, there is considerable speculation that she blurred gender binaries in pioneering ways. Though female, she identified as male at various points. Willie (named for young Cather) grows up in Red Cloud, and that’s where the narrative begins. Though the world of *Hype Women* is populated by females, Willie is biologically male. It is compelling to me that both Willie (the fictional character) and Willa Cather are women who might have preferred to identify as men if society would accept it.

Hype Women opens with the epigraph “Sentence first—verdict afterwards.” It is a quote from the Queen of Hearts in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll. It is notable that the response to this statement by Alice is “Stuff and nonsense!” The

epigraph is a signpost for readers to the bullshit that follows. We live in a disorienting period in history. Were the events of January 6, 2021, an insurrection or legitimate political discourse? Is a mask a sensible form of protection amidst a pandemic or a tool of biopower? Should climate change be addressed by multinational corporations and billionaires or am I supposed to fix it? Is a cabinet on [Wayfair.com](https://www.wayfair.com) an overpriced piece of junk or a listing for a sex-trafficked teenager? Are birds biological creatures or are they government drones? In this context, a politically independent American seems about as likely to exist as an all-knowing religious deity.

While it's possible we are on the front-edge of a wave of QAnon-adjacent absurdist fiction, my goal is to create something that fulfills my own need to grapple with the fact of my existence in a weird world. Like the characters on their journey to paradise, this project is an exercise in seeking truth amid chaos and confusion. In my experience, journeys of this nature often end in further contradiction.

“Sentence first—verdict afterwards.”
—Queen of Hearts
Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland
Lewis Carroll

PROLOGUE THE PROPHET IN HER HOMETOWN

By revelation, Willie’s course was set. Her actions were pre-ordained. She was neither culpable, nor contrite. That the revelation came by way of donkey flatulence didn’t lessen its import. That flatulence was rarely so noxious as to detach one from reality lent credence to what it revealed. It was no common fart but the withering smell of butt-death, an odor that lodged in Willie’s nasal cavity, dogged her the rest of her life, and revived, even unto the end, with every breath. It was a fart imbued with meaning. The revelation was specific. Willie was the redeemer, the deliverer, the savior.

Willie felt honorifics were *déclassé*. She hadn’t committed to a title, but its inference she adopted. The winds led her to it, the excretory winds of a righteous ass. She checked the forecast—the week was clear and mild, but at the end of it, there would be a cataclysmic weather event tailor-made to suit her purposes. It was a sign. From that moment, she knew, by divine instinct, her course of action.

Like visionaries of old, there were parts of her story she wasn’t keen to disclose. Honestly, she never enjoyed recounting the beef between herself and Mother. She preferred to skip past her prolonged estrangement from the Hype, though prodigal narratives had cachet. Likewise, there was no need for a long exposition to reveal Mother

was naked and dead in the front porch rocker, or the vultures circling overhead were ominously known as a wake.

Any one-sided conversation between Willie and Mother's corpse—the airing of grievances, the hatching of plans, the begrudging repentances—happened off the page if they happened at all. By way of last rites, she deadlifted Mother into the rocker and cut her hair short, in crude style—an approximation of Willie's own pompadour. She didn't linger over the irony that a pinch of Grease #109 brought Mother's hair back to life ("like hot, buttered camshaft" as Willie used to say). In truth, she rarely lingered over irony. It was lost on her, as was subtlety.

Willie watched the buzzards riding loops of wind in the reaches of the sky. The donkey in question pounded the dirt by the picket fence and loosed an unmistakable, human-like laugh. Now that Mother was dead, there was no other person except Willie to be found in all of Red Cloud.

Wind billowed the grasses in the old ag fields—still tree-less more than a century after their last planting. The ruins of South Town were brown from drought even though winter was over for well and good. The headstones in the Catholic Cemetery had crumbled in rows. Dust-devils worked their way through the abandoned cluster homes in the reconstruction zone. The mirrored eye of the interstellarscope was welded shut within a dented metal building as searching for meaning in the bowels of the universe was the errand of a previous generation's fools. All the historic storefronts on Garber block were still standing; same for Moon block, the 1885 Opera House, and Farmer's Co-op GW. Most of West Town was razed after the urban migration of the late 21st century. It settled

into a hilly terrain of debris. Red Cloud, like the rest of the Nebraska territory, was empty.

One last time, Willie entered her family home, the clapboard house on North Cedar. The radio in the kitchen was tuned as ever to white noise. Its sound—a surge of rainfall, a swell of crickets, a rising tsunami—was imprinted on Willie’s youth. Static was her birthright. Rather than switch the radio off, she cranked up the volume. When the Message finally came—and come it would—she wanted to make sure Mother heard it.

She opened the pantry and raided Mother’s hoard of ramen noodles, filling her pockets for the days ahead. Then she crossed into her childhood bedroom. Willie blinked away an urgent notification from Vic at the top of her Newerlink sight display—*Hey Hun! When I find you I’m gon fuckn kill you!* She flicked open her switchblade comb and smoothed the sides of her hair while scanning a file of complaints from her downline. She trashed them with a twitch of an eye. *Can’t please everyone*, she thought. *And you can never please a bunch of whiny bitches.*

She snapped the comb shut and pocketed it. She skimmed the felony warrant alert with her name on it in red type that crawled the bottom of the interface, bristling at the word *fraud*, which she found fatuous and demeaning. Willie preferred not to think of her last gig as a fraud but as a start-up she’d developed into a global lifestyle brand. That was another part of her story she chose not to dwell on. Anyhow, the relevant authorities would soon arrive, and she needed to exit the premises.

She scrubbed through all her memory files denying detectives access to a moment-by-moment record of every thought and action she’d had over the twelve years she’d been

away from Red Cloud, her entire life in the mainstream world. She wiped all her data without a twinge of nostalgia. That was all behind her. She'd come home to the Hype. She'd accepted her inheritance, embraced her lineage, resolved to elevate her people from laughingstock to legacy. She was no pantywaist. She was a Hype Woman.

Willie readjusted her junk (something about the gesture gave her confidence). Then she removed her Newerlink earrings—the small, magnetic hardware networked to her brain. Her vision went black just long enough to lose balance. She stumbled against her bed. Her analog sight returned. She studied the room she would never see again—peeling wallpaper, cracked oil lamp, yellowed washbowl. Everything was as it had always been, just without the data feedback. It would take some getting used to. She reached under the mattress. There was no need to hide the letter any longer. Mother'd lost her chance to deny it, confiscate it, contextualize it. Mother was dead. Now no one could dispute it. The letter belonged to Willie. It contained all the proof she needed that, from birth, she possessed something others did not. She had been chosen.

Outside, the heat swelled. Mother never held up well in the summer. She smelled of rotten fruit and feces. Willie swatted the flies off Mother's eyelids. The vultures numbered in the double digits now, not that she counted. There were enough, she hoped, to make quick work of the body. She dragged Mother's rocker onto the brick walk where the corpse would be accessible. Then, she placed a second rocker next to Mother and sat down to re-read the words that had so long ago predicted her ascendance, the prophecy that propelled her.

My dear Mary Virginia,

Thank you for writing to update me on the condition of your daughter, Willie. How I miss the dear girl. I expect you're curious as to how we manage here at home. I am doing well. I'm languid as the result of a fright (the details would bore you), but I have somehow gotten the requisite food and rest to keep from exciting my nerves though it has been difficult, I own. At the first inkling my wires are tightening, I amble along in the dreary air as if I'm one of the great Romantics, and it lulls me. But on the subject of your Willie, I wish to offer consolation. She is a case that fascinates me still. Please be easy regarding matters of genitalia. I assure you, upon medical inspection, we all look like ragbags (my experience in war has taught me)! Willie is utterly, truly, and wholly normal under the carriage. I am coming to wonder if we should not do away with the concept of what is "normal." Willie is a girl of perception and intellect, and she is a gift to your people already, surely to be even more with time. I implore you to treasure and nurture her, for I know to my soul she came into this world for a reason. I judge she'll be arousing the masses from the rotunda of the capitol before her thirtieth year! She will do us all proud beyond measure.

Respectfully,

Dr. Love

P.S. Remind me the name of that ass of yours.

P.P.S. Willie will be an insect for awhile, a little caterpillar! That is, a harmless, leaf-eater. Do not hurry her process of transformation. She has plenty of time—quite enough. It is my belief that we are, all of us, subject to outside conditions (drought, crow-peckings, wasps, hail storms) just as caterpillars are. I caution you to consider the

conditions in which you place Willie, for they will determine how she grows. In time, she will transform like a butterfly—a wish fulfillment!

Willie folded the letter and slid it into the pocket of her leather jacket. She snapped her earrings—her identity—onto Mother’s ears. Willie preferred not to compare herself to Mother or remark on their resemblance. She never mentioned the obvious anatomical difference between them. Frankly, she didn’t like to mention Mother at all, preferring to sideline her role in the story. The events of her brief stopover in Red Cloud were not, to Willie’s mind, relevant to the journey she was about to undertake, her holy crusade.

In her final years of life, when past and future tangled in the cobwebs of her mind, when she paced a locked hallway in a rascal scooter, a disgraced messiah, her speech inhibited by an overgrown tongue, her spine fused into a crook, identifying people only by their footwear, unable even to clock the changing seasonal puns on the activity board, Willie would have ample time to reconsider the improbable events of her life. Unto her dying breath, she claimed her story had nothing whatsoever to do with Mother. Mother was no more than a footnote. The best thing Mother ever gave Willie was her dead body to feed to the vultures. See, Willie couldn’t be reborn a savior if the sinner in her hadn’t yet died.

Without a goodbye to the left behind (farewells, too, were declass ), Willie mounted the donkey and kicked the stock-still animal like she expected him to take off in a gallop. Instead, the ass lurched forward slow as you please. Dust billowed around the two as they made their way down the dirt road, through the coneflower knolls, beyond a herd of deer, and over a graveyard of eagle bones until they reached the blue hill. The afternoon sky

was clear with a glimmering mantle that spoke to Willie of wonders to come. And, as if in solemn accord, the ass, again, farted.

CHAPTER 1 UNHOLY UNION

Despite the taboo nature of a cow-goat sex scene, it occurred unbidden—goat on cow, deep in the dance of the wild prairie, born by an instinct both prosaic and profane, natural and industrial, a deed so gag-inducing Prudence must intervene. Birds took wing. Chipmunks dropped their nuts. With a breeze, the big bluestem demurred. O Hubris, what hath thou wrought?

The two species seemed ill-suited for this interaction. The cow was a heritage breed from a farm on the other side of the river. Pru could trace the animal's lineage for several generations, certain she was genetically pure and unlikely to crossbreed. But the goat's origins were murkier. He'd often exhibited modified behaviors, and his scent was off—the entire homestead reeked of blister pus. He was forever seeking a way out of his pen as though he was unsatisfied with the life of a bread-and-butter farm. Pru considered slaughtering him for meat, but she had a soft spot for impurity. Contrary to the doctrine in which she was raised, she deemed it a blessing. A bit of artificiality *was* natural in one way of thinking, hers even, though she kept that salacious idea to herself, locked away with the secrets of doubters.

As to the union of goat and cow, no need to imagine the details. Goats, by nature, were adept animals, and by modern genetics, strapping and limber. Their facility for tool use had been enhanced, so an overturned washtub was involved. Like all curiosities, it just worked, though not without acrobatics, giving Pru enough time to crank the barn

radio to a level known as “ear-splitting,” though Pru herself couldn’t hear it. She was aware sudden, loud noises were considered frightening.

The tactic had the desired effect: startled buck, *coitus interruptus*. The creature regained his composure. Unholy union of goat and cow averted, and Pru’s hands weren’t even dirty. For this, she should give thanks. But not to the goat. *You’re endless trouble*. Pru signed, then pointed to his erect penis. *And out of style*. Among humans at least, penises were no longer fashionable. The old saying turned out to be prescient. If everybody could choose their own gender, the world would be full of women. So it was.

Pru hooked the goat’s leg and dragged him back to his pen, dreading the work of wire-fence repair. The cow, liberated, cut a traverse through the fields of goldenrod and up to a bluff that met with a view of the Platte. Its rutted bed carved in and out of banks of cottonwood and silver maple trees. The stream, even in drought, sparkled like glass. The water gave onto fringes of swamp milkweed and towering anthills. Dry lightning sparked in the heavens.

In the distance, Pru’s grandmother, Germain, scurried down a slope beneath the sod house. There was a soundtrack associated with the pastoral—braying and whinnying of large creatures, chittering and chirping of small, a hollow knock on galvanized steel, a windmill’s insistent squeak, a rasping door hinge, the work of saws, hatchets, washboards, a breeze through leaves, grass, wind chimes, a midnight predator’s howl. Pru had read of it in Wordsworth and Hardy. Quite pleasant it all seemed for one who could hear. Alas, she could not. Her world moved to a muffled hum. And silence.

The goat knocked his horns on Pru’s leg as she gathered the length of her hair. She signed *willpower*, then took an apple from her pocket and held it out. She would have

lectured him on the Internet Age theory of social order through self-control, but the goat jerked her arm hauling her forward, unable to sign. Back and forth they struggled.

Willpower fortifies the mind, establishes stronger bonds, enables better health, she thought. She grabbed the apple with both hands and yanked, dragging the goat. She gained ground. One more pull. She felt the fence at her back. She had nowhere to go. For a moment their eyes met, but the buck's rectangular pupils lacked a capacity for empathy. He took his opportunity and wrenched the apple from Pru's grip, chomping it whole. With vexed gestures, she signed, *You should really work on it*. He circled the pen in defiance. Pru slumped against the railing. As she understood them, the decisions goats made were not of this world.

The goat worked his jaw, yelling who knows what. She stifled an instinct to nail him in the gonads. She did not wish to martyr him like the central character of her grandmother's parable about the loyal goat. As Germain told the story, a mother left her sleeping baby in the goat's care. She returned at nightfall. The cradle was overturned, the baby'd disappeared, and the goat bore a guilty expression. Thinking the goat let the baby crawl away, the mother took off her goat's head with a pulaski, spilling his blood across the rocks. Returning to the cradle to put it aright, she saw the baby was fast asleep beneath it, and by the child's side was the flattened body of a venomous scorpion. The mother realized her goat hadn't endangered the baby—rather, he'd saved the child, and for his effort, the mother slaughtered him. Pru often balked at the parable, at the very idea of it, but Germain explained the lesson within. Besides being a hollow-horned ruminant, a goat might also be one who suffers in the place of another, a scapegoat. Who endangered the baby? The mother did. Pru's own goat never displayed the kind of loyalty

for which the goat-martyr was remembered. That quality, she conjectured, had been engineered out of him.

She took her time cleaning out the stall, wiping sweat from her chin with the handkerchief in the pocket of her coveralls. Despite growing up in the Hype, Pru had no serious religious practice. Rather, she was a practitioner of eye rolls and sighs. She lived by a simple maxim: Like a piece of toilet paper, life only gives you one swipe. Implied was the idea that a second attempt just spreads the shit around. The goat watched as Pru loaded his pellets into the wheelbarrow for disposal, his chin raised, his mouth upturned. Was he nodding? Smug fucking goat.

She paused her work and looked up to find Germain waving madly, hurrying her way. A cloud hovered beyond, crackling with lightning. The old woman signed *I rushed. The Message, I hear it*. Her gestures were fast and exaggerated. *Radio!* She rushed to the boombox—Pru forgot it was on—and adjusted the volume. *Crazy loud*, Germain signed. *Ears bleeding. Like a Motörhead concert. I can hear it as far as the house. The Message!*

Germain doubled over, catching her breath. As she huffed, Germain seemed to regard the walls trimmed in cobweb. Pru noticed them too. Shards of daylight exposed gaps to be chinked before winter, along with the cow chips to be collected, the garden harvest put up, the wood hauled and split, and on and on. Germain's eyes met Pru's. Something sly surfaced within them, something younger. The eyes, Pru recalled, of her mother, Jo, before she flew the coop. Eyes, she expected, that would be her own perverse inheritance one day. A blessing indeed. Germain pressed her thumbs and forefingers together, interlocking her hands. Then she pulled them apart. *The Message!*

Pru needed no further explanation to understand Germain's intent. Her grandmother had spent her life awaiting "the Message." How often she'd told Pru it was coming. This was the testament of the Hype, repeated in solemnity, foremost in the canon of eyewash. How long Pru had dreaded it. For lo, the Message doth not herald glad tidings but an unwelcome load of crap. Pru touched her forefinger to her temple, wiggling it as she pulled it away—a motion that looked much like drawing a hazy memory from her brain. *You're dreaming.* She pointed at Germain.

Germain shook her head. *No, no, no, no! It's on the radio. Now! 104.9 The Voice of the New Earth!* The old woman drew a scrap of paper from an apron pocket and waved it at Pru. Of course, it wasn't a dream, or a vision, or a trick of the feeble mind. Pru should be so lucky. Despite the stray pieces of hay in her grandmother's silver hair and the heart-shaped pink glasses, Germain was sharp as ever. This was the fulfillment of a prophecy, the long-awaited sort. Pru groaned and read as her grandmother transcribed.

I'm gonna go ahead and lube this vaginal ultrasound probe for insertion. That's right. It's time to examine your darkest cavity, for you—for all of us—to determine just what we're made of. Put your feet up. Legs apart. Ignore the discomfort as I slide this thing in for a deep view. Oof. Change, you know, is never comfortable. Your solitary existence in the recesses and gaps of our forsaken land, connected by radio static and patience...it feels familiar. You've nailed down your life hacks, your weird tricks, the tales of old wives, and it's going to sting a little, giving it all up. You'll feel a pinch. But the time has come to grunt out a new life. Call it paradise, the promised land, Nana's garden, Aladdin's Castle, whatever name unlocks the pipe dream of your mind, and follow me forth.

Pru wasn't yet done reading, but Germain tugged her arm toward the sod house, signing *We've got to go!* She was robust for her age and bearing. She heaved Pru off-kilter landing her granddaughter on the short grass. Germain mouthed, *I told you...It's true. Get your freckled ass moving.*

Pru wanted to stop her. To object. To marshal logic. To holler, *Wait. We're going to leave everything behind? Leave our home forever because of some stranger's sermon?* Her voice, though, allowed nothing. The goat stood above her stammering something indecipherable. She flinched as a burst of lightning split the sky. Was this prophecy, she wondered, or classic foreshadowing? The goat nipped the paper from Pru's hand and swallowed it. All she could think was, *Shit.*

CHAPTER 2 FORCED TO FLEDGE

Good News, the tease, was never on time. She was always breaking promises. She knew you wanted her, and she stood you up anyway. In fact, she stood you up *because* you wanted her. Bad News was a drill sergeant—relentless, punctual, unsympathetic. She was unwelcome, sure, but at least you could count on her. It was Scotty's experience that when good news was running late, bad news was already at the door.

She'd been waiting for forty-three days, and the hawk chicks still hadn't fledged. She'd set up an alert so she'd know the moment they took flight. She checked their video feed morning and night, just in case. They grew, puffed up, their feathers emerged, and they lounged in the nest calling for dinner by special-delivery like babies of all species. She hoped they'd vacate just long enough so she could relocate the nest, but the pace of nature was too slow for the pace of tech. Now she was in the position of bearing the bad news herself.

On the roof of the Continental Earthwave Monitoring station in Grand Island, Nebraska territory, the prairie wind was aggressive. The windbelt rose fifteen meters above the array of solar panels that made up the station's roof. It was a lean tower of chrome vanadium steel with a slot down its length, like the eye of a great needle. The windbelt powered the station.

Though Scotty was trained in the geophysical arts, at the CEM she was a glorified property manager. The site was mostly self-sustaining, and the real scientists worked remotely. Living so deep in the middle of nowhere was neither desirable nor

recommended. Scotty's job was considered oddball work for weirdos. She took over the position from her sister, Erin, after she died a few months back. Scotty never considered Erin a weirdo. Why her sister took the job was still an open question. But the building maintenance stuff was simple, and Scotty had free time to deep-dive into Erin's side-project—culture and customs of the Hype—to determine what was so compelling about another crazy cult that she'd give up her life in the real world.

As the property manager, Scotty had one responsibility: to keep the CEM running so no earthquake in Norte America went undetected. Thus, she had to get the windbelt going. The moment she set foot on the first rung of the access ladder, the wind was bent on pulling Scotty off. Ma and Pa hawk knew she was coming. She'd checked the video before she left the station to verify they weren't around, but as soon as she started climbing, they swooped in from out of nowhere. Now they were circling above her and squawking avian obscenities. She turned up the music in Newerlink to drown them out. (Radiohead. "Bones." *The Bends*. Parlophone, 1995.) They wanted Scotty to fall off the ladder, but she was clipped into a brake rail so she'd suffer contusions at most.

"Calm down," Scotty advised. "Repeat your mantra. Place your negative thoughts on clouds and push them over the horizon." She looked around. There were clouds aplenty, including a dark one hovering in the distance. From the tower, she surveyed the shale cliffs, the Platte River, the empty grassland, the sky all around her. One of the hawks shrieked and plunged at her. She ducked. "It was just a suggestion. There are lots of valid meditation techniques."

To the hawks, Scotty was a threat, a top-level predator. She could steal or kill the chicks, stalling Ma and Pa's DNA replication goals. Replication failure manifested as

grief. In fact, the possibility of that outcome incentivized Ma and Pa to protect the chicks. Scotty wasn't a threat, though. She wanted to reassure them. She'd given the chicks as much time as she could, but the power level at the CEM was critically low. The antiquated solar panels weren't efficient enough to keep the battery topped up. She needed to turn on the windbelt atop which the hawks roosted. For two months—ever since Ma and Pa started nest construction—the zekine windbelt was locked taut in the vertical slot of the tower so it couldn't vibrate in the wind. Scotty hadn't conducted a study, but she speculated that chicks incubated in a vibrating nest could be born with neurological defects causing them to fly in circles or seize mid-flight or warble nonsensically. It was time to turn the windbelt back on, and ready or not, it was time for the chicks to leave the nest.

Her track shuffled. (LL Cool J. "Mama Said Knock You Out." *Mama Said Knock You Out*. Island Def Jam, 1991.) She had low-velocity tranquilizer darts, otter leather falcon gloves, a welding helmet, and a pet carrier clipped to her harness. If all went well, she could get both chicks in one trip. They were each about the size and heft of a football. She had to remove the nest as well so Ma and Pa got the message to rebuild elsewhere. She wasn't keen to evict a young family, but trees were plentiful by the river, she reminded herself. They had other options.

Hand over hand, five more meters. The sky strobed, and Scotty checked her weather display—sporadic lightning storms in the immediate area. Possibly, a tall metal tower in the middle of the empty prairie was not the safest place to be. As if to confirm, the hawks launched a coordinated attack, dive-bombing Scotty and screeching over the music. They were strong birds. They walloped her helmet with echoing pops, forcing her

off-balance, and banging the pet carrier against the tower. She wrapped her arm around the ladder and braced herself as one of the birds slammed into her back. It tried for purchase. The bird's claws couldn't catch on her bioskin suit. She swatted it away.

A throbbing notification in her right peripheral distracted her. It was a bad time for multitasking. She tried to ignore the alert, but sometimes Scotty felt she had no more hold on her concentration than the wind had on a falling feather. She glanced at the message. It flashed red with urgency. Puta Madre. Erin's automated scan had turned up a live radio broadcast for the first time. Ever. She didn't know much about the Hype yet, but she knew this was the big one. The Message was coming across the station, *104.9 The Voice of the New Earth*.

She felt the sting of adrenaline. Urgent, yes. Critical? Not at the moment. If she didn't keep climbing, she'd be an easy target. Lightning rippled beneath the black cloud. Actually, an *easier* target. She ignored the alert and forced herself up another step only to be beaten back by both hawks at once.

Scotty looked up at the nest. It was ungainly, hanging over the sides of the upper platform. The smell of droppings, picked-over carcasses and decaying vegetation penetrated her helmet. She was curious about the tidiness disparity between species. A cat would never live like this, she judged. Meanwhile, there were microbes who thrived in spaces so clean, they were virtually nutrient-less. Before humans learned to control them, they were stow-aways on an exploratory mission to Mars. Ironically, they were also the first known alien life form, discovered on Mars during a subsequent mission.

Six more steps. Ma hawk charged. Her talons grabbed Scotty's shoulder and hung on. She couldn't swat the hawk away as she needed both hands to grip the ladder. The

bird pecked and scratched, then screamed. Panic. The helmet no longer felt protection enough. Scotty pulled herself up a step, skimming through the avalanche of words in her right peripheral. Even under present circumstances, they were hard to ignore.

She started up another rung... *Call it paradise, the promised land, Nana's garden, Aladdin's Castle, whatever name unlocks the pipe dream of your mind and follow me forth. Leave your failings behind. This world is a hot mess. 58% worldwide mortality during that last pandemic? Rough stuff. I always say, bodily fluids are the one secret worth keeping? Only the smart among you heeded my advice. Now I'm proposing a hashtag naturally essenced cure-all. It's like shoving a gun in your mouth, pulling the trigger, and shooting yourself full of rainbows. You'll hemorrhage glitter from every human orifice. Excuse my wimpy metaphor. Or make up your own! Seriously folks, you faithful out there waiting, feeling like this might have been a scam, the hour of vindication is upon us, or shortly will be if you make it here in time...*

The hawk pierced her bioskin suit and stabbed her shoulder. "That hurts." She faltered. Her track shuffled (The Faux. "Stapler Jam." *Planned Obsolescence*. Apple, 2081.) While she was still wrestling Ma, Pa clipped the pet carrier, circled and jabbed at her gluteus maximus, clinging to her. She grabbed the ladder and tried to shake the hawks off, but they were tough birds. Two more steps. She pulled up hard. The hawk had her by the pants. It was flapping hysterically. Feathers swirled around them.

One more step. She could hear the chicks' call, high and thin, lacking the force of an adult bird. Were they shouting threats at her? Pleading for help? Regretting their brief lives in what they perceived to be their last moments? She pulled herself up onto the platform and got her first look at them. They didn't have their signature red tail feathers

yet. They hopped and flapped their developing wings. Ma hawk descended and caught her hand by the glove. She fluttered backward, whipping tornados of wind at Scotty. The chicks jumped and flapped, regaining their balance. She tried to close her hand and pull against the hawk, but at that moment, the other hawk punctured the rear of her pants with its beak, and she felt the fabric ripping followed by a change in temperature on her legs.

She hesitated for a second and drew breath. Ma pulled her arm so hard, she'd either lose the glove or her balance. She let go of the glove. A silent bolt of lightning charged the air. Last thing she needed. If Scotty died, Erin's work, whatever it was, would never be finished. Scotty clutched the ladder and fell against the nest. The chicks screamed. One beat the air with its wings and dropped off into the wind. The second followed the first. Pa let go of Scotty's pants and Ma dropped her glove. Together, they glided away. The world was immediately silent behind Scotty's track. (Jones, Rashida. "Genuinely Curious." *The Feminine Urge*. Arista, 2030.) Suddenly, the chicks reappeared in the sky, flapping for thrust, finding lift, achieving the magical aerodynamics that enabled flight. They sailed toward the river and disappeared into the trees. Ma and Pa followed.

Scotty was breathing hard. Her bpm was high, but it was dropping as her heart returned to its natural rhythm. Well, the nest was empty. She held her breath and gave it a shove. It fell in a heap to the solar roof. It would need to be swept up and disposed of, but she didn't have time for that now. She descended the ladder. She reached the roof and looked up at the windbelt. *On*, she commanded. The tower unlocked. The belt relaxed just enough to vibrate in the wind—an aeroelastic flutter that oscillated magnets between wire coils to induce current to charge the battery to power the CEM. Task complete.

She took off her helmet and scratched the short fade over her temples. She glanced at mapping. It estimated five days of walking to her destination. Did she have that much time? If the Hype Women were headed to a higher realm, damnit, so was she. Erin would've gone out of sheer curiosity. Shit, maybe she was already there. Scotty unclipped the pet carrier and threw off her remaining glove. She twisted around to look at the back of her pants. The pants. She'd have to mend them. It wouldn't do to show up at the promised land with her ass hanging out.

CHAPTER 3 THE NEW HIRE

The odor of rotting flesh—a fist-clenching smell so thick you could choke on it—rode the gusts of wind through the grassy thoroughfares of Red Cloud, curling around broken steeples, surfing roof corrugation, sweeping up wildflowers in the gaps of crumbling bricks, tackling a street sign as it rushed down the hill into town, over the loose gravel of bioluminescent pebbles by the silo, through strings of cobweb-covered diodes along the mag tracks that used to connect Red Cloud station to the once-prosperous urban center at Lincoln-Omaha. In an energetic burst, it sailed along the green bridge straddling the Republican River where a bloodhound nosed the air, pulling whiffs of it through his scent receptors, the bouquet of death like a mouthful of promise. If only he could locate it and dig his nose right up in its biz.

“Eau de protein decay. This’ll be fun, Shotgun. I love creative non-fiction. Lead on.” Larry rubbed her palms together.

Filaments of lightning popped around them. Thunder guttered. Shotgun, a sleuth of sorts, lifted one ear, and with a rambling stride, led Larry, an investigator of sorts, along the reverse of the wind’s course, detecting a deeper, ever-more-embodied scent as the two closed in on the carcass from which it emanated. Holy hell. Larry donned a surgical respirator to cut the odor. The carcass sat in repose upon a rocking chair on the front walk of a neglected cottage—Willa Cather’s childhood home according to Newerlink. A radio within the house was tuned to static, cranked to be audible in the yard. The carcass’s appearance was not, in Larry’s estimation, worth noting. As a piece of evidence, it was

already picked over. Besides, it couldn't tell her anything she wouldn't get from the scraps of earlobes on the ground to which a pair of gold hoops were still absurdly attached. If the corpse was evidence of anything, it proved that the perp might well be a visionary leader, but she was only an amateur thug. A sophisticate would know that investigators had the tools to access wiped memories. Whoever this corpse was and whatever events brought her to this state could and would be ascertained.

To keep Shotgun from licking at one of the stripped tibias, or worse, the splayed nether region, Larry offered him a strip of rawhide from an interior pocket of her blazer in which she carried assorted precautionary items. Her shoes were built for multiple days at attention—black, ankle-high, thick of sole, rugged uppers. She always kept a weapon of last resort in the lining of her instep. She made rare attempts to manage her gray curls, no attempt to hide the lines of her forehead, checked her appearance so rarely, she hadn't yet noticed the coarse hairs growing under her chin. Her eyes were squinched from frequent giving of no fucks. She had the look and demeanor of one adept at busting metaphorical balls or the occasional real ones. She was a shade darker than average, a decade older than average, a head taller than average, and, in her estimation, a fair bit stronger than the average woman, who she assumed had no occasion to tackle a grown-ass lawbreaker at a full sprint.

She eased herself into the adjoining rocker, pushed back on her toes, and skimmed the perp's memory files as she rocked. Larry chuckled to see the woman's clumsy manner handling the corpse at 4x reverse speed. She was a first timer, no doubt. The murder had been accomplished through surreptitious administration of toxin in a cup of tea consumed

by the victim. Larry started a language diagnostic to save her some of the real-time viewing she'd need to log. While it ran in the background, she cued up the deathbed scene, which took place in a bathtub. The victim—a 60-ish woman, cross-Caucasian, average height, brunette—apparently feeling ill, drew a bath and sat in the tub with her head against her knees. She summoned the perp with a bony finger. The woman turned off the water and leaned over the tub's ceramic edge to attend to the victim's words. Her whisper was audible in the perp's ear. "I pushed you out of my vag alone, in this very tub. You sucked my teat until you were old enough to get your own milk. I had hopes for you, but you are nothing to me now. Less than the donkey out there chewing grass. He at least, has some sense."

"You're having a temporal lobe seizure, Mother," the perp informed the victim. "You're dying. Is that the last thing you have to say to me?" [*An eleventh-hour confession would be nice. Or an apology for the mind games. Or if you can't muster an expression of love maybe toleration.*] Ahh. Interiority. Larry's favorite.

"Willie," the victim rasped. "I've always known I'd die cold, naked, and alone."

"I'm here, Mother. I'm here, you know, for comfort." Willie enfolded her hand over the victim's. [*How long is this going to take?*]

The victim pushed Willie's hand away and looked at her with cold disdain. "You're spoiling it."

Larry reached down and scratched Shotgun behind the ear as he gnawed on the rawhide. "I have a hunch this case'll be worth coming out of retirement for." In truth, Larry had only been retired twelve days when she got the hard sell from a desperate

client—Vic, a retired fútbol player for one of the regional teams, and a Greaser, or that’s what the woman called herself. The Greasers, Vic said, were bilked out of their savings by their unscrupulous guru, Willie, who hooked them on direct selling a hair-styling gel called Grease #109 along with a line of other products for people who were sick of health and wellness. The goof was that the styling gel was actual grease. Like engine grease or something. Larry didn’t look it up.

The Greasers loved it. They all wore pompadours and rolled up the sleeves of their white tees, which explained Willie’s unorthodox style. They felt free for the first time to flex their biceps and bruh out. Larry refrained from editorializing. Frankly, the dispute wasn’t overly compelling. Some of the Greasers had lost their hair, and many lost some coin. But it was more than the money, Vic said (same as all pyramid scheme dupes). Larry found it strange that people still fell for such a dubious “business model,” but she reminded herself everyone was desperate in their own special way. Experience told Larry the money was already gone, and the hair may never grow back. If recovery was what the Greasers wanted, they were howling into the wind. But, as a testament to the severity of the fraud, the Greasers had gotten Territorial Protection to issue a warrant and—if they could bring Willie in—charge her with a felony. Without the possibility of restitution, this would be a case of simple vengeance, which Larry was happy to admit was the best kind.

Of course, she had other reasons for taking the case. She’d put off until retirement the writing of her fiction masterpiece, yet now the opportunity had arrived, she panicked every time she sat still. It was unpleasant. Additionally, her wife, Maxi, was in high

dudgeon about the flimsiness of their home's closet doors, which Larry knew had nothing to do with the cheap look of louvers. Getting out of the house was an amenable solution to issues related to lifestyle transition. Lastly, by no means leastly, and perhaps mostly, this notion of "the Hype" the Greaser, Vic, hinted at gave Larry a frisson of curiosity she knew from a long career often made an investigation worth taking on. Though a quick search didn't yield much, she gleaned the basics. The Hype was a decentralized cult-like group with wackadoodle beliefs living in isolation, awaiting the promised land. What could Larry say? She loved a good cult story. Vic blinked her Willie's bio, relevant correspondence, and the warrant. Larry serviced Maxi with a few words on the endeavor. Then she and Shotgun were out the door.

Shotgun stopped chewing and stood, aquiver. He pointed his nose east, flared his nostrils. A lightning strike forked the sky. Larry glanced at her weather display. No rain in the forecast. Just drought and lightning. Perfect weather for criminal apprehension.

As far as tracking Willie went, Red Cloud was the obvious point of departure. It was her hometown and the current residence of her only living relative, her mom, Ginny. It was also remote. Larry'd crossed through the Nebraska territory on occasion, but she'd never spent any time. It was as bleak or bleaker than its fly-over appearance, though as a woman of a certain age, Larry could appreciate the overlap between the land of grass and sky and bygone conceptions of paradise. The prairie was, to its credit, simple. A little digging into the particulars revealed the town of Red Cloud had an interesting cultural heritage likely buried beneath the footprint of defense-related labs during the last gasp of nationalism. The town was situated mere kilometers from the center of the former

continental United States, so one could scarcely get farther from foreign shores. That, of course, was all in the past. Its recent history was the same as every other town:

irrelevance.

Lightning brought Larry out of her thoughts. Then came thunder's call, blotting all other sound. As it waned, a voice rose out of the static—compressed, mid-sentence, disembodied, broadcasting from the radio. Shotgun rose to his front legs and gave an attentive head tilt. He was open-eyed. Larry did some cross-referencing and cottoned the import of the message—or in Hype coinage, “the Message”—before she'd missed too much. This, she had a hunch, was more than uncanny timing, or coincidence, or even divine intervention. There was no way in the lucid multiverse that Larry just happened to arrive on the scene the moment a public service announcement went out to all Hype Women after hundreds of years of static. Absolutely no fucking way.

...Seriously folks, you faithful out there waiting, feeling like this might just have been a scam, the hour of vindication is here, or shortly will be if you make it in time. The storm is upon us. Color-coded index cards are arranged on the wall with pushpins, red string carefully connecting them to the images, the dates, the maps, the headlines—just pretend I'm writing equations I'm too lazy to look up. Numbers! Letters in a language you don't read! Symbols from the ancient world! Break down the reality distortion field. Think of it as a calculated risk. How do you improve your calculations? Make them over and over again. It comes down to this, twerps—you've been waiting for a voice, and I've got one. Trust in me. I am all things that have been and all things to come. The perils of the world are grains of sand underfoot. Cast them off like dust....

The “voice,” Newerlink assured her, was that of Willie, her beautiful, bumbling perp. Larry had her target pegged. She fit a profile—a failed executive looking to rehab her resume. The more Larry learned about the Hype, the more Willie’s actions made a twisted kind of sense. Willie had seemingly been gone sixteen years, but, as an insider, she would know the Hype had a metaphorical job opening. Their listing, unlike other sacred traditions, had never been written down. Rather, it was passed from mother to daughter, a four-hundred-year search for the perfect candidate. The job was to be filled internally, of course, so it wasn’t advertised. The Hype preferred to promote from within, as the role required native understanding of the group’s brand. And as it was a high-stakes position with low probability of success, woeful few had ever applied, none of them capable of rising to its principal demand: overseeing the logistics of relocation to the promised land.

The successful candidate would have to work in darkness, extreme weather, and vermin-infested territories. It was an on-call position, so night and weekend work was expected. Bullheaded determination and a grandiose sense of purpose would be crucial to a candidate’s success, though from what Larry gathered, Hype Women called those qualities “righteousness.” While belief in the core mission was likely preferred, it would not be required if the candidate kept a lid on her doubts and demonstrated allegiance—this at least was Larry’s interpretation. As she saw it, curiosity and an open mind would not be as important as cunning and creative thinking. There was no interview process, naturally, as the Hype had no organizational structure, no leadership, no hiring manager.

Though it was not a paid position, the successful candidate would be amply compensated in gratitude, internal name-recognition, global, maybe universal power, and

first dibs on the perks of the promised land. In short, the Hype were looking for a savior, and Willie, doubtless, considered herself qualified. She had plenty of experience promising folks paradise, certainly more than the average candidate, and the rest of it, she could learn on the job.

Larry stopped rocking in the chair. She rose and turned to the house. The paint on its exterior was scraped clean by the wind. An upper window was shuttered. A chickadee perched on the gutter pronouncing advice or admonition. The porch moaned as she entered the domicile. Larry's footsteps were heavy with the certainty of a woman who knew her job and how to do it. With access to Willie's Newerlink, she had little need to study her surroundings. Shotgun, however, collected olfactory data from every room, tallying the common foot traffic routes and regular butt-accommodations. Larry crossed into the kitchen where the radio proclaimed widely: *...Everything before me was a hoax, which should be proof that I have a sense of humor...* Outside, somewhere, though near or far, Larry couldn't determine, some wild bolt of electricity snapped in the air, and for a moment, just a queef, the radio signal flickered, and the words contorted—*Bing Double Dingo!*—before the voice returned to normal. Larry looked at the dial. She blink referenced the frequency. *104.9 The Voice of the New Earth*, thirty-one kilometers northeast of Red Cloud. Curiously, its listing still contained an old-school digital phone number. Better and better. Larry blinked twice for a connection and strode out the front door while it rang.

She was long past whistling directions to Shotgun. The dog had a scent trail that extended to a radio tower that was improbably still standing. He whiffed a handkerchief slick with Grease #109 and charged through the gate. Shotgun lead the case. As Larry

closed the picket fence, she turned to face the carcass feeling some parting words were in order, though nothing appropriate came to mind. Suddenly, the radio station phone clicked. Someone was on the line. Larry spoke: "Willie?...Willie?...Come on. Put the phone to your ear and say hello." There was audible fumbling as Larry waited. "Someone's never used a telephone before." A few more seconds gone. Larry tried again. "Pap smear, pap smear. Can you hear me?"

Wrong number.

CHAPTER 4 A MESSAGE FROM ABOVE

The misapprehension between Willie and the donkey went back decades. Among other quarrels, they had different conceptions of the purpose of endless walking. For Willie, it was a matter of leading her people to the hereafter. The donkey had more complicated notions that honestly seemed food motivated. Their traveling party moved slowly and by negotiation, which frustrated Willie who was working on deadline. She needed to create space between herself and the authorities, but the donkey stopped every few meters to munch on grass. It took them three days to make it to *The Voice of the New Earth*. They spent the first night inside an abandoned storage unit. Willie choked down the powder of a nutrient shake she scrounged from a bin and slept on a deck chair. The next night they sojourned under the stars. Stripped naked in the heat, Willie slept lightly out of fear that spiders might explore her intimate demesne, or that the donkey would hit her face with a stream of hot piss from his protuberant dick. She met the morning in a funk.

By the third day, the sun had slow-roasted the prairie until the grass was dry enough to ignite. Willie could smell it in the air—hot dirt and thirst. There was electricity in the atmosphere. A cloud of mosquitoes consumed necks and hard-to-scratch places like nostrils and eyelids and shaggy inner ears. A gust of wind barreled a rickety cart, and the yoke bowed to the grass. A prairie chicken perched on an orange highway reflector. Willie's glutes cramped from hours of donkey-riding. The donkey panted under the burden of transporting a grown-ass human with functional legs. Just past a dirt road, they

began to hear the sporadic calls of wildlife—guttural belching and non-human giggling. There was a stereophonic quality to the vocalizations that brought to Willie’s mind the possibility of ambush. The donkey’s response was a sharp bellow, an answering call, a communication with the dark creatures crouching somewhere beyond the edge of visibility. The creatures answered back, cackling or taunting or cracking irreverent jokes.

“Donkey diplomacy. Did you learn that in your graduate program? I assume you spent your time in worthwhile pursuit while I was gone.” Willie nudged the donkey on, unsure whether he’d arranged for their safe passage or bargained her away. She pulled a switch off of a dead hawthorn. Could come in useful against a mob, or just to keep the donkey in line. She whipped him on the rear. He stopped. “It’s just a little light ribbing. No harm done.”

The two rambled onward, and soon Willie spotted a broadcast tower bestriding the horizon. Even from afar, Willie could make out the colossal letters mounted vertically on the side of the antenna. WWGO. At last. Forthwith to thine salvation. But, as a fact of existence, salvation does not stand unguarded. It’s an exclusive club with stiff bouncers.

Warily, the pair approached the radio antenna. It pulsed in the heat. The building beneath it was shadowed and hard to make out. Willie studied her surroundings. Signs of movement were everywhere and nowhere at once. The swaying grass suggested a hidden presence.

“Giddy-up,” Willie clucked. “Need I inform you that carrying me on your back is an honor for which you’ll be remembered? People still bring up that famous donkey-riding magician who made such a splash around the turn of the common era. His name slips my mind, but I assure you, much of his success was due to the donkey in his act.”

The ass took it slow. In latticed steel, the antenna punctured the sky. It dared to stand apart from the grassland. Always one for higher meaning, Willie read symbolism well beyond the architecture. One doesn't travel the plains by donkey without dabbling in literary devices. She was unsurprised, therefore, to hear a burst of frenzied laughter shooting across the terrain. She blocked the sun with her hand. She made out a species of black-muzzled dogs, a pack of dozens, sheltering in the shade of the no-man's land around the tower. Dark holes littered with bones perforated the dirt. Dogs in groups kicked up dust, eyeing her with suspicion. Juveniles stuck close to their mothers. A pair, the nearest, bared their teeth and grunted at Willie. The donkey appeared unbothered. He huffed a reply. As if cued, the animals got to their feet and skulked into loose formations, cantering, snarling. Their intention, expressed in the language of domination, was tactical defense. They allowed no point of penetration to the tower. Willie shouted, brandishing her stick and thinking of Mother. "I've killed meaner dogs than you."

Willie switched the donkey to get him moving. She hissed at him, "If you've got moves, jackass, use them now." Contrary to her advice, he put on the brakes and brought himself to a stop amidst the circling dogs. Willie shifted her weight toward the donkey's head and spoke through gritted teeth. "Do you require a motivational speech?" He dropped his hindquarters to the grass. Willie lost her grip and tumbled. The dogs closed in. Centered among the pack, the largest dog was heavy with a litter of pups. She walked with a swagger that suggested her authority, as well as her burden. Willie approached slowly with her eyes lowered. She didn't know what to say. She never knew how to address animals, particularly the more barbaric species. "Is there a toll to be paid? Some sort of gauntlet to run?"

Willie had no one to pray to. She was loathe to call for intercession, for who had the power, but she? The Hype was not a religion. It was a faith. No one commanded her. She was under her own control. A hawk called from on high. A nearby beetle clicked. A wild blueberry, out of place on the prairie, improbably seeded from a distant bush and growing despite the odds, burst its skin. What did it mean? The Hype kept its own kind of prophecy. It wasn't a mantra of belief. It was a knowing. It was a foretelling. It was light on specifics. At least it was to Willie. And what it was to Willie, it was. One day, the messiah would send a message and call the Hype Women to their promised land. The messiah's identity was a question of circumstances. Thus, Willie's claim was valid. A pack of wild dogs wasn't mentioned in popular lore, but, you know, these things weren't meant to be easy. Perhaps, Willie thought, it was this danger that kept the pretenders away. The dogs were not newcomers to this scene. She was.

She addressed the central animal, the leader. Taking direction from a bitch wasn't typical dog behavior to Willie's knowledge, but these were strange creatures, and sure as shit, they knew their alpha. "Do you require a sacrifice?" She gestured to the donkey. "Take him." She pulled on his bridle. He kept his distance. She whispered, "Go along with it. This is where you make your name." The dogs uttered a chorus of yelps and regained her attention. She attempted to jerk the donkey forward, but he was unmoved. "I offer this ass, fine of flesh. You can pick your teeth with his old bones." Boss bitch brandished a fang tooth, a signal to her crew. She lunged and events befell as they were meant to, according to a sacred plan.

The donkey, ass that he was, bit Willie's backside—a real mouthful. She howled. The pack mobilized. Dirt swelled into clouds. The bitch got a piece of Willie's ankle, but

Willie shook loose and bolted for the building. The donkey stood his ground against the tumult. With a pack at her heels, Willie tripped on loose rock. Face-planted. Her pompadour flopped. She scrambled to face the dogs who would savage her. And they would have too. Tongues dangled, saliva dripped. But boss bitch slowed and screamed in sudden pain. She doubled over. Her penis—surely one of nature’s more astonishing miracles—rose and swelled. Willie experienced something similar though the timing was inopportune. She shoved the crotch of her pants down and got to her feet. The dogs were distracted by their leader’s sudden distress. Childbirth, Willie realized. What fresh hell. The bitch licked her erect vagina, while her clan whimpered and paced. Their interest in Willie had been quickly and forcefully displaced. Willie exercised some positive self-talk—*It’s not just hair gel, it’s freedom, it’s confidence, it’s life!*—and dashed to the vacant building.

Meanwhile, the donkey howled his annoyance. He watched the dog wallow in pain with apparent irritation. Willie reached the door and kicked it open. It had been forced before and hung loose on its hinges. The smell inside was dank and sulfurous, hinting at varmint death. She let the wind blow the door closed. The sound of whimpering dogs disappeared. The world changed, quieted. There were messages everywhere, covering walls, tables, dingy computers. Bumper stickers were the most influential philosophical movement of the twenty-first century. Here was a repository—*Behind every great man is a woman rolling her eyes...Don’t do drugs, Alcohol works fine...I’m not afraid of death; I just don’t want to be there when it happens...Surely not everybody was kung-fu fighting...There was a gravity to this place. It was sacred ground.* Willie made her way down the hall to the door with the paper star. She was the way, the

truth, the light of her people. Those who came before were imposters who could not pass, for the star bore an admonition: Jocks Only. She gave her package an adjustment with new confidence. There was no more hiding it. The jock had finally arrived. The show could begin.

...The perils of the world are grains of sand underfoot. Cast them off like dust. Raze this place and erect something new. Build a monument to man's folly, and it will look like a woman. Ladies, all of you out there listening, abandon ye, the dialectic! You have outgrown your childish desires and matured. Finally—it has indeed been a long time—you can discern false from true. What is left? Love and contentment. Thrilling. Remember the Segway? Nobody does. I intend so much more for you than mere contentment. A new era has begun. A new earth arises. The universe is a Rube Goldberg device created for one specific purpose. Let us spring the boxing glove, drop the paint can, kick the empty boot, cut the thread from which dangles the hammer above our heads!

Thunder rumbled toward the radio station. Willie didn't notice at first, so enraptured was she with her own grandiloquence. Outside, though, forces of nature were conjuring. A duck stopped paddling. An aphid quit its colony. An armadillo tossed himself prone onto the center line of a road. A butterfly perched on the lower fang of a weasel. And a lady dog struggled to push a pup out of her weird, tight vaginal phallus. In the sky, a fearsome shock charged. The donkey lifted his ears to their full height. He trembled, though with fear or rage one could hardly suppose.

Leave your comfortable lives—leave now!—because the promised land awaits every one of you. Attend me, my flock. The day of reckoning is set, five days hence—it's my

birthday, bitches, or May 22 if you live by the concept of “human time.” And since we must meet at a destination on earth before we can leave this shithole behind, we shall rendezvous on that hallowed ground, the Prick of the Prairie, the Penis of the Plains, the Hard-on on the Heartland. Are you woman enough?

A sudden crack of thunder jolted the back alleys of Willie’s cranium. The mic zapped her. The RCA transmitter buzzed. The studio lights strobed before snuffing out. Her broadcast, she realized, was cut. A crash from the vicinity of the roof shook the shelves of plastic cases that lined the walls. They collapsed to the floor. A concert poster for the Pious Pedophiles, which dated to 2066, dropped from its pushpin. Just as Willie’s racing heart began to slow, a sharp ringing startled her out of her rolling chair. It stopped. Then it rang again. What did it mean? *What did it mean?* She got to her feet and crossed the pile of plastic cases toward a drab device with no obvious function on a desk across the room. The device had a base station with buttons and a hand-set containing a speaker. She lifted and examined it. Her pelvic floor clenched as she waited. Again, it rang, an archaic sound repeating every few seconds with no indication it would stop. It must, *must* signify. This device could be her connection to the universe, the highest of holiness. Its insistence, its intention told all. Heed ye well. She pressed the green button that said “talk.” The ringing stopped. She set it on its base. Then she heard a tinny voice. *Willie? ... Willie? ... Come on. Put the phone to your ear and say hello.*

“Put the phone to my ear?” Unsure which way to hold it, she attempted various positions until she heard the voice clearly.

Someone’s never used a telephone before...Pap smear, pap smear. Can you hear me?
Pap smear? Not in this life. “Wrong number.”

This is good stuff, we've got a rapport already.

“With whom do I have the pleasure of speaking?”

An admirer, name withheld. I happened to catch your one-act amateur theatrical entitled “Beauty and the Beast” down here in Red Cloud. You played your part terrifically. I'm an aspiring novelist, and I think you've got a best-seller on your hands.

“How did you get this number?”

Red Cloud's a cute town. Speaking of writing, did you know a famous author lived here? Me either. Never read her work, but she's got a nice little pompadour. I'll bet she was a Greaser. Whatcha think? Those Greasers, huh. They're a wild bunch. I wouldn't mess with them.

“If you'll excuse me, I've got to go.”

Don't I know it. I'm trying to remember, was it the Cum Gun of the Countryside? The Shaft of the Savannah? The Boner of the Backwater! Ha, now I'm getting silly. Ok, searching it...Charming. The 'ol Nebraska State Capitol. Look. At. That. It even has a sower spreading his seed from the, shall we say, erection. I'm currently about a day behind you, but I'm fit. I don't need much sleep. I think I can cover ground posthaste. Or you can just wait right there. I'll have you charged, printed, and processed by nightfall, and I can get to work selling the hell out of your story. I know you like that idea...Willie...

Willie pressed the red button that said “end” and the voice clicked off. Hmm.

With the Greasers on her heels, it seemed she wouldn't have as much time to get to the promised land as she thought, which was too bad because she was looking forward to taking a nice, uninterrupted dump in the radio station's toilet. Alas, it would have to wait.

As she made her way through the door, she noticed a certain flickering beneath the clouds. She breathed in the tang of particle discharge. The dogs' ears were tuned, the hairs upon them intent. "What?" she asked. "Afraid of a little lightning?" Boss bitch, still licking her vagina, closed her eyes. The donkey stomped. The light changed. A shadow moved. At first, Willie took it for shifting clouds, but there was something unnatural about the shadow. It was too fast, the trajectory all wrong. She felt a tingle on the back of her neck. She whipped around, seeking an explanation. On the roof of the radio station, the broadcast tower had fractured. Smoke rose from it. The top half of its metal framework, attached by a frail cross-member, was falling toward her, collapsing. Its rusty joints sang in chorus. The great WW grew in her vision as the peak of the antenna targeted the ground. At the sight of the spire, Willie's hunger, thirst, discomfort all vanished. The dogs scattered. Bursts of light flashed in her eyes. Lightning rippled across the sky. Each bolt charged Willie. Behold! Sign incoming, handed down to her in two jumbo-sized letters that remained on the broken tower: GO.

CHAPTER 5 THE LIFE-SUSTAINING FORCE OF TWINKIES

“Home-Seekers Paradise.” Pru squinted at the faded sign. It was once red-and-white-and-blue-of-the-sky. Now it was rust. The rows of wheeled dwellings it hawked were no more than remnants of aluminum sheeting crowded with artifacts of lives-gone-by: glass bottles sorted by color, a cable lock on some kind of steel fence, hand tools, a shattered screen mounted in a plastic case. All were embedded within waves of grass as if germinated rather than abandoned. If this was paradise, Pru reckoned, it was for seekers of a different sort than her.

She picked her way barefoot over the landscape of half-buried metal careful not to drop her washing. The sun was close. Sweat soaked the back of her camisole, but that was no matter. She was already dingy and smelled of rutting goat. From under a broken-down chassis, she pulled out a disc with a hole in the center—a kind of wheel-cover, perhaps. If there had originally been four as with most family vehicles of the twenty-first century, one had since disappeared, and another was broken in half. She tucked the two remaining under her free arm.

She trudged past the mobile homes considering the concept. Why would one want to move one’s home? The thing she loved best about home was that she always knew where it was. After a full day of walking to who-knows-where, she wanted nothing more than to go back. She shifted the laundry on her hip. They hadn’t brought much when they left yesterday. Truth be told, it wasn’t a joyous leave-taking. Pru packed in haste with Germain rushing her along. She’d had no time to clear the stove’s cinders, water the

garden to make room in the cisterns, mend the cart spokes, arrange the provisions. And what of the cow? What would she eat? Germain had gestured widely. *Everything*, she mouthed, then signed, *We're not returning. Everything belongs to the cow now*. Pru was antsy at the thought of the cow munching her home away.

A bead of sweat tickled her nose, but she didn't have a free hand to wipe it. As she approached the pond, she scanned for a suitable laundry spot. A statue of a buffalo was half-submerged by the far shore near a row of rusted-out vehicles. Clumps of black-eyed Susan and purple prairie clover lined the water. Closer, a walnut tree stood at the pond's edge down a path busy with crickets. The tree's branches spoke in her own language. From a distance, she thought it said *shade*, but up-close, she found a lifeless trunk with long arms rippling their fingers.

She dropped the clothes near the water and paused. Not for the first time, she felt she was watched. She examined the horizon. Germain moved like a darkling beetle down a street of brick rubble. Otherwise, Pru spied no activity. This settlement might be forsaken, but was it empty? Time would tell—time and folly. It was a broad truth that humans tended to gather, and it couldn't be helped.

She slipped one of the discs over the skinny end of a branch and spun it round. The other disc she slid on the branch opposite. She untied the rope circling the bundle and tied the ends together, winding it over each disc and adjusting the tension until it was secure. The rope glided back and forth—an effective pulley system for a laundry line. Pru scrubbed the clothes with a sliver of soap and hung them. The branches shivered as wind pulled at the line. *Become!* commanded the boughs of the walnut tree. She bristled. The cocoon, the seed, the egg make no apologies they aren't the butterfly, the flower, the bird.

You should understand, tree, as you were once a nut. The tree seemed to sign *fuck you*. In response, Pru's hands flew in loose motion. Roughly translated, she responded thus: *Three billion humans on this planet, and you're the only one with whom I can truly communicate. The contradiction is staggering to the point of paradox. And as to your offer, don't bother. I'd rather fuck myself!* The last sign required no translation.

It was a fair walk through the mobile homes back to camp. Germain stood among brambles with an apron full. One-handed, she signed, *blackberries, lucky*. Pru signed, *to be determined*. Germain responded with *check your settings*, then took Pru's elbow and steered her out of the vines toward the shelter she'd found for the night. *This way*. They made their way to a door in a crumbled brick wall. The building behind it, a business of some kind, was gone allowing the prairie to sneak in. Germain kicked the door off the hinges and entered the open space. The goat grazed on a patch of indiangrass. A pot bubbled over a fire. Long boxes of weathered wood were arranged as if for display. They'd been handsome in their time, Pru supposed, with machine-smoothed curves and carvings, metal railings dented by hail. They were clearly built to last. Germain pushed a pot of wild garlic mush and salt pork to Pru, then passed her a handful of blackberries. *We'll sleep well tonight. Look*. Germain lifted the split hinge lid of the nearest box. It was padded inside, lined in green satin. *Just my size*. Germain dragged over a bench, climbed into the box and settled.

Pru put her spoon down. *You're not eating?*

Germain laid her head on the pillow. *Nah. I'm stuffed. Twinkies*. She exaggerated her satisfaction. Nestled in satin, she was pretty convincing.

What are Twinkies?

Germain mouthed *The Golden Snack that's been putting smiles on faces for generations.*

Pru didn't bother to ask for clarification. *It seems like you're in the promised land already.* She scraped the rest of the mush from the pot.

Germain wrinkled her nose and mouthed, *If you think this is heaven, you have no imagination. You're all dried up.* She finger-spelled *grandma vagina* to indicate the severity of Pru's dehydration and shook her head.

Pru choked on salt pork. Lack of imagination. Of course. That was her problem. She waved at Germain. *Attention: What is your version of heaven? Explain.* It was a valid question. If they were leaving their lives behind for it, how did Germain envision the paradise they were promised?

Germain shrugged. *Perfect.* As if nothing else needed to be said.

No, no, no. Tell me. Chariot? Winged horses? Sky? Ideal beauty, love, justice?

Pru swept her hands up. She'd read of it in Plato, the great humorist of his time.

Germain looked amused. *No quote ideal. Just perfect.* The lines around her eyes softened. *Like a dollhouse. Everything is there.* She switched back to speaking. *Whatever I want to eat. It's in the fridge. Twinkies all day, and if I run out, doorbell rings, and there're more. Entertainment. Clean house. Multiple sex partners. I want to be able to relax anytime.* She breathed. *Sounds good.*

Pru studied her grandmother, amused. Eternity in a dollhouse? The idea did not appeal to Pru. She already had a mind palace, built for her in bedtime stories by her mother, Jo, when she was a child. Pru had every detail memorized. It was made of corn cobs in variegated onion-dome style with murals depicting a sloppy version of Americana

more to Jo's taste than her own. It contained eleven rooms, including a vintage cubicle space and a temple dedicated to a red snapper. Her favorite room was the library because it was big enough to catalog every book Pru'd ever read, though the ladder to reach them was built of dry spaghetti noodles and was therefore unstable. It was in this room that Pru spent much of her time now that it was the only place she could encounter her mother. She reconsidered Germain's dollhouse paradise. If it was indeed valid, the question posed itself: *Who do you suppose will get you your Twinkies?*

Germain raised her eyebrows. *I have some ideas.* She put her right fist on the back of her spread left hand and pushed the two in a circle. She winked and mouthed, *dominance and submission.*

Stop winking. Pru gave her head a vigorous shake, unable to comprehend her grandmother's vision. Germain was no submissive. If anything, she was radically stubborn. She considered telling the woman she'd gotten her sign wrong—instead of *submission*, she'd signed *slave*—but then, maybe that's what Germain had meant, a promised land of sexual servitude.

The sun dropped away. Blinking fireflies surrounded the camp. The embers burned down, and Pru rose to scrub the pot. A flash lit the sky for a fraction of a second and Pru supposed lightning struck somewhere. Germain snuggled into her box, her legs disappearing beneath the lower lid. *Sleep tight,* she signed before closing her eyes. She looked peaceful. Pru reached for the upper lid, but before it shut, Germain stopped her. *Wait.* The old woman groped near her legs and pulled out a clenched fist. When she opened it, Germain gasped, surprising herself. Inside was a yellow pill imprinted with a T and a winking emoji. *One more Twinkie! I thought I'd eaten them all.* She popped the pill

in her mouth and swallowed before Pru could register her confusion. Again, Germain held up a finger, *Wait*. Again, she reached deep into the box, and again, she pulled out a fist. This time, she opened her hand revealing a pair of earrings. She offered them to her granddaughter. Pru was puzzled. They were tiny balls with magnetic backs. She'd never seen Germain wear jewelry. Pru didn't know she had any. Germain mouthed *I brought them in case I needed them but...Fuck it. I'm going to a love mansion in the sky*. She pushed her palm against Pru's hand to say *keep*.

Pru angled her head. Her dried-up imagination could not conceive of a situation in which a pair of earrings would be needed, but it was useless to ask. Mild perplexity was her portion. She unsnapped the earrings and stuck them inside the pocket of her apron. *Lovely*, she mouthed.

She reached once more for the upper lid to shut her grandmother in for the night. And once more, Germain stopped her. Once more, the woman reached below. Once more, she pulled out a closed fist. She opened it and offered Pru a golden snack cake in a clear wrapper. *Eat this if you want to go on a real trip*. Germain returned her head to the pillow. With her eyes closed, she gave a tug at the lid, and it dropped over her head.

Pru stirred the embers until they were black. She laid her apron on the bench. Then she opened a person-sized enamel box less adorned than Germain's and climbed in. The satin whispered. It was too luxurious for this life. She found a card tucked in the gathers. *Caskets On Demand. Your final resting place for rock-bottom deals. Don't get gouged on your funeral necessities!* The user guide was thirty-six pages long. Pru opened the snack cake. She took one bite and gagged. A familiar thought came to her: *People are weird*. She tossed the rest of it to the goat.

A bird winged a path from here to there. A piece of tasseled grass bobbed against the bricks. Inexplicably, a street light turned on outside the brick wall, illuminating the line of caskets. Somewhere in the shadows, she was watched by hiding eyes. As the fox watches the rabbit, as the cat watches the squirrel, as the sociopath watches the innocent, she too was watched. She felt the short breath of the wind. *Pffff*. *Let 'em look*. She shut the lid of the box and slept.

CHAPTER 6 MENSTRUAL FAILINGS

Scotty thought it was strange that scientists had perfected a seamless brain-computer interface to regulate some of the human body's functions, yet her own menstrual cycle always came as a complete surprise. She was a thirty-two-year-old, developmentally mature specimen, and she still never had a flow suppressant when she needed one. Thus, she was crouched with her bioskin around her ankles, improvising behind a bronze bison sunk chest deep into the shore of a pond. It was not a position in which she wished to be found. Naturally, she hid when she glimpsed a woman fifty-seven meters away scrubbing laundry under a dead tree. First person she'd seen since she'd taken over Erin's job at the CEM. This was suboptimal timing.

The woman faced away from Scotty's location. Scotty saw nothing but her back, her hair, the curve of her shoulder, and the motion of her forearm scrubbing at the cloth, but Scotty knew in an instant this was a Hype Woman. Field guides always stressed observation. Don't disturb the habitat. Patience was directed if one wished to document behavior in the wild.

Late-day sun outlined the corroded hulls of antique heavy machinery, combustion cars, and a snow-plow. Scotty crept to the rear panel of a 1968 Chevy Impala. A possum darted out of a rust-hole. The woman briefly looked up, but Scotty was well-concealed. She pried open the rear door and slid onto the seat. The woman's brachioradialis tensed as she wrung out a pair of coarse leggings. She turned toward Scotty allowing Scotty to observe her features. She noted only the distinctive freckling of the woman's face and

chest, and her unusual light eye color. In all other respects, the woman conformed to species type. She draped a shirt on an improvised line. Industrious. Quaint. Much as Scotty expected, though, it was different to observe the behavior in nature than it had been to scroll through pixel-damaged images on obsolete tech. Not to mention Erin's notes on the Hype Women were an incoherent babble of catch-phrases and jargon that struck Scotty as, well, garbage. (Garbage. "Stupid Girl." *Garbage*. Almos, 1995.)

Yet, Erin had some reason for keeping her research close. She'd saved it outside of the Newerlink interface on a piece of flimsy plastic hardware for which Scotty had a hell of a time locating an adapter. Erin had been a woman of particular fascinations. Scotty thought of her as an anthropologist, highly trained in a dying field of study, but Erin preferred the term "information archaeologist." Turns out, she had been digging. Erin's card only had a 2TB capacity, so it copied forthwith. An encoded file took up half the space on the device, but Scotty only made a cursory attempt to crack it as she was a novice at cryptanalysis. The other half contained Erin's archive of sources, a confounding dung pile as Scotty saw it. It had been months since Erin died, and Scotty was still sifting through crap.

She peered at the laundress through the Chevy's rear window, zooming in with a blink. The left side of her sight display usually listed relevant details but there wasn't much data out here, disconnected as they were from the rest of the world. Luckily, she still had traditional long-term memory to help her analyze the scene. Lye soap? Caustic overkill. Cotton fabric? Wildly inefficient. The woman adjusted the clothes on the line, then stepped back. At first Scotty thought she was shaking water from her hands, but her motions were scrupulous, precise. Hmm. Representative finger work? Scotty pushed her

zoom and observed. Humans have always used expressive gestures, mostly for emphasis. But this she determined bore the hallmarks of communication. She blinked through a slew of references looking for a match. Sign language. Of course. Formerly used by the formerly deaf, now defunct. The woman was speaking...No, that wasn't the term...Signing? Sounded wrong. Scotty slapped the leather seat. Yes! She was starting to enjoy this anthropology thing. Real-time translations appeared in her display. [*Three billion humans on this planet, and you're the only one with whom I can truly communicate. The contradiction is staggering to the point of paradox.*]

Scotty ducked, assuming the woman referred to her. Had she been made? She suppressed an impulse to flee and settled onto the backseat, afraid to risk another look. She repeated Erin's mantra: Do your research. She cued the music (La Croix. "Pamplemousse." *Sparkling Water*. Warner Bros, 2215.) She immersed herself in notes on the origin, theology, and worship rituals of the Hype. It was time for a good, old-fashioned head-trip into a world in which animals were assumed to have no theory of mind, nature was deemed incapable of self-evolving, and humans conceived of themselves as more than just carbon machines. Back then, people believed there was something beyond their souls. This "something" created everything and could take everything away. According the notes, the Hype was a relic of that era. But Erin had suspected there were forces at work beneath the Hype Women's customs, and now that Erin was gone, it was up to Scotty to find out. Because, damn it, that's what sisters do.

It was engrossing. Thunder, followed by pops of lightning roused Scotty from a research stupor. A weather alert warned of increased wildfire risk in the area over the next twenty-four hours. She blinked it away. By the time Scotty checked the back

window, the woman was gone. The moon approached the meridian. A dust devil swirled through the ruins of the township where a street lamp glimmered. Motion in the distance caught her attention. A figure circled like the head of a serpent chasing its tail. Scotty zoomed in and increased exposure. It appeared to be a standoff between domesticated pack animals. Goat (curious, possessive) versus donkey (shifty, sensing danger). With the goat at his neck, the donkey was unable to stand his ground. In a rush of fear, the donkey bolted, but the goat followed. Nip after nip, the goat worried at the donkey, until the donkey lifted its hind leg and urinated on the goat. Brilliant tactic. The goat retreated to a patch of dry grass several meters away.

Scotty's sleep monitor suggested bedtime, but she answered to no intelligence, human or otherwise. (Beastie Boys. "Intergalactic." *Hello Nasty*. Capitol, 1998.) She blinked away the alert and focused on the motion. The pack animals appeared to be grazing among a display of caskets. The area showed signs of recent use—an apron tossed across a bench, an overturned pot, the ashes of a cookfire. Here, she supposed, the Hype Woman slept sheltered from the threat of lightning strike. Clever girl.

As Scotty considered whether she too might be more comfortable in a padded coffin, the lid of one began to rise. She magnified her vision 100x to resolve more detail. Someone peered out, checking that she was alone and emerging from the casket. To Scotty's surprise, she was not the laundress but a far older woman, bare chested and flabby armed. She wore heart-shaped glasses. Her movements suggested secrecy—tiptoeing, shrugged shoulders. She approached the apron and removed something indiscernible from the pocket. A midnight snack? Just then, Scotty's sight display blinked indicating a proximity user. *Callsign: MadClaw McScurvy*. Here? Another user in her

proximity? Curiouser and curiouser. Scotty scanned the landscape quickly, wishing not for the first time she'd upgraded to night vision. Was there someone else around? Shadows encroached, but, aside from the funeral-home ruins, the area appeared empty. Scotty blinked the map and MadClaw McScurvy's user icon appeared positioned above the old woman. (Morissette, Alanis. "You Oughta Know." *Jagged Little Pill*. Maverick, 1995.) Some moments occasion literal head-scratching, and Scotty's scalp was itchy. Just what in the hell was going on?

The old woman reclined on a broken pew, lost in an expression widely referred to as "game face." Scotty knew it well. An unexpected turn of events. She hacked into MadClaw McScurvy's account to determine what game the sneaky minx played in the middle of the night. Could it be *Oregon Fucking Trail*, a popular first-person revenge fantasy set along the nineteenth-century emigration route through the Nebraska territory, near their present position? No indeed, the woman wasn't playing a game at all. She was watching a "television" show called *Cagney & Lacey*, about a pair of plucky lady cops at a time when that was unusual. Scotty was piqued. She cued an episode up at random, and though the humor mostly missed her, the woman's cackles added up. A late-night binge, surreptitious at that. According to the research, this was novel behavior. Supposedly, Hype Women were air-gapped, unconnected to the rest of the world and even to each other. It was one of their prime characteristics. They were—as far as one could be—alone. They knew only their own specious knowledge, passed down and bastardized. That's why they were all listening for a radio broadcast on a frequency range full of static. Scotty understood it was improper to mock one's own study subjects, but she

occasionally laughed to the point of tears. (The Pharmaceutical Company. “Quick Acquittal.” *If I Did It*. Sony, 2031.)

Scotty turned her attention back to the notes Erin unearthed with sieve and brush from the strata of dead information buried within what was once called “the internet” before the zapocalypse fried it and its adorable cloud back in the day. Erin had preserved images of Hype Women engaged in various forms of labor, home life, and fraternization. She collected multimedia assets, social media rants, websites produced in a visual style featuring eagles and robust-looking guns, as well as reams of discussions on boards with UI design that might be described as berserk. Really, it was too much, and Scotty had little expectation that she would get through all of it. Mostly she poked at random, like a blind shrew coming up with the occasional scorpion.

That night, by the Power of Grayskull or IronBru or Positive Thinking, Scotty blundered onto a video she’d never noticed before. It was a woman discussing Hype folklore to camera. Nothing notable, except the woman in the video looked familiar. Distinctive freckling, unusual light eye color. Scotty blinked through memory snaps until she had one from the pond she could directly compare to the video. The likeness was uncanny. Except that the woman Scotty had observed appeared to be deaf, and the woman in the video gave no such impression. The hair on Scotty’s arms rose, a vestigial reflex. She tuned out everything else to listen to the recording.

We Hype Women love our myths, and for the uninitiated, one of the most crucial, as told, usually goes like this: a garter snake lives his life in the dirt, seeing the world from two inches high. Rocks, roots, and grasses—these he believes constitute the extent of the world.

A bird flies above, and the snake raises its head and suddenly recognizes the possibility of a different perspective. He wonders what else he is missing. You can imagine what happens next: the bird dives and clamps the snake in its talon. The snake is airborne. He sees the world in a way no snake ever has (or at least as far as he knows). The trees are small tufts below him, the grasses, a blur of yellow and green. The lizards, the horse flies, the snails are all gone, but the clouds seem close and the mountains large. For the first time, the snake perceives speed, a fascinating proposition.

Ahead, a tower approaches. The way the tower has been described to me is a tall silver mast with a nest of sticks and grass on it. At first the tower is small and distant, but soon it's...it's looming. And the larger it gets, the faster it advances. Almost instantly, he is above it. The bird flies over the nest, where a pair of hatchlings await their father's arrival. You can guess what happens next. By the time the snake has seen the world from a perspective entirely opposite his previous one, he has been torn to pieces and swallowed.

Here, the woman paused, collected her thoughts. Scotty's pulse shot to the red zone. She felt fluttery. Memories of clearing the hawk's nest upset her stasis.

Now, I'll bet you assume the moral of this story has something to do with the snake. No. That's what they want you to think, and make a note of this. It is an essential skill if you believe the Hype: unthink what you think they want you to think. UWYTTWYTT if that helps you remember it better. So no, the story is not about the snake. It's about what happens after the snake is devoured.

CHAPTER 7 THE ROTTENEST EGG

“Move, cretin.” Willie upbraided the donkey. She was getting impatient. “Shall I go on without you? Shall I send you back? It’s kilometers now, and you haven’t got the sense to root out the way. You’ll wander lost until a coyote finds you. That would show Mother, wouldn’t it. You always were her favorite.”

Morning clouds scattered leaving behind a day bright and still, the prairie’s vow of silence. Willie had a sense of betraying it by speaking, but ditched her concern when the donkey responded by braying so loudly Willie’s ears stung.

“Shush!” The donkey brayed louder in defiance of Willie. “Oh shut up, muttonhead.” She rapped him hard on the noggin. With a high leap, he bucked his rider to the ground. Willie scrambled to put some distance between the donkey and herself fearing a hoof-stomp, or worse, a kick. Her head hurt from the fall, but at least the ass stopped braying. “You’ve made your wishes clear.” Willie stretched her spine, looking for relief. “I’ve got legs of my own. I don’t need yours.”

She forged ahead, determined, if not well-prepared. The donkey’d been meandering the hills north of the Platte all morning while Willie scanned for signs, anything familiar. Ahead was as good a direction as she knew. Willie looked back. The donkey met her eyes and bellowed with renewed strength. To Willie, the sound was equivalent to a rusty barrow wheel on a downhill push. Worse. Willie turned away from the beast only to halt outright. A large rattlesnake balanced so both its fanged head and tail were aloft. It hissed an open-mouthed threat, but much more ominous to Willie (who

was within striking distance) was the serpent's warning rattle, a reminder that not every creature was warm-fleshed as she. This one, it seemed, was stone cold.

The donkey brayed as if he had the power to keep Willie from taking the next step. "Hurrah, you have excellent hearing," Willie chided the donkey, "but no nerve. What am I to get from your constant wailing? Sadly, evolution has not seen fit to give you the gift of human speech. Rightly so, as I suspect you'd do nothing but bellyache." Willie crouched. The snake reared. "You can't wait all day for danger to depart, jackass. Where would that get you? I know for a fact it'd get me a ride straight to jail. Not that I'm admitting to any wrongdoing." She took off her jacket, determined to prove herself. The snake hissed. "To move forward, one must have grit." She waved the jacket to the left of the snake's face. The snake struck the leather. Swift as a bobcat, Willie had it behind the head with her right hand. The snake flailed. With a light twist the threat was dead. The snake hung limp like an old belt. She lifted its fangs from the jacket leaving two wet holes in the gusset. She put the jacket back on and turned to the donkey. "Is this what you were afraid of?" She held up the snake in two hands. The braying stopped. "There's a saying: A coward dies many times, but it takes balls to live forever."

She made her way back to the donkey in a dozen confident strides. She slung the snake over his neck. The donkey startled but didn't bolt. "Shall we try this again?" Willie hopped onto the saddle and gave his ribs a squeeze. Reluctantly, the donkey stepped through the quivering grass.

Signs of humanity appeared. First it was the foundations of houses clustered in enclaves and arranged in lines and semicircles. Matching stairwells descended to moldy basements sheltering vermin. After scaring up a combative family of raccoons, Willie

decided she was safer taking no shelter than venturing underground. Scattered chimneys followed these. Rusted windmills, collapsed water towers with half-buried town names rose from the grass.

Soon, Willie and the donkey came upon an asphalt trail and glimpsed a settlement ahead. The houses came more frequently, separated by a few paces. She saw an entire row of post boxes toppled like dominoes. Soon one building grew out of the next, shoulder to shoulder in fields of black rock. The donkey resisted, demanded a rest, but the sun was swelling, its color intensifying. Twilight would follow this and then another night.

She saw herself outlined in a sheet of glass fronting a building. She was gaunt with a bandana tied over her nose and mouth and a sagging pompadour. “Steel yourself for the journey, Willie. Do you not claim to be a savior?” Through the glass, she saw empty shelves, a counter, everything covered in dirt and criss-crossed in paw prints. A container of GooGone was on the floor. Letters painted onto the wall said CarQuest.

She dismounted, pushed the door open and knelt before a precision tool chest much like the one Mother had—a vessel for Mother’s collection of beeswax-filled eggs. Willie had so admired them as a child, tawny and linen and aloe and mink-speckled, each uncracked and perfect, or as near as could be.

Truth told, the prettiest shell in the world was worthless if the egg inside rotted. This was a notion Mother took pains to impart. She shook the egg to break the yolk, silencing Willie’s moans about the baby bird within. “You can have the bird or you can have the shell,” Mother reminded her. “Beware the person who wants both.”

“Because she’s greedy?”

“Because she’s an imbecile.” Then, Mother punctured either side of the shell oh-so-gently and blew the yolk into the grease pot while the Willie watched. The stolen babies were nothing to the beauty of the eggshells displayed in the oaken box.

On the floor of CarQuest, Willie lifted the lid. Inside, rather than tools, she found a few bright trinkets and a notebook. The pages were delicate, but well-preserved in the lightproof box. Names and dates were penciled on the lines. Treasure hunters, Willie thought. Signatures to prove they’d been there in 2026. The box had lasted all that time. Willie scribbled her name and the year 2442 at the bottom of the register with a short pencil. From among the trinkets, she pocketed a flare gun and an extra flare. Time would take the rest. It must.

She urged the donkey over a bridge, past ruined buildings and shattered glass, past the angled metal arms at intersections and a row of bent poles until darkness disguised everything, gave cover, concealment to the clouds gathering above. At last, Willie saw the twinkle of light on the horizon, and sang glory to its godhood. She slid off the donkey and stumbled along the shore of a pond. The light was not far. She staggered past trees, a pile of cinder blocks, rusted-out car bodies, one of them occupied by a hobo or a Hype Woman or someone who fit both descriptions. Willie steered clear. Ahead was a streetlamp. The early twenty-second century LED bulb was still lit after some-two hundred years—a phenomenon begging for divine explanation. Its light spilled over a door in a tumble-down wall giving entry to a bygone house of worship lined with coffins, a place where a backward culture honored their dead. Thunder bellowed from the dark as it often did at key moments.

“Step lively. Let’s see some enthusiasm from you.” The donkey had been following at a careful distance. “Your prayers are answered, ingrate, a night’s shelter...if you can squeeze into one of these fine boxes.” Willie stopped to hike up her pants. In the pause, the donkey trotted for the threshold. Willie pulled his bridle and brought him up short. Then she doffed her jacket and stepped through the door before him. Lo, she was instantly hurled breathless to the asphalt. Pain sunk into her belly. She writhed and struggled for air. Standing above her was a dusty goat. His lips curled back exposing an acrid smile. She doubled over. He bobbed his head.

“Ass!” She wheezed, but the donkey was already at her back. She reached up and grabbed the rattle of the snake carcass and tossed it to the goat who set to gnawing. A band of lightning bolts illuminated the rows of boxes. Willie searched the night for a vision, for a sign, but all returned to black. She dropped her jacket, and dragged herself into a casket, streaking dirt on its satin. She snapped shut the lid of the box and shivered in the darkness. She was too exhausted for prayer. Instead, she repeated a chestnut of Mother’s: *Even a shell unbroken can’t hide the smell of death.* Mother dear, she yawned, you stone-cold snake.

CHAPTER 8 THE CURSE OF OPPOSABLE THUMBS

The wind brought something to Shotgun that stopped him in his tracks. He thrust his nose, the source of his power, into the air and flared his nostrils. Larry could always tell when Shotgun was intrigued. Those were the rare moments she could make out his eyes, glistening black orbs that were normally hidden within the soft folds of his furry fucking face. She passed on an instinct to squish him and eat him up because it would undermine his dignity, and one doesn't do such a thing to a co-worker. She wondered, though, what piquant aroma riding along the breeze had him so engrossed. The Grease #109 hair product was pungent, sure, and there were probably a hundred other distinctive odors for Shotgun to track that Larry herself couldn't detect, like sweat, skin cells, dental cavities, iron deficiency, between-the-legs chafing, pimple pus, fingernail flora, human delusion and desperation. It was a bloodhound's delight, a world viewed through tangles of stank. Shotgun seemed to locate the source of stench behind him—directly behind him. Larry contemplated the moist surface of her dog's nose. What information, she wondered, did the dog get from sniffing his own butthole?

“Toxic gas leak?” She chided. “Get on with it.” Words of affirmation weren't her love language.

Shotgun scampered across a gravel road, following a line in the wind. Larry kept pace with the dog. She chewed on a thick blade of grass. The leftover taste of Major Gains Muscle Remedy had notes of sawdust. Some time that morning, Shotgun found a pouch of the stuff in a storage unit where Willie evidently spent the night. Larry decocted and

drank it in the interest of acquiring nutrition, and her mouth still felt furry. The blade of grass, with its woody inedibility, put her saliva glands to work. Shotgun returned his head to the grass and moved along an overgrown path. He traced the delicate hoof of the deer, the swift paws of the fox, the fleet foot of the jackrabbit, the sloppy stomp of the donkey. At their approach, a duck flapped into the sky and glided ahead, setting down further along the path.

Larry maintained a visual on Shotgun. Her feet kept moving, alert to uneven ground, but her analytical mind disappeared into Willie's consciousness. She observed through Willie's eyes the nitty-gritty of a different world. She heard Willie's thoughts. Certain truths were apparent at this early stage of the investigation. It was clear Willie was no criminal mastermind. Cracking open Willie's metaphorical braincase revealed the wiring was fried. Linkages were missing, pathways never completed. What might have been an orderly processing unit was an incomprehensible mess. Larry doom-scrolled Willie's timeline as she kept the bloodhound in sight.

She followed Willie's consciousness through a beachside villa. It looked like something from the golden age of reality television—sweeping views, oversized furniture, interiors designed to emulate the look of “ethnicity,” a decorative style with evergreen popularity. One end of the room was anchored by a full-scale bioscreen depicting a stylized interpretation of Old Town Los Angeles, born of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, piercing the sky with a hundred sharp edges, like a pincushion. Through floor-to-ceiling windows, Larry noted the swimming pool had been refitted as a freshwater stopover for waterfowl. Beyond the terrace, a controlled access natural zone led to the distant ocean. The space, though costly, smacked of desperation. The general

state of it was unkempt, strewn with socks and blankets, crumbs and cups, personal and pet clutter. Larry had observed countless such homes, ones whose inhabitants wanted for nothing except someone to tell them how to live. Willie's gaze scanned the room, darting across surfaces, grabbing vital items, checking the status of the door, making, evidently, a final check of the house before taking off.

[Shoes are under the bench. Helmet by the vehicle, I think. I'll have to come back if it's in here somewhere. I'll need water. She's not supposed to be home yet, though sometimes she surprises me. I'm running out of time. Need to figure out what to do with the cat.] Willie entered a bedroom. Incense was burning. She wiped up some vomit with a towel and tossed it into a closet. She pocketed a tub of Grease #109 but left the rest of the Grease branded products on the bathroom counter.

Shotgun picked up the pace. Something in his movement caught Larry's attention. She minimized Willie's memory files and zoomed in on a silhouette at 863 meters. Location info indicated the radio station was ahead, but Larry couldn't make out a tower. She spit out the grass and maxed the focal length of her visual field. The radio antenna was broken, snapped in half. The image cleared up as they moved. Larry discerned the letters GO remaining atop the building's roof. The point of the antenna was a twisted mass of metal on the ground. This explained why Willie's transmission cut so abruptly. Shotgun raised his head and bayed. *Aaaaaooooooooohhh*. Classic hound stuff. Larry normalized her vision to take in more of the scene. The radio station was still quite a distance, but Shotgun seemed bent on approaching at a clip. Something ahead had his attention. It was Larry's responsibility to keep up with Shotgun.

She returned to Willie's consciousness, observing the perp's actions. Willie bent down and peered under the bed. "Don't be shy." A gray cat watched Willie with one open eye. [*Hiding under the bed. Go-to move. He's so frail. He hasn't got much longer.*] "Make this easy on me, Moose. I don't want to drag you out." [*But I will. I don't have the time, and he doesn't have the energy to do it any other way.*] She reached into the space and pulled the cat's hind legs. Gray fur came off in clumps. He hissed and scrambled, but soon went limp. He threw up on the floor before Willie pulled him out. [*One last gift for Vic.*]

Willie cradled the cat beneath her jacket. He shivered. She scanned some contacts and pictures in Newerlink, composed a message to Vic. [*It's time. Just as I promised. Moose and I are going dark. You'll see us again in the hereafter. Don't look for us. Be Zion increasingly.*] Erased the message instead of sending it. "You're going to a better place," she said to the cat. "Better than throwing up under the bed anyway. If you were a human, if you could understand me, if you could talk, I'd make an argument, something persuasive, designed to comfort. But you don't know what I'm saying. My tone is soothing. My jacket is warm. I'm going to do you a solid and put you out of your misery. You and Vic both."

Shotgun was outpacing Larry. He was shrinking in her view, weaving in and out of a grass fringe her eyes couldn't penetrate even with optical aid. Larry accelerated to a jog. She caught up to Shotgun in the shadow of a cinder-block building. He was engaged in mutual sniffing with several animals—spotted hyenas, according to Newerlink. Judging by their numbers and the size of the local bone piles, the hyenas were established in a long-term settlement of dens surrounding the radio station. And their butts provided

beguiling olfaction. Because hyenas were known to be a territorial species, their welcome of Shotgun struck Larry as aberrant behavior. Though she noted sporadic snarling at her own approach, it was clear the clan had a higher concern than their presence. Many of the largest adults snoozed or took care of grooming needs in various dirt depressions, but some of the smaller ones, the ones with the hectic, high-strung vibe, or perhaps with the least status, worried at Shotgun with palpable desperation. This was not normal. Larry skimmed the species info. Cross-referencing...Nothing about this clan was “normal.” They weren’t a Norte American species. It looked like they were the tail end of a research colony out west that had split up and migrated over the past couple hundred years. No one was studying them anymore. They were one of the first “re-wilded” species, though generations later, the term no longer applied.

Shotgun nosed the dirt and proceeded to the shade of the building. Near the entrance, Larry spotted a sizable female hyena lying on her side. Her pseudopenis was distended and shockingly engorged. Anatomically, the spotted hyena was unique. Pushing a litter through the equivalent of a male phallus was one of the most difficult reproductive experiences in nature. Her breathing was shallow, almost imperceptible.

Larry hadn’t witnessed a wild animal giving birth since she helped deliver jaguar cubs back in the seventies when she was on the university cheer squad. She doubted much had changed. This bitch, she knew, was in trouble. How the hell was she supposed to get fully-fanged pups out a hole that size? Larry recognized a call to action when she saw one.

Shotgun paced. The adults of the clan circled. She was no bloodhound, but she could smell the agitation in the air, or perhaps it was the distinctive musk of childbirth. And

Larry was the only creature in sight with articulated fingers, opposable thumbs. Hot damn. She really really really did not want to tear this bitch's vagina apart.

Larry put her back to the distressed hyena. She closed her eyes and shut out reality. She watched instead the workings of her dear little perp, Willie, who carried a gray cat inside her jacket. The cat looked quite like the one her wife, Maxi, lived with when she and Larry first met, back in the old days, before Larry became a private dick. Back before Shotgun. Back when the three of them, Larry, Maxi, and the cat, Dinosaur, would spend lazy Saturday mornings eating cereal in bed.

Willie looked down at the frail creature, and Larry noticed it was losing its fur. Age was degrading, Larry thought, before correcting herself, and then re-correcting herself. Maxi required such a number of ergonomic pillows to maintain proper sleep position that Willie could no longer cuddle her. And Shotgun didn't sleep in their bed anymore. Due to chronic flatulence, he required a bed of his own.

Willie crossed the terrace to the natural zone. Found some wooly sunflower adjacent to the house. Nestled Moose under the scrub. Took a vial from her pocket and placed a dab on the cat's tongue. "Vic found you here when you were still young and spry. It's time to go back." [*We're both going back where we came from, cat. It's the way of things.*] "Close your eyes." She gave the cat a half-hearted scratch, displaced loose fur. [*You'll be gone soon. Not to an immortal higher state I don't think, but hey, who the hell knows? The only way to make a liar out of me is to test my theory, and even then it can't be proven.*] Willie stood and watched the cat's breath slow, then pause, then stop. Though Larry had witnessed such scenes before, this one hit her with more force. The heat, the feral noises, yes, the odors of the current moment connected her to the phenomenology of

the past. She felt an unfamiliar yearning to change history and a bit of melancholy that it was not possible. The past was long gone.

Larry opened her eyes and knelt by the laboring hyena. She pulled a pair of surgical gloves from one of her blazer pockets and donned them finger by finger. It wasn't enough to know what must be done. She cracked her full set of knuckles. You have to make it happen.

CHAPTER 9 WRATH OF THE GODS

It occurred to Pru that Germain had stirred the wrath of the gods when she swapped the goat for the donkey. That is, if gods were anything but works of fiction. Just past dawn, Pru rose from her coffin to find Germain mounting a handsome jackass with a white muzzle, curly ear hair, and a penis like an ax-handle. Before Pru could stop her, Germain was astride the animal's bare back. He raised his chin and gave Pru a skeptical side-glance.

Germain smacked the ass. He parted the lips of a yellow-toothed smile. Addressing her granddaughter, Germain mouthed, "I always told you to pay heed to donkeys, didn't I?"

Yes, Pru recalled, you did. Germain had often given the advice in reference to one of her parables. Pru recited it in sign language. *A man and a donkey argue beneath a willow tree. One wants to go left, the other right. The willow sends down a whip, saying the one who claims it will be master of the other. Man, being quicker, reaches it first, but donkey, being harder of head, knocks him away and swipes it for himself.*

"Both being male, we know how the story ends," Germain resolved, emerging from thought. "We best get moving." With her steel-toed boots, she pressured the donkey under his ribs. As he turned toward the prairie, she signed, *Sacred creature, this. Sent from heaven to aid the journey.*

Pru wanted to object that bridled pack animals don't appear in the wild. Nor do they appear among displays of caskets. The donkey surely accompanied a person who

would not appreciate the trade. Germain hustled her along with some baloney about age and deference. Pru didn't have the tools to argue if her grandmother was determined to saunter away. She aimed curses at the woman's back instead. It did not escape her notice that Germain was wearing the earrings she'd given Pru the night before. Typical. Despite the prairie-life schtick, Germain wasn't one for self-denial. Pru grabbed her apron (pocket now empty) and a tin of soda biscuits. She stomped into her untied shoes, tripped over a sun-bleached floral wreath, dropped fast, and ground her cheek in the dirt. The day's journey hadn't yet begun and already she was breathing hard. In frustration, she tossed a handful of pebbles at Germain. The donkey paused. Germain turned to her granddaughter.

Our stuff? Pru signed, fingers in full action. *The goat?*

Germain waved her away. *Who has time? Not me.*

Pru rose to her feet, brushing off her knees. *It's a long way, you know.* The round collar of her dress was standing up. Germain reached down to straighten it.

"Yep," Germain mouthed. "And I'm too old to wait around." She flicked the reins. The donkey edged to a walk.

If this wasn't prime human foolishness, Pru stewed as they cut across the grassland, gods strike her. Anon, wind snaked through the tassels, loosing grass seeds. A flock of grackles winged south. A sliver of rock worked its way to the bottom of Pru's boot. She nibbled dry biscuits and ignored the discomfort. She glanced north and caught the flicker of lightning along coral clouds. It wasn't a single strike. It wasn't the work of a moment. As she watched, lighting popped across the length of the sky in some chaotic system. An electrical storm brewed. The gods were carrying through. Pru tapped

Germain's leg and pointed, but her grandmother only raised her eyebrows twice as if agreeing to a kinky proposition. The morning grew redder and hazier as they walked. Something ignited in the distance. At length, smoke smudged the sky. Pru cautioned they should backtrack to safety, take refuge in the caskets thinking, perhaps erroneously, such a box could protect a human body from an onrush of flame. She stepped abreast with Germain, then she clapped hard to draw the old woman's notice. *Wildfire. Let's go back.* She jabbed her temple twice with her index finger to indicate her wisdom.

No. No. No. Germain shut her eyes tight with conviction and signed, *Trust the plan.*

There was no point in giving gesture to a reply if Germain refused to observe it. Pru had no choice but to trust the plan though she suspected there was no plan at all. It was not original to suggest that much of life was random or at least, as Horace claimed, #misheardlyrics. Pru would know. She'd barely survived the fever that took her hearing at age two. Once recovered, she cried for hours at a stretch, pausing occasionally from exhaustion. It took a week for her mother to recognize that Pru couldn't hear herself scream. Jo began sign language intervention right away, learning the basics as she taught them to Pru. *Hungry, milk, hurt, sleep, please.* The first sign Germain learned was *miracle.* It served in some way to explain the old woman.

Pru later learned from a medical text that the virus had damaged her eardrums. Her survival had been a successful immune response to an aggressive infection. It had not been miraculous. Rather, she was a fully operational human being. Was. But Germain believed the unbelievable as a point of pride. She considered Pru a marvel. Pru considered her grandmother a conundrum. They looked at the world from opposite sides

of the peephole, meaning one of them saw very little of the world, and for the other, all was distortion.

The burn reached a stand of trees to the north, rendering branches like an ink drawing. Pru pointed, but Germain pressed on in her delirium of security. Meanwhile, Pru inhaled traces of mineral and ash. The range fire closed in. Her thoughts turned to Prometheus, the flame-bringer, credited with bestowing fire upon humanity. Smoke ruffled from the bright line of the approaching blaze. Perhaps she should have sacrificed the donkey to appease the gods, but she was no heathen. Though she agreed with Zeus, Prometheus was getting too big for his damn britches and deserved to have an eagle peck his guts daily. At the thought, a bird of prey buzzed the travelers.

The donkey startled and took off. Germain signed over her shoulder, *This one's frisky. Hurry, Pru.* It was hard to decipher because she was bouncing. *I-I'm not used to this much energy between my legs.* They cut a quick traverse through the fields of goldenrod, past a junction, and up to a bluff where they met with a broader view. The northern sky was lost behind smoke. Lightning sparked ahead of them—not a good sign as they looked for a way out.

“Have you ever considered death by fire?” Germain mouthed with a wry smile.

Immolation. Yes, in detail.

“Any thoughts?”

Pru coughed into her elbow, suddenly short of breath. *One of the worst ways to go, but I'm up for it if you are.*

The donkey must have gotten a whiff of burnt nose hair, or maybe he could hear some fire-adjacent sound Pru did not. He dashed down the bluff with his dick swinging.

His smile turned to a grimace. He wasn't up for it. Pru should have mentioned death was unlikely. Burns, though, were a real possibility, and a foul one. Pru followed her grandmother and the donkey down a dirt path slicing the big bluestem and lobelia hills in half. Where the two sides met in the distance, Pru could barely make out a dark shape, something man-made. It was the lone feature of her view—there were no trees, no roaming flocks, no cottages. With fire tearing across the terrain, the donkey was right to aim for it.

Hot wind rushed over them, whipping Pru's hair and skirt. An ember circled her waist and came to rest on her forearm. Germain and the donkey paused. Pru overtook them. She squinted at the fireline, nigh at hand. Flames came into detail. For a moment, she was stock-still, like a scarecrow, lodged in the soil. What cows do with cud—rumination—Pru did with fear. She chewed it over obsessively. She imagined the makeshift burn treatments available in a sea of charred grass. Their best option was to keep moving. She felt a tug at her back. The donkey nipped her apron strings and nodded his head.

You're not worried, are you? Germain signed.

To join the hellfire club of the damned? Nah. Pru wasn't worried. She was truly fucking terrified. Heat rose in her cheeks. Why, she wondered, had she gone along with this insanity when she could be at home reading a book in a hammock? Why? Seriously. Why? Because it was what her grandmother wanted.

Germain leaned down, and with her fingers she lifted Pru's chin so their eyes met. "Worship without sacrifice is just words."

Pru inhaled singed air. She tied her kerchief over her nose and mouth as another fiery gust swept them. She signed, *Everything is just words.*

“Good grief, child. All you have to do is run.” Germain pointed at the black structure. “May the best animal win.”

Some dormant sound welled in the back of Pru’s throat, an instinct to speak. She couldn’t hear it, but she felt it coming, a primitive kind of prayer leaving her mouth. She attempted to suppress it, but doing so was impossible. The words had a mind of their own. *Let’s Go, Brandon!*

Whether or not Germain understood the utterance, she dug her boots into the donkey. “Hallelujah!” Together they scurried down the trail alongside a pair of spooked quail. They reached a concrete shelter carved into a hillside. By divine providence or sheer luck, the shelter door—at least a foot thick—was ajar. A line of shadow marked the entrance. Under normal circumstances, Pru would not approach, but the universe suggested there was no going back. Pru stepped forward with Germain and the donkey behind. She turned to her grandmother. *It’s well fortified.*

Germain scanned the darkness, peering into its depths. As Pru watched, her grandmother’s forehead lines relaxed. She appeared to be listening. She held her palms out, wiggling her fingers. *Wait.* Then she cupped her ear. She straightened her cockeyed glasses. She dismounted, and grabbed the donkey’s bridle. *I hear it.* Germain neared the door. She turned back to Pru and signed, *Paradise City—my favorite song. It’s coming from within.* Her eyes widened. *This could be a sign.*

A sign of what?

You know what.

No. I don't know what. And you don't either.

“Cursed alive,” Germain mouthed. She grabbed Pru’s apron front and pulled her to. “It’s in the name. Paradise City.”

But we're heading to Lincoln. The Message was clear on those points. The date, the location. I'm naive, sure, but even I can tell this facility is not to be described as a prick, at least not an erect one. Maybe a buried penis, but that would be considered an abnormality.

“It’s not a prick. It’s a vagina.” She dragged Pru through the opening. The donkey followed “And I always say, vaginas are meant to be explored.”

I suppose. As Pru’s eyes adjusted, a cool breeze wrapped her. The three inched down a hallway onto a platform overlooking a chasm. Red exit lighting along a spiral staircase circled the blackness. Pru looked over the edge wondering if the sane move would be to jump.

“Hello!” Germain shouted into the void. If it echoed, Pru couldn’t hear it “The song is coming from down there.”

I can't read lips in the dark.

Germain resorted to aggressive pointing. *Paradise City. There.* She leaned over the railing. *What if they're at the bottom?*

Germain. Pru jerked her grandmother back before signing, *This is a dark hole in the ground. We don't know where it leads.*

Exactly.

Germain prodded her granddaughter toward the stairs. *So go and check.*

Pru slowly finger-spelled each letter of her response. *F-U-C-K-I-N-G-F-I-N-E.*

Then she waved her grandmother on.

But Germain hesitated. She stepped behind the donkey, scratching the animal behind the ear. *I can't leave him alone. He led us here, and I always say—*

—Life is all about the ass.

Well, yes. Germain gave a solemn nod. *Pay heed.*

A certain logic, see. That of a toddler. It was always there. Context-free. A crayon rendering of reality. Both repellent and irresistible. Descend into the darkness by yourself, the logic said. Descend on the strength of another's faith. Perhaps, at the bottom, you will find your own.

Welp. Who can argue with that?

CHAPTER 10 FRESH AIR ACHIEVEMENT UNLOCKED

Willie cursed the ass. She cursed his smell, his excreta, his flea colony, his ill-timed and obnoxious braying, his inability to take a joke, poor manners, inconsiderate nature, and #MeToo grin. As she awakened to the knock of his hoof on the side of her casket, she prayed the donkey would disappear. Into thin air. Yet when she opened the lid to find the ass had in fact disappeared, she was enraged at his cheek and vowed he would be punished. Also to be punished: crotch-itch, morning breath, spinal misalignment, hunger, and the goat striking his horns on the casket in the donkey's place. She clomped the goat between the horns with her boot heel, conveying the message she was not desirous of companionship. But as Willie moved to step down, the goat rammed the side of the box where she nearly put her foot.

“I see you’ve eaten the snake—head and all BTW. Credit for that.” The goat responded with bleating. “I hope you’re not expecting me to prepare your breakfast. Goats are said to be masters of self-care.” Again, the goat rammed the casket just as Willie, now balancing, attempted an exit. “Move along.” She jumped into the gravel. The goat’s bleating turned to all-out yelling. Willie kicked at him. “I respond to aggression with aggression.” She grabbed the goat’s horns and clenched. “Now where is the bloody donkey? Did you eat him too?” But as soon as she let go, the goat pursued her, wailing. Willie high stepped toward the grass, trying to maintain the space between her rear and the goat’s horns whilst she searched the horizon for signs of the donkey. Turns out, it’s awkward to call for one animal while swatting another away. Some creatures refused to

be ignored. Willie stopped, turned and hollered back. “Motherfucking leave, would you?” The goat didn’t flinch at her admonition. Rather, he leapt on his hind legs and head-butted Willie in the motherfucking nuggs.

“What is wrong with you? That’s the behavior of a psychopath.” Before she caught her breath enough to get to her feet, the goat nudged her. He nipped at her rear. She jumped. “Seriously, no means no.” The goat grabbed her back pocket and, with surprising lip dexterity, pulled out a package of ramen noodles she carried, mostly crushed. “Well, damnit, why didn’t you say so?” Once the goat tore through the package and munched the dry noodles, he seemed to settle. “So we’re friends now. Perf.” Willie watched the goat licking the plastic clean. He was one of the big breeds, with horns and floppy ears, brown and bearded and walleyed. Some alien computer power behind that skull.

The goat’s gaze met hers. Ugh. Eye-contact. No thank you. Willie head-faked and made a run for it, hightailing along a trail of trampled grass and donkey piss. But she could not outrun the goat, who trotted alongside with ease. “I neither seek nor require a sidekick. Unlike you, the donkey can be put to use though it’s ever a trial.” She slowed to a walk. “And I’m out of snacks.” The goat seemed content at her side. Among her bad qualities, Willie couldn’t abide silence. After a minute with no response from the goat, she dug her hands into her pockets, resigned. “Really, AMA. If we’re walking together, it should be a back-and-forth.”

It was too hot for the early hour. Willie directed the wind up the back of her shirt. Nearby, river water ran fast around rocks. In high years, the river eroded the cliffs at its banks, but the water was low now. The grass was dry. The bluffs overlooking the river

were thatched in roots. Long antler scratches banded the dirt. Willie slid down the embankment and pulled her hands through her pompadour. It was stiff with dust and Grease #109. She could barely get her fingers out. She knelt on a tire by the stream letting the water flow over the scars on her right arm. It was murky and sun-warmed, unappetizing. She and the goat drank anyhow. She wiped her mouth on her shirt. Trying another tack, she said, “At least tell me your name. I’m not an idiot. I know you can.”

The goat cocked his head like he was receiving a message, as if a processor within flickered to life. To Willie’s surprise, he responded. “This is *Fresh Air*—”

“—okey—”

“—and I’m Terry Goat.”

Wait. Willie wiped her dripping hands and appraised him from horn to hoof. Terry Goat? *Fresh Air*? He was not, she knew, referring to the atmospheric conditions. Willie felt her pulse race. She took a quick breath and held it. The scenario was damned far-fetched. Why here? Why now? Preeminent AI journalist Terry Goat. Interviewer of notables. Not to be conceited, but Willie always knew this conversation would come one day, that she’d have a go at Terry Goat’s show eventually, everyone did. Though, this didn’t feel like the ideal moment. But people didn’t choose moments, right? Moments chose people. Or goats chose moments? Or people chose goats? She gathered her thoughts before replying. “Hello, Terry. It’s a pleasure to be here.” Willie said it in the exact manner of a guest on *Fresh Air*.

The talking goat introduced her. “If faith traditions seem a little unhinged and aimless these days, our guest is working to restore focus to religious life. She calls her

work “fulfillment,” and claims it is within the power of people of faith to bring about the promised land they seek.”

Succinct. Accurate.

“That’s right, Terry. My basic belief is that prophecies need resolutions.”

The goat’s long tongue appeared and then retreated. “I want to set a bit of context here. Your group, the Hype, has been courting controversy for four hundred years. Many prophecies have gone unfulfilled, most famously, that DNA testing would confirm Jesus and Mohammad were the same person. Can you speak to why your ‘faith’ is still relevant?”

Willie sat back onto the tire and hugged her legs. “Does a slap in the face hurt if it doesn’t leave a handprint?” She laughed nervously. Terry Goat was a tough interviewer. “Look, I know what a blow that was. To be clear, I wasn’t around for that. I suspect it was a bad joke that went on too long. You know, worship is a delicate thing. Do it right, you’re saved. Wrong? You’ll find yourself barricaded in a bowling alley with a SWAT team on the other side of the door.”

The goat’s eyes narrowed. “It does make one wonder, though. What else were you wrong about?”

“Free will. I’m kidding of course.” Willie noticed Terry Goat wasn’t smiling. *Get it together*, she admonished herself. This wasn’t a humor show, except the episodes on musical theater and jazz.

“Joking aside, you’re making a bold claim. Essentially anyone can be a savior. Are you not?”

“Not precisely. I make a fine distinction. I don’t believe you need to be a *savior* to bring about a prophecy’s fulfillment.”

“So you don’t claim to be a savior?”

“Not publicly. It’s for me to decide.”

“But you’ve been groomed for this role from childhood, have you not?”

Terry Goat had been researching, Willie realized, digging into her backstory. The sly beast. Willie was not prepared to discuss the boiling pot incident if that’s what the goat was referring to. “Well, my family line goes back to the early days of the Hype, so, as you suggest, there is a certain credibility, even pedigree, that goes with it, but I wouldn’t characterize it as ‘grooming.’”

The goat bleated and stamped. “But your mother set up tests for you, trials for you to prove yourself. You have scars on your hand, physical scars. How do you explain that?”

Uneasy, Willie slid her hand into her pocket. Only two people knew the story, and one of them was dead. It was meant to remain secret. Anyway, everybody knew you didn’t have to answer a computer’s questions. “Sorry, Terry. If computers were meant to talk, they’d be humans.”

“But I’m a goat.”

“And I’m getting tired of it.” Willie stood, trying to put some distance between herself and the creature.

“Ok. Let’s put the Hype aside for a moment. You have a lifestyle brand, Grease #109, a noxious product frankly. How do you respond to accusations that you’ve been defrauding customers?”

“You’re venturing into slanderous territory here, Goat.”

“I believe it’s relevant.”

“Fresh Air. What a crock.”

“I’m only holding you accountable for your claims. Do you think your reaction to criticism could have a chilling effect on people who are questioning—”

“This is a hatchet job, and I don’t like it.” A walk-off was not the most dignified way to end a *Fresh Air* interview and certainly not how she’d envisioned it. But Willie wasn’t going to let Terry Goat lead her around by the nose. “If you’re petty enough to put this on the air, you should be ashamed of yourself.”

“Oh. The show is live, in the AI sense, but—”

Willie picked up the tire. “I don’t stand insolence especially from a ruminant, one of the lowest creatures on earth.”

“Can’t we do this without insults?”

Willie raised the tire over her head. “You’ve mocked me for the last time, Goat.” Then she stuffed it over the goat’s horns. “And *this* is the end of the interview.” The goat shook his head to free himself, but the tire was a good fit. He somersaulted into the river trying to get enough leverage to pop it off.

“You’re not going to give me the chance to ask a follow up question?”

“Get soaked.” Willie marched across the river, denying Terry a final look.

The goat called after her. “You get to make a speech and then have the last word? You’re gone. She’s walked out.”

What a disaster. This was not information Willie wished to discuss publicly. Terry had been out to get Willie from the jump, obv. Willie marched with her chin raised until

she was out of sight. Then she ran until she got winded. Morning was full, its motives unclear. Like everyone else, the day would either be with Willie or against her.

Where was the donkey? Willie descended into the bed of a dried lake. The cracked mud was chalky. A few cottonwoods and some scrubs flourished there, but mostly, it was flat terrain with no view beyond the rise around her. She watched a bird flutter and drop onto the broken limb of a log. It was a meadowlark (bright yellow, you could spot one blindfolded). On a whim, Willie picked up a rock. She didn't give it too much thought, just let it fly in the bird's direction. She watched the rock's trajectory through the sky, noticing a lighting burst from some low clouds. It was a miss. The bird flew off. Within moments, a line of smoke billowed and expanded. *Fucking finally*, she thought. *Signs and wonders*.

Willie pushed on, tramping up the hill and across the open space, filling it with her increasing rage. She wasn't surprised to feel the fire's approach. Some might have looked with penitence upon it, but Willie was unchastened. It was only natural that the power of her anger exploded through the prairie. She judged it a foretoken. Perhaps the one she sought. With flames nearly at her back, she entered the darkness of some human-made bunker blasting the Hype theme, *Paradise City*, in a hollow tone. And who did she find taking cover there? Her goddamn donkey.

"You," Willie snarled. She smelled the donkey's foul breath when he brayed at her. "I believe you owe me an apology for that display of treachery." Willie approached him. Behind the donkey was vacant darkness. No human devotions, no human prayers, no humans at all. Willie walked down a short corridor and peered past the railing, removing her leather jacket and hooking it on a single finger. The blackness below was

luminous, like it could reach Willie where she stood. Somehow, the darkness seemed bigger, more massive than the structure that contained it. Willie had a sense that if she fell, the void would catch her and cradle her.

Heeeee-haaaawwww! With his hind to Willie, careful steps backed the ass up. His next move should have been obvious. There could be only one reason for his rearward orientation. But Willie missed the signs—mouth-breathing, flattened ears, tail swishing. She was focused on some expected prostration, an ass-to-floor repentance. *Haaaawwww!*

“No, no. That kind of apology won’t do. Say it in a language I can understand like your friend the goat does.” Willie unbuckled her belt and snapped it free of the loops. She approached the donkey’s hindquarters. “Or Mother will give you a lashing.”

As she whipped the leather strap, she caught a movement over her shoulder. A shirtless old woman stood behind her wielding a rusty pipe. The sight was so surprising, Willie dropped the belt and turned toward her. As she did, she was knocked square in the back by a powerful force, a swift ass-kicking—no, a *double* ass-kicking—launching her into the old woman. They both lost their footing. In the space of a breath, they pitched toward the railing, propelled by enough power to push them over. Through some higher force, Willie got a hand on the rail and saved herself from falling to the depths. The old woman? Not so much.

No sound followed her into the darkness. No scream, no thud, no moan. Beside silence, all that remained was rhythmic donkey panting and *Paradise City* echoing off the walls.

CHAPTER 11 A CLEVER IMPERSONATION

Moves and countermoves, dumbass. Get up! I refuse to let you sleep through the Great Awakening. Scotty's disorientation upon waking in the back seat of a Chevy to chastisement from her dead sister was so profound, she imagined she, too, was dead, and had merged with the universal consciousness touted by boomerang physicists claiming the dimensions of reality moved in an arc across space-time and would theoretically return (or something).

Do your research. Do your research. The words were a dig that Scotty wasn't suited to the rigor demanded by academic work. She did not have Erin's discipline, her curiosity, or her urgency. People driven by urgency didn't oversleep.

"Erin?" Scotty switched viewing modes and searched her contact stream to figure out how her sister could be speaking to her.

The gall bladder surgery's gone terribly wrong.

"Erin!"

After some muted jostling, her sister's voice was replaced by a familiar snort. "Sorry, honey. This bird makes some insensitive jokes, but she sounds *just* like Erin, doesn't she? Uncanny."

"Mom! For fuck's sake. I was asleep." It was full daylight by the time she crawled out of the Chevy, and wouldn't you know it, the funeral camp was empty. Erin would have accused her of dereliction of duty, and in fairness, it was a crime of scholarship to lose track of study subjects in such a careless way.

“Then it’s a good thing we called. We haven’t heard from you in days.”

“We?”

“Wing Man, the bird and me. Speaking of, will you be returning to civilization for his birthday party?”

Scotty opened the car door and watched the sky. It was hazy. Not normal. She blinked to weather view. Pop-up wildfires. Immediate area under threat. She considered an exit strategy. Coming up with nothing, she considered shutting the door, turning off notifications, and going back to sleep. Instead, she cued up a Monday morning playlist. (Strong, Cecily. “Hot (Yoga) Suicide.” *Interpreting Facial Expressions*. Island, 2029.)

Erin’s voice cut in. *Follow the breadcrumbs. Follow the breadcrumbs.*

“Shut up, Wing Man. Mom, get him off the call.”

“He’s telling you he wants you to come.”

“No. He’s just repeating things Erin used to say.”

“But you know Erin would have wanted you to be here.”

“I’m busy at the moment.” She switched to mapping and pinpointed specific locations. Lighting struck 2.3 kilometers north. Projections put the fire at her current position in approximately half an hour.

“This bird was your sister’s only progeny, her bequest, and when she died, we promised we’d care for him.”

“Well, it was a dick move. That bird has an eighty-year life span.”

Take me down to the paradise city where the grass is green and the girls are pretty. Take me home, yeah yeah.

“He sings too?” Scotty had to admit, he nailed Erin’s vibrato.

“He’s a bird. That must have been one of your sister’s favorite songs. He sings it all the time. It’s catchy.”

“That’s not how I’d describe it.”

Scotty blinked through map layers, seeking a way out. There. 5k south, a defunct missile silo. She ran a quick search on the site and found its decommissioning dated back to 2128 but little else. Fire was now visible on the grassland. If she had any hope of making it to shelter, she needed to hurry. Finding the laundress and MadClaw McScurvy would have to wait.

“Oh now stop it, Scotty. Wing Man is a delight with his Erin impersonation. A delight! It’s like having your sister in the house again.”

“Cringe. I’ve got to go. Shit’s burning down.”

Take me down to the paradise city where the grass is green and the girls are pretty. Oh, won't you please take me home.

Her mother giggled. “A goddamn delight.”

Looking west along the plains, Scotty calculated the necessary pace to beat the fire to shelter. At a jog, it would take her at least forty minutes across uneven terrain. She looked around. She was in a vehicle yard. Most of it was a century past its last maintenance check, not to mention the fuel tanks would be dry, the solar arrays discharged, the hydrogen cells drained, the tires dry-rotted, and the ignition keys lost. Humans and their hunks of junk. She shook her head in bafflement. At the end of a line of farm implements, she spotted a bike with airless radial tweels that probably still had some flex if they were made of silicone. Legs, as an alternative fuel, were unbeatable in terms of reliability.

She coughed into her elbow as she ran for it. The smell of burn entered her lungs. Smoke settled over the relics of the former town. The fire would destroy what the humans had left behind. *About time*, she thought before she could get verklempt. Ha. As if that ever happened. She heaved the handlebars out of the soil the bike was buried in. She lost her balance pulling it free. She gave the pedals some quick spins to shake loose the dirt and get the belt drive moving. She wasted no time steering her way across the debris toward open prairie. (Cantrell, Blu. "Hit 'Em Up Style (Oops!)" *So Blu*. Arista, 2001.)

She glanced north toward the fire. It occurred to Scotty she might be witnessing the beginning of time itself, the world at its birth, simple and lonely. A burning grassland was a bitter sight. The fire had an existence of its own and a will. That old town had never been more than a characteristic of the landscape, a destination no more than a den was to a warren of rabbits, or a hive to a colony of bees. And it would soon be gone. The town had the audacity to stand out well and truly from anything of nature around it, to seek attention unto itself, to assume it had the right to exist. It was not of nature. It was of man. Against nature. And the fire was coming.

The bike hit a divot in the road and kicked up sand. Scotty shook it off. The track changed. (Ask Amy. "I Made a Comment About Race That Offended My Family." *On Repeat*. The Washington Post Records, 2025.) She had always felt the prairie endless, and the farther she traveled, the more her feeling was confirmed. Grass upon grass. The centuries had worn the rough edges off the earth like an hour glass turned on its side. Everything, Scotty supposed, was seeking equilibrium. The outside influences, obstacles, tumults, and all-of-a-sudden catastrophic shifts of life kept it from being achieved. Time was the force that brought balance. Seconds, generations, eons. The whole of human

history was tumult. The Primitive Age came before the Technology Age, the Dark Age came before the Age of Enlightenment. The Faith Age before the Science Age. The Age of Excess led to the Age of Restraint. The Divided Age came before One World. There was a progression, but it wasn't always forward. It was punctuated by cataclysmic reversals. What appeared to be a new beginning could more accurately be considered the kind of reboot all systems need to keep running efficiently. What appeared as tragedy could be seen as a course-correction given a century of hindsight. And sometimes a century wasn't enough.

Pedaling over masses of roots, plowing down tall grass, riding the bumps and swells was strenuous. It taxed Scotty's aerobic system. With each breath, she took in more smoke from the fire until she couldn't determine if the burn in her lungs was due to effort or environment. Her momentum waned, and she stood off the bike seat to get a deeper push on the pedals. She watched the horizon for signs of the missile site and course-corrected to match her map display. She looked for the sun through the haze, but it had disappeared. She was stuck, she felt, inside increasingly small realities, like the littlest matryoshka doll who finds herself nested within containers.

In truth, the Milky Way had proven devoid of life outside of Earth. The universe was too immense, the potential of human technology too limited, to reach across the cosmos. The cosmos was exactly as it was described: space. And an individual human was but a mere speck. (Jesus Jones. "Right Here, Right Now." *Doubt*. EMI, 1990.) The thought was overwhelming, and at times disheartening. Scotty envied the Hype Women. They were certain of their destination, and certainty answered all their questions. Paradise was the central focus and feature of the Hype in ways Scotty was only beginning to

understand. There was symbiosis between the savior and her people. Only through one could the other exist. Scotty, on the other hand, seemed to be living her life on a Mobius strip in which everything circled back on itself until one day it would be sliced down the center, and she would find herself forever separated from those she loved.

A fox darted past the bike as Scotty pushed up a rise. It ran with its tail flying behind as it crested the hill and disappeared on the other side. In the space of three seconds, her view of the landscape vanished behind black smoke. She was smothered. She blinked through health alerts stacking up in her peripheral to an environmental warning that the wind had shifted toward her and was gusting to 129 km/h. ****SEEK SHELTER**** She picked up speed in an uncharacteristic panic, biking blind. Suddenly, the bike barreled into something, and she hurtled over the handlebars, landing on her back, discombobulated.

She blinked, and again, she heard Erin's voice inside her head. *Listen, XXI is not just a legal drinking age, interstellar space travel doesn't require a warp drive, and a 3-DNA bust of Colonel Sanders is a masterpiece of early digital art. How are they all connected? History's worst practical joke.*

"Mom! Stop calling." She cinched her hoodie strings, narrowing the aperture to just her eyes and coughed forcefully.

"I tell ya, this bird has a quick wit, Scotty."

An opening in the smoke revealed a goat with a tire around his neck staring down at her. He stood on his back legs, and Scotty thought he was about to stomp her head, so she rolled just shy of the hooves. "Oh buddy, you've got bigger problems than me." Out of nowhere, a pair of deer leapt over them. Choking on embers, Scotty grabbed the tire

and worked it over the goat's bearded jaw. She maneuvered it past the pair of horns, freeing the creature, who bared his teeth at her. "Damn, bitch. You better run!" The smoke closed in on them, the fire not far behind. ****SEEK SHELTER**** Scotty straddled the bike and pedaled through blackness toward the throbbing dot on her sight display. Her only chance was that missile silo. History's worst practical joke.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Meggan Haller's first writing credit, at six years old, was a story called "Wooden Bread" about a woman so poor she had to feed her children bread made from a tree. After an exhaustive round of querying, she decided to self-publish the story on her dad's typewriter and laminate it with cellophane tape.

Haller earned a Bachelor of Arts in English and a Bachelor of Science in Journalism from the University of Florida in 2002. She completed her Master of Arts at the University of South Alabama in 2022. Alongside her career as an undistinguished author, she has built an undistinguished career as a photojournalist. Though her work has been commissioned by leading national and international publications, she often finds herself shooting for niche mags in industries such as septic tank service and portable restroom clean-out. "Thrive" might be too strong a word, but she continues to "get by."

Haller's most cherished accomplishments are not on her resume. She photographed Ray Allen's first hole in one (he's a basketball player, not a golfer). She's a member of the Goodyear Blimp Club (you have to ride the Blimp to join). She won \$4,444 on *Let's Make A Deal* wearing her mother's wedding dress (circa 1972). She canoed across the Everglades, and walked across Spain, the Scottish Highlands, and the Black Forest in Germany. She knows how to pop the clutch with a yo-yo, play pop ballads badly on the piano, roll down a hill of any steepness, and pack out her own shit.

Anything else she says she's done is a lie, which is why she enjoys writing fiction.