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11.

St. Francis Medical Center, whose hallways and operating rooms Reyn knows her mother to be scavenging, is to the right, large and indestructible when compared to the neighboring buildings, its windows intact, its brick walls free of graffiti and shrouded in sunlight. As are the congested sidewalks and public transit platforms, both blanketed by bike frames, by pots, pans, microwaves, toasters, stray dresser drawers, phone chargers, and smashed laptops, the occasional wardrobe on wheels accompanying pillaged suitcases, pants, empty hangers still on bent rods and swaying—items discarded by those who fled, items left for the stubborn and ignorant to clean up or sift through.

Despite the volume of inanimate objects, Calypso Street is clear of what Reyn has been instructed to scan for. Any sign of life is to be indicated by sounding the Jeep's horn—honk for sedans skidding out of alleyways and onto the street, honk for tweekers squatting beneath unhinged shop signs, honk for starved Rottweilers pawing through tipped trashcans, honk for small birds falling like rain, honk for their feathered pools of blood. LOOK FOR LIFE, her mother has re-written on the dashboard with a black permanent marker, the initial characters faded over time, over the months. Beside the phrase: HNK 1 IF FAR, HNK 2 IF CLOSE, KEEP DOORS UNLOCKED.

The small chunks of asphalt chiseled out of the street either by hand or by storm do not require the horn. Nor do the trees, bare, bark paling as if doused in bleach, nor do the shards of glass glinting near the parking meters. Here, on Calypso, Reyn has decided that IF FAR means somewhere near the riverfront, near the grey and blue buildings that once were hotels and whose foundations have since been reduced to floodwalls, should the river rise again. She'll honk twice, then, if threats appear in the dollar store parking lots, or lurk among the shin-high grass of the St. Francis campus. And all Reyn can do is hope that her mother will hear it, somewhere in that hospital, whichever floor she is on, whichever staircase, whichever wing or operating room. Reyn has been inside St. Francis before, at the age of five, for a second opinion on the best approaches for confronting deafness. She remembers her mother as comforting that

day, strong and stoic for her daughter but fragile enough for love. Eyes forward. Straight back. Legs crossed; a bouncing knee. They'd held hands that day, in the elevator, in the waiting room, even while the doctor, a gangly man with a dry scalp, glanced incessantly at Reyn's mother, then leaned back, inhaled, and explained what his examination foretold.

“ deaf mute different insurance
very little we do sorry ”

Once home, Reyn's mother, so healthy then, so colorful—a dark sweater with sequins, pinpoint eyeliner, sun-hugged skin—had laid on the couch, on her back, and waved her daughter over. She then grabbed three of Reyn's fingers and placed them on her throat. And she'd hummed there, some slow, jazzy tune, on that blue couch, in that unkempt living room on LaFontaine. It's this moment that Reyn wishes she could step back into now. She thinks she'd tidy up the living room, stack the coffee table's stray magazines, straighten the bunched rug, tilt the television so that sunlight no longer interfered with daytime subtitles. She'd then approach her five-year-old self, take her free hand and lead her into the kitchen, sit her down at the lone bistro table and write. Let her know. That she will never hear the kitchen sink drain. That she will never hear her father's heel-driven footsteps, nor the sizzle of his crab cakes in the oil-drenched frying pan. That touching her mother's humming throat is not to be thought of as a game that one day she will win—correctly pinpointing the source of the vibration as a music student would locate notes from plucked harp strings—but only as an exercise of reduction: to smell, to sight, to touch and taste. She'd write that the words and phrases her five-year-old self will soon feel swelling in her gut, that jagged ball working its way into her throat, those beginnings, those embers, will surface only as a written question: WHAT DID IT SOUND LIKE? To which her mother's answer will always be: WHAT?

Reyn hates that she will never know what the Jeep's horn sounds like. She hates that it is this Jeep that connects her and her mother now, not that house on LaFontaine

Some other junkie she could die with. Staring into the night, she will contemplate exiting this forever—the Jeep, her mother, her home—being free, moving on to something, to someone better.

Why she doesn't act upon these thoughts is no mystery to Reyn. It's fear. Fear is why she sits in this passenger seat, scanning Calypso Street. Fear is what drives Reyn to exit the Jeep each night, and walk to the passenger side, and use her shoulder to shove her mother's legs in far enough to shut the door. Fear not of herself, nor of her mother, but the fear of being left with less than no one. She is a dependent deaf mute. A helpless parasite, she feels, that can only go as far as her host. Survival, Reyn believes, hinges on that junkie in St. Francis, that junkie that once was a mother, a good mother who, when not leaping from job to job in pursuit of pay and benefits her associates degree from Louisiana Delta rendered elusive, made it a priority to compensate for the one instructor Monroe Public Schools issued to thirty-three disabled children; after her morning shift serving coffee—for a regional chain who, due to a corporate squashing of its failed all-hands-on-deck effort to expand, was forced to evaluate its benefits program, to move the bar from three to six months employment before kicking in—and before her night shift—at a nearby distillery she hoped would eventually have enough room for her on their marketing team, the graphics side, in particular, though she was willing to challenge herself in other arenas—she'd teach Reyn how to read, how to write, how to COMMUNICATE WITH THOSE EITHER UNABLE OR UNWILLING TO SIGN. She'd sit across from Reyn at the bistro table and mouth vowels, consonants, one-syllable words, then two, and three, and four, checking Reyn's accuracy on the legal pads she brought home from the dollar store one Tuesday. She'd spend hours guiding Reyn as she copied onto those same legal pads whole passages from her favorite books, and even more hours going over the reading comprehension questions Reyn would answer when she was at the distillery and leave on her pillow. All of which, as Reyn has thought often, would've been better explained had her mother at some point in her life been an educator. But

she hadn't. She wasn't. She admitted time and again to hating school as a child. To hating reading. And yet her mother guided her. She supported her. And, above all else, her mother conversed with her. THEY WON'T TEACH YOU TO MAKE YOUR OWN DECISIONS, her mother wrote more than once, on the rare occasion that Reyn would express frustration or disinterest, THIS WILL. Another time: YOU'RE SO MUCH SMARTER THAN I WAS, THAN I AM. And another: I'M SO PROUD OF YOU. Her mother asked her questions, but not just any question. She asked the right questions. Instead of HOW WAS SCHOOL?, she'd ask, WHAT DID YOU LIKE ABOUT YOUR DAY? If Reyn was frustrated with something, or someone: HOW WOULD YOU LIKE TO HANDLE THE SITUATION? Upon awakening, on a Saturday that she took off from work: HOW DO YOU WANT OUR DAY TO LOOK?

And Reyn wants that woman back, those questions, that concern. She wants to feel important again, important to the only person in her life. Wants her to know that she yearns for the day that they can once more cuddle on the sofa and watch *Little Big Man*, Reyn attentive, her mother nodding off. Wants to tell her how those reading lessons didn't work, that instead of independence they fused within her a need of approval she hoped was satiable. JUST ONCE, Reyn wants to write on the dashboard, JUST ONCE CAN WE TALK? Just once, can they go back? Can they pass one of Reyn's three TIME magazines back and forth, each of them underlining not just their favorite words, but a message—circled syllables of headlines, underlined sentences, a starred slogan? Can they create a code that only the two of them can decipher? Can there be something deeper than this Jeep to bind them once more?

But she is alone. Her mother is gone. Reyn is alone, and she is sweating. She removes the cat-clawed purple and gold LSU sweatshirt her mother snatched last week from a Goodwill whose roof had caved in, and tosses it on the back seat, leaving her in the baggy white v-neck whose off-brown stains still smell of stale coffee. The sweatshirt drops to the Jeep floor, settles atop an unplanned pyramid of empty bottles and cans. Quaker State bottles, Aquafina bottles, bottles of rubbing alcohol, bottles-bottles-

bottles, and eye drops, and nasal spray, those that aren't empty marked of its contents either by obvious color, or with OIL, SOAP GAS, WATER, or MED in the same black permanent marker scribbled across the dash and center console. Also strewn across the Jeep's floor, atop a rusted toolkit Reyn's mother has used only to break car windows, are batteries who only have value if the acid can be extracted—D, double A, triple A—torn pages of magazines and newspapers to use as toilet paper, rattier clothes than those Reyn currently wears, the occasional dry pen or stubbed pencil, assorted bandannas, one pot, one pan, a sack of brown rice clamped by a hair tie.

Because, for reasons of scope, she has tilted them at the most extreme of angles, Reyn cranes her neck to view what each Jeep mirror reflects, which is, as it has been for the past hours, nothing but asphalt, the tops of buildings. Intact ruins. She shifts in the seat, tilts her eyes downward momentarily, at her hands, at her blonde-haired forearms, now exposed, oily but bare, save for the smeared ink near the bone, remnants of a gel pen tattoo she gave herself out of boredom. Just her name, in capital letters. She rotates her hand, examines the clear fingernails she liked most when they were turquoise, the hints of dirt packed into her uncallused palms. Reyn hooks her fingers and thumb around her bony right wrist, paying particular attention to the overlap of the two, how her index finger is firmly atop her thumbnail. She does this every day. Has become a nervous tick of some sorts. But she also does it because she knows, save for the emergence of her breasts, she is emaciated. She can run her fingers over her stomach and count the notches of her abdomen. When the rearview mirrors aren't so severely angled, Reyn can see the knots of her bicep and tricep tighten as she grips the steering wheel. So too can she see just how large her eyes have become.

Reyn releases her wrist only when she sees a side door of St. Francis creep open. She straightens her back, hovers her left hand over the horn. The other is over the gearshift, foot at the ready. She has thought of this moment often, of a threat approaching, not intimidated by the horn, not turned away, but instead sparked by

whatever noise it does produce, hoisted into a relentless pursuit. She has pictured a man of indescribable height and girth dragging her mother out of these hospitals by the hair. She's wondered if she could ever leave her mother in a scenario like that, drive off and debate over when it'd be best to return. Has wondered if she has it in her to gun it over the curb, across a sidewalk and lawn, pursuing from the seat of power she does hold, feeling the quick squish of the indescribable man beneath the Jeep.

Please be her, Reyn thinks, please be her.

Other than glancing at the ink-covered dashboard and gauges—half a tank remains within the Jeep—she keeps her eyes on St. Francis' door. What appears first, seconds later, is an orange duffel bag, stuffed so full and rigid it looks as if it could pass for an antique trunk. Following, and nudging the duffel bag along with her shins and calves is Reyn's mother. That black stocking cap. That faded pink jacket. That struggle—in each hands are canvas bags she must've found, misshapen by objects testing their elasticity. She sets them on the grass. Straightens her back, puts her hands on her hips. Squints at the sun. Catches her breath.

UNABLE OR UNWILLING. It isn't the first time, but in this moment, Reyn recalls one of two signing sessions she had with her mother. The ASL alphabet. Her mom's disinterested eyes, how her wrists would only cooperate with her wine glass. UNABLE OR UNWILLING. *Unable or unwilling*, Reyn thinks, though she's certain the answer has been true for much longer than these last months.

Reyn snakes the Jeep through several waves of abandoned vehicles—sedans left windowless on the shoulder of the road, pick-ups angled across each lane, a semi tipped entirely, its intricate chassis bled onto by the indigo sky—eventually passing the SHREVEPORT 14 sign and reaching the most open stretch of Highway 20. And there the masked are. Men and women emerge from each treeline as Reyn accelerates, and make their way to the road, topless bodies defined, muscle and tendon swallowing what fat

remains. Each face is concealed. By mustard-colored welding masks. By gas masks splattered neon. Trailing are the children. *Their* children, maybe. As young as three or four, as old as eleven or twelve, all facsimiles of those they follow: frail bodies, yellow masks, bare feet, even their awkward gait.

For three months now, Reyn has bore witness to this, to them, this emergence. For three months, she has driven this very stretch of highway, and for three months she has looked at her mother at this very moment, and for three months she has seen the very same reaction: placid. Her mother's shoulders do not tense, nor do her hands. She maintains her slouch. She keeps her eyes forward. Blinks. Again. Again, and again.

An exchange, that's what this is. Trade. Of pills and plastic jugs, of rubbing alcohol and peroxide, of bandages and batteries and beakers, rubber-banded bundles of tongs and forceps, baggies of cotton swabs and iodine, all that currently bulks the duffel and canvas bags on the Jeep's back seat. They do not want the magazines. They do not want the brochures. They don't even want food. Medical supplies are all that the masked desire. In return is gasoline, and oil. In return, freedom is granted—to roam the stretch of highway they have claimed, to search, to resupply, to approach as they are without the onslaught that Reyn pictures happening to unknowing passersby, a blur of yellow swarming tighter and tighter, releasing only when the intruder has been immobilized, corralled to the nearby exit ramps. In return is the only thing Reyn's mother seems to truly desire: Ohapila.

As Reyn understands it, these yellow-masked men and women are its creators. Small bands of them venture into emptied cities each day to scrape paint, rust, and aluminum into buckets that they then lug back and dump into what her mind tells her are giant black cauldrons. What comes next, Reyn isn't certain. She pictures the rubbing alcohol dumped in, the peroxide, the iodine, ingredients of an imprecise process, an unbalanced blend stirred and boiled for hours over an uncontrolled flame far out in the woods, consistency and color a foreign idea, some vials smooth and the color of copper,

others choppy and closer to maroon. *Imprecise*, Reyn has thought, because the masked need not care; if there are more like her mother—and there are; she has seen them—there is demand. They need not travel, they need not promote, they need not risk. All will come, and all will pay, and all will return.

For three months, they have returned. Three months, and Reyn still can't help herself from sitting up just that much straighter, from gripping the steering wheel tight with both hands, from feeling as if this somehow won't continue, this trade, how the masked allow their Jeep to approach. *They'll turn soon*, Reyn thinks. *There will soon come a day where the deaf mute and her mother are no longer needed*. Either deemed dispensable, or converted: stripped, fitted with a yellow mask, given a weapon—a claw hammer, a wrench, a hatchet, a screwdriver, a rusted knife—and then a tattoo, of the state, of an eagle, of a gator, of a family tree, a barbed wire or illegible character, any other symbol that stretches across these masked adults, these masked children, across breasts and chests, arms and shins. Escorted to a tree, or ditch, or valley, shown their new home, their new life. It'll happen, Reyn is certain, because progress will deem it so.

Progress: when Reyn's mother first guided her to this outpost, there may have been ten yellow-masked men and women upon arrival. Now there are seventy, including the children, maybe eighty.

Progress: just two weeks ago, the masked began construction on their shelter, standing one hundred feet from the highway, between hand-sawn tree trunks. Now, it is the width of a basketball court, and it stands ten feet tall, a skeleton in place to make it taller, to add a second floor. Now: semi-lit by lanterns placed on surrounding stumps, Reyn can see that windows have been found and cut and set aside to wedge into allotted slots.

Progress: Reyn has never seen a pistol in the hands of the masked until this moment, when she pulls the Jeep parallel to the shelter and two backlit silhouettes emerge. The shorter of the two holds the pistol. He is stout despite the living conditions,

and wears a yellow with black specks on its cheeks shaped like teeth. His torso jiggles with each step, belly spilling over his belt loops. The other is tall, torso chiseled, the veins that run from wrist to bicep, from hips to ribs, somehow reflective of the bends and curls of black serpents painted onto the yellow hockey mask tight against his cheeks. As they have done in the past, together they surmount the gentle slope leading to the road. Leaders, Reyn knows, who now, when compared to previous encounters, when they'd wave them off of visitors they intend to conduct business with, make a minimal effort to keep their followers at bay.

Progress: the gauntlet converges on the Jeep.

Perhaps, contrary to what they were instructed to do at the start of this relationship, Reyn and her mother are now to exit the Jeep. Maybe Reyn isn't supposed to shut the vehicle off. Maybe they aren't to sit, and wait for the leaders to come to them, negotiating and executing trade through an open window, squishing bags through the frame, contorting both bodies and objects. Maybe Reyn and her mother are no longer welcome here.

But, under her mother's direction, Reyn does not deviate from what has become routine. She rolls down her mother's window, then shuts the engine off. And she stares, first at her mother, who has twisted herself to reach for one of the canvas bags, and next at the tall leader, who has stepped in front of his pear-shaped counterpart and now stands feet from the vehicle. His torso looks to Reyn like what one would find beneath the hood of this very Jeep—power and torque compacted into tubes and parts, into reservoirs and wires. She stares. Even as his eyes find hers, she stares. Even as he tilts his head, as he lowers himself to her level, masked face in the center of the window's frame.

Reyn's mother hoists the canvas bag over the center console, into Reyn's line of sight. But then she stops. She looks at Reyn—two seconds, three seconds, four—until her message is clear. *THAT'S ENOUGH.* She then glances down at Reyn's crotch, at the

weeks-old bloodstain on the driver's seat. Embarrassed, Reyn bows her head, until the stain is all that she can focus on. To her, it is the only evidence of *her* change, and she is ashamed of it, of her mind's inability to control her body. *It shouldn't have happened here*, she thinks. *It should've happened in a different world, in a bathroom, or on a couch, or at a cousin's house*, where her mother would be called to pick her up, and they'd drive home, and they'd eat frozen yogurt together, and they'd pass notes back and forth, Reyn's of confusion, her mother's of assurance, of encouragement. *A mother would do that*. A mother would welcome her daughter into womanhood, not ignore requests for tampons or pads because NOT WHAT WE'RE HERE FOR. A former version of her mother would do that.

Reyn lifts her head when her mother reaches for the second canvas bag, this time much more efficiently than the last. The gauntlet stays put while the leaders step closer. The muscular one grips the windowsill with his right hand, which Reyn can now see has been marked by black ink—JOHN, from left to right, one letter on each knuckle. And she can see his eyes now, or some semblance of them, flickers, and then nothing. She watches her mother address him. Watches her jaws stretch. Watches her mouth. Watches JOHN take the canvas bag from her mother and, with planted feet, with so much bend in his torso, pass it to his partner. He then points at Reyn. Clearly points, at her.

And back to the stain Reyn's eyes go. The stain. Nowhere else. The stain that she is. The dependent. The parasite. She imagines her mother telling JOHN about her flaws, about her ears, about her tongue. How difficult it has been. How much it still costs her. How much time she has devoted. How much better off she'd be if things were different. How she manages. Ohapila. Back to Ohapila. Back to blackout. Back to comfort.

Reyn the Deaf.

Reyn the Mute.

Reyn the Burden.

A light kicks on. The passenger door is now open. Reyn's mother is stepping outside. Reyn taps the dashboard, fingers not aimed at any particular word, phrase, or command. Her mother turns around, skin like ash under the light, stocking cap already off, raven hair matted. She looks at Reyn not with malice, or concern, but with apology. *For what?* Reyn wonders. She raises her hands to ask. And then her mother's eyes dim into what Reyn interprets as a sad admittance, that where she is going, that what she is about to do, will scar them both.

Her mother scribbles her hand in the air until Reyn provides her with a pen from the center console. She leans so her wrist is flat on the dashboard and, when she is done, she caps the pen, and points at what she has written.

SHUT YOUR EYES

Reyn reaches for her mother, but it is too late—she backs her way into JOHN, into the night and, before closing the door, mouths to her daughter: “It. Will. Be. O.K.”

And then there is once again darkness, and a panic eased within seconds, as Reyn swivels to see her mother open the rear passenger door of the Jeep. The light comes back on and, after passing the pistol to an osseous man nearby, in climbs the fat man, who, as he slides to the driver's side, sends forward scents of smoke and wood, sweat and paint. Once settled, he frantically nudges his hand beneath his gut and tugs at the button of his pants. Reyn turns around. She does not want to see it, him, his, this. She has seen penises before, but only the bloated cylinders belonging to dead men stripped of their clothes, color the same as the alleyways and sidewalks they rested upon. SHUT YOUR EYES. And, yet, she looks in the rearview mirror as her naked mother, on hands and knees, climbs atop the backseat, puffed eyes like strangled ovals, ribs like foothills to the valley that is her stomach. Only after JOHN follows, only after JOHN shuts the door and strokes himself hard in the darkness, only when he and the fat man are thrusting at opposite ends into her mother does Reyn shut her eyes. The Jeep bounces. Shakes, sways.

And Reyn's mind bends into the afternoons she'd spy on her mother, seated before the open armoire in her bedroom, sun glaring on the makeup kit in her lap. She thinks of the fear she had of being caught, how silly it'd been to be so afraid, but how much more interesting it had made the scene, how intensified it all was—the swiftness of her mother's wrist, the calm, the precision, the faith in the finished product. She thinks of all those times her mother still hoped to impress her father after his long days in that torrid kitchen. She wonders if this was why, if this was the result, the end goal, if this is what they did, if this was why her mother eventually pulled her in from the doorway, smiled, and showed her how much to use, how to hold the brush, how best to shape her lips.

The Jeep shakes. The Jeep sways. Bounces.

Reyn opens her eyes. The masked men and women have advanced on the Jeep. A pair of slender men peer into the driver's side window while four others have gathered on the passenger side, hands shaped like magnifying glasses, extensions of their eyes. Ahead, there are women and children dancing, their weapons piled on the road, arms free to flail. And flail they do, as if their shoulders do nothing to connect one to the other, up-down-around, up-down-around. They stomp. Left-left-right-left-right-right. They jump, they bounce, they slap their thighs as if they are drums. And Reyn feels it. Transmitted to her are synchronized thumps and thuds that soon disband, bleed left, bleed right, left, right, left-right-right-left.

The Jeep sways. The Jeep shakes. Bounces.

Reyn turns around. JOHN's tattooed right hand grips her mother's breast. He no longer thrusts, but half-stands-half-sits, propped by the bent left leg upon the seat. Reyn's mother, seated now, strokes him. Fast, hard, faster, harder. Mirrored on the other side of the backseat is the fat man, masked face tilted back as if searching the Jeep's ceiling for some kind of answer. Small. Stiff. Faster, harder.

The thumps from a man open-hand-slapping the Jeep's quarter panel forces Reyn's eyes to cross into her mother's line of sight. Hair has matted to her damp forehead. She does not blink. When she knows Reyn will not look away, she mouths: "Shut. Your. Eyes."

Which Reyn acknowledges. Which Reyn obeys. She turns around. Closes her eyes. Absorbs the thumps, the thuds, the sound of flesh drums. What follows are visions of yellow masks floating through the night sky, slow, then fast, then slow again, and circling, yellow masks searching for faces, hovering over the Jeep at their own will, crashing into the windshield, jabbing at tires, redirecting the headlights to a faceless crowd of half-naked men and women staring, just staring at Reyn in the driver's seat, one in the distance sculpting a plastic mask with a blow torch, molding it to an infant's cheeks. And the infant grows, evolves rapidly before Reyn's eyes into a woman content atop a lookout tree, happy to stand outside of vehicles like this, and watch events like this, and celebrate moments like this, and stomp to moments like this, and dance.

The Jeep bounces. The Jeep sways. Shakes.

There is a tap on Reyn's shoulder. She opens her eyes. The interior light is on. The spectators have vanished. Her mother, clothed now, but looking as if she weighs more than she ever has—shoulders slumped, unable to lift her neck—passes a bowl of stew to her across the seat. Steam rolls into her cheeks. Within the stew are potatoes and what appear to be strings of pork. Reyn turns to the back seat. In place of the canvas bags are eight meal-sized cylinders and a bottle of rubbing alcohol. On the seat, atop the emptied duffel bag, are five large jugs of gasoline, a bundle of loaded syringes between, wrapped in twine. Before sitting in the passenger's seat and closing the door, Reyn's mother points to a note she has set on the center console, which Reyn will unfold and read shortly after the first syringe is emptied into her mother's arm:

THEY ASKED FOR YOU

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They've been here before. West Monroe. Four days ago. And the week before, and the week before that. The same Glenwood Regional swallowed by ivy. Reyn doesn't understand why, if her mother had been at all successful on any of the previous visits, they've come back. She pictures the place stripped of anything useful. Food: gone. Water: gone. Meds: gone. Just a junkie wandering through empty halls, rummaging through empty cupboards, standing in empty ORs.

Yet Reyn writes nothing. She steers where her mother points her, to the ambulance lane. Once parked, she unbuckles her seatbelt, and waits. For something, for anything. In the twelve hours that have passed since she traded her body, Reyn's mother has not been sober—the twine that held the bundle together has been cut, a third of the syringes empty and atop the other junk on the Jeep's floor. Convulsions. Dried blood on her mother's forearm. Dried snot and spit on her mother's cheeks and chin. Everything dry but her jeans, still damp with urine despite Reyn's efforts to soak the mess up with spare shirts, scarves, and gloves.

And now, instead of grabbing the duffel bag and exiting the Jeep, Reyn's mother blankly stares at the glove compartment and twirls her hair. Which leaves Reyn to wonder if she too is questioning why such a sacrifice rested on her shoulders. They could've driven off, sped north, high-tailed it west, and found an exit that, if they could evade the masked men and women, led to a more hopeful life. She could've traded less—left her body out of it, gotten two gallons of gasoline instead of five, six loaded syringes instead of eleven. Reyn could've offered herself instead. She knows that, if her mother had explained what was required of her, she could have done it, handled the both of them, stroked, let them thrust. A fresh young girl is what they wanted. A tight young girl that wears no mask. And at what price? Ten jugs of gasoline? Twenty cans of food? Two-dozen lighters? New tires? One pistol? Permission to drive anywhere they pleased? What of Reyn did her mother's actions protect? How long can and will

her actions protect Reyn? How much further along could they be if it had been Reyn in that back seat?

Reyn uncaps a pen and writes on her mother's side of the dashboard: *HERE AGAIN?* She taps the two words and out of her daze comes her mother, who pulls her stocking cap tight over her head. *SHUT IT OFF*, her mother writes. *SAVE GAS*. After Reyn complies, Reyn's mother opens the door, steps out into the morning light, and slumps toward the nearest Glenwood entrance, a gaping hole in a once-automatic glass door. Before stepping through, Reyn's mother turns around. She faces the Jeep, finds Reyn's eyes, and raises her hand. Raises her thumb, her index finger, and her little finger.

Clouds merge in the sky, then unevenly peel themselves apart, and curl, and thin, evaporating eventually to blue.

Open on Reyn's lap is her favorite issue of *TIME*. A commemorative issue whose hard cover states, *PEACE AT LAST* just beneath a photograph of the USS Bataan, the oldest in the fleet, and upon whose topmost deck are men and women with their arms in the air, celebrating the end of the Iranian conflict. In the distance, miles from the aircraft carrier, is the coastline, a semi-elevated city with clay buildings aflame, thick grey streams of smoke unraveling into the sky. *19 SEPTEMBER, 2019*. She has read it, several times, from cover to cover—the detailed timeline of the conflict, each and every headline, each and every block quote, each and every word of the personal accounts from soldiers, sailors, and SEAL teams, from the wives and children. None of that, however, is what keeps Reyn returning to this particular issue, the oldest in her collection of three. Words are not what keep her turning its glossy pages.

Near the back of the issue is the smallest of photographs—*DADDY, COME HOME*, its caption reads, and in it is a camouflaged father of twenty-five, both of his light-haired daughters in his arms, wet cheeks against his clean-shaven neck. Though she has

prematurely flipped to this image hundreds of times before, Reyn intentionally prolongs the process now, one page at a time, hoping that doing so will recapture the feeling she had that first time—the smile, the joy, the empathy, the escape. One page. Another. Another. Blindly flipping. Losing interest in blindly flipping. Past an advertisement for headphones, past another promoting the TIME app, past a cartoon with suited men being dropped into a soup bowl of oil by a grey hand three times their size. Another, another, past the American flag, past a flavored vodka ad, two at a time, three, three, three-three-two, until Reyn skips ahead and grabs the back cover, closing the issue altogether.

She reaches beneath the driver’s seat and pulls out the others. Calmly places PEACE AT LAST atop the 14 APRIL, 2022 issue, atop WHAT APOCALYPSE?, atop the enormous drill that makes the men working on it look like mice, their heads a third of the VANCE STEEL logos hugging the cylinder. She shoves them back where they belong.

3FAJ172: MICHIGAN
MFV9124: TENNESSEE
084BART: NEW JERSEY
LEV2225: CONNECTICUT
XGZK628: NORTH CAROLINA
B808B92: IDAHO.

The Idaho license plate on the Ford pickup aligns with what Reyn remembers her father’s last postcard looking like: mountains, beautiful mountains in a false blue, jagged and with white peaks. He’d written carefully, letters curled where they needed to be, sentences relatively straight across the back of the card. I LOVE YOU, he’d written. I’M SORRY. XOXO.

Reyn remembers the day she walked out to the mailbox and found that postcard. The earliest days of what would become the blackout. TV stations out, yes, cellular towers inoperable, yes, internet connection down, yes, but weeks before the landlines had been uprooted and heaped over asphalt, weeks before buses were hijacked mid-route by men that had just looted local gun stores. Weeks before and, yet, her mother

had been voluntarily bed-ridden, quilt to chin, blinds shut and lights left off. She remembers walking that postcard into the house on LaFontaine, sitting on the couch, and digesting every syllable again and again over a span of hours, thinking of how odd it was of her father to declare his love from a distance, and then apologize for the distance, how odd it was to fondly remember his deep slouch, his crooked smile, how odd it was for her to actually miss him.

She remembers waiting days before attaching a sticky note to the postcard that said, WE CAN GO, and delivering it to her mother, who, hours later, arose, walked down the stairs and proceeded to toss the card into the kitchen sink and drown her husband's last words with the last of the tap water. She remembers the next time her mother came down the stairs, when, as few as six blocks down the street, men and women in grey coveralls and surgeon masks surrounded fled homes, putty knives in hand. She remembers her mother not even bothering to write a note, but immediately packing up the Jeep, ushering Reyn to do the same. She remembers obeying, blindly obeying, climbing into the passenger side at twelve years old, unaware that her mother's only intention would be to drive around, unaware that on her thirteenth birthday she would be shown how to operate the Jeep, unaware that it would be the place that she'd become a woman. Unaware that, in the beginning, she would look at the license plates of abandoned vehicles and hope that whomever its owner was had somehow made it safely home amidst the chaos, with their high-powered flashlights, with quarter-sized candles in their palms. Unaware that something incomprehensible within her would turn, that she would eventually look at these license plates and think only of herself. Where they could be right now. How far out of Monroe they could've gotten.

A lone pigeon bobs awkwardly on the sidewalk, pecking at debris as the breeze tumbles it by. The way it moves hints at injury, the majority of its weight on one narrow leg. Its breast is closer to bone. When the sun hits it just right, there is a pea green

shimmer on the remaining feathers, a dark red gloss to its left eye. The pigeon stops and thrashes its head in a series of diagonals, somehow appearing as chaos rooted in scheme. Seconds later, off the pigeon goes, back on track, bobbing down the sidewalk, persistent in its search.

Reyn looks at the knuckles on her left hand. REYN, they read, one large, deeply shaded letter on all but the thumb. She then stares at the hole in the glass door, where her mother entered the hospital. Not much else of the building's interior can be seen from the driver's seat; darkness, mostly, slivers of light illuminating ten feet inward, making clear only the tile floor.

Any minute now, Reyn thinks. *Any minute now*, her mother will walk through that hole, goods in tow. So many things, Reyn hopes, things they've proven they don't need, but things that'll make them each smile, that'll make them each forget, forget it all, if even for a moment. Plastic containers of peanut butter, jelly and honey anchoring the bottom of a bag her mother lifted, bruised but edible apples and kiwis between. Another bag in the other hand, this one full of toilet paper and tampons, bars of soap and bundles of books—actual books—shampoo and chewing gum. *Any minute now*, she thinks, *any minute now*, *any minute now*.

LOOK 4 LIFE
HNK 1 IF FAR
HNK 2 IF CLOSE
KEEP DOORS UNLOCKED

THEY ASKED FOR YOU

KEEP DOORS UNLOCKED
HNK 2 IF CLOSE
HNK 1 IF FAR
LOOK 4 LIFE

Reyn steps through that hole in the door. Once past what had been visible from the Jeep—that initial burst of light—Reyn sees that each of the forking hallways before her are strewn with bodies. Still bodies, child bodies, adult bodies, rotting bodies, black

bodies, white bodies, naked bodies, bodies cut open, bodies with surfacing bones, bodies whose legs and backs and faces are pressed to the walls, a small path between bodies to walk upon, an arm here and there to step over.

The smell alone causes Reyn to vomit. The bodies appear as if scavengers have been dragging them, stacking them, manipulating them to ensure mobility. Syringes populate the path, a few sticking out of forearms like diving boards over taut pools of grey. Once the vomiting is over, once her body allows her brain to resume its function, Reyn can't help but wonder if each and every place that her mother enters is like this, an incinerator awaiting heat. If so, she cannot fathom how her mother has done it, how she has gone so long without saying so, and has instead absorbed the assault on her senses and re-entered the Jeep looking the same as when she'd exited.

Doing her best to not look at the bodies, Reyn begins down the left hallway, which, of the two, holds more light. Head up, eyes up, she passes examination room after examination room, each either with its door partially open, or with shotgun holes as doorknobs. Within these rooms, Reyn can see, are anatomical diagrams, clear jars of tongue depressors and cotton balls. And more bodies. Far fewer than the hallway but three or four to each, some scattered, some stacked unnaturally near, or against, the respective door.

At the end of the hallway, adjacent to a pair of elevators, is a doorway cleared of bodies, but also void of its floor directory, reduced to a rectangle of dry glue. Reyn opens the door. Dim light from the hallway seeps into the dark room, a breath long enough to see the staircase, wide enough to see that ten feet from the bottom step crouches a naked man with eggshell skin and scraggly hair the color of rust. Reyn looks to the floor. Diarrhea splatters on the tile, onto the blue and pink cloths over his feet. The man twists at the torso, rotates his gaunt face toward Reyn. Somewhere in that beard are his lips, somewhere he is saying something to her. But Reyn, only seeing the red blade of the scalpel in his right hand, lets go of the door. She sprints up the stairs,

sprints-sprints-sprints, the room growing darker and darker as she goes, as she tackles another flight, her hand dragging across the wall, hoping to find a door handle. Once she does, she quickly flings the door inward and steps into a hallway just as dark, save for a haze of daylight at its apparent end, one hundred feet away. There is no time. She steps toward that light, telling herself that the bearded man will not follow, that, if he does, he will not find her, that he will not grab her with jagged fingernails, that he will not shove her face onto the tile and thrust his dick into her. He will not rape her, and he will not kill her because she will not let him.

As she'd done on the stairwell, Reyn extends her arm to the wall and feels her way forward, first at a walk, but then, as she becomes acclimated, stalking faster and faster and faster. Her fingers graze dried splotches of something she refuses to inspect. Every few steps, she turns around, expecting a shape to break from the dark. Faster, faster, almost to a jog now, and faster, and faster, until she no longer can step, but only slide. She falls to the floor. Liquid splashes onto her neck, onto her sweatshirt. Smells of vinegar. She quickly removes her right foot from the bedpan but, in so much of a hurry, Reyn trips once more before sprinting to the hallway's end, arms locked to brace her impact with the wall.

The light comes from windows along another hallway. On the windows, on the bits of wall between, are red handprints, red streaks to the bottom. To Reyn's immediate right is another staircase, this one's floor directory intact. There are four floors altogether. *There is no reason to go up*, Reyn thinks, *no reason at all*. Her mother has left by now. *She is outside*, at the Jeep, *locked out and waiting. Make your way down. Hurry*. Yet, in nearing the windows, Reyn can see that the red handprints are still slick. She looks at the tile floor. More red. More streaks. More handprints.

And so Reyn follows the trail down the hallway. It grows thicker as she approaches an open door. She looks up. To the left, behind an entire wall of glass, are newborns still bundled in their blankets, color-coded by gender, some faces nearer to

skeletons than others but most like mush, soft flesh caving in on itself. Why none of them have been touched, why they haven't been swiped to the floor is beyond Reyn. Yet there they are, in rows, elevated as something sacred.

The trail of blood extends further into the room, past the first row of babies, past the second, and proceeds into a curve, which Reyn follows. There, at the end of it, is her mother, curled not unlike an infant, and bloody. All over her hands and wrists. Smearred across her face. Reyn does not hurry to her, nor does she drop to her knees. But she, not at all thinking about that bearded man in this moment, approaches. Once there, she crouches. She examines her mother. Sees the puncture in her throat; thinks of the scalpel. Taps her shoulder. Places the back of her hand against her cheek. Her skin is still warm. Eyes, chest: motionless. Reyn pulls her hand back but remains crouched. Looks at her mother. Looks elsewhere, at the floor, at the blood, at the babies, at her feet. At the glass enclosing all of this, wondering when the bearded man will come, wondering how long it'll be until she has to sprint.