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All I Ever Had

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by

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Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto.
– Terence

No one has thus far succeeded in singing an epic of peace.
-Wings of Desire

Chapter 1
:: Beets can go to the devil ::

Kettle was dead. There was no changing that. The question was how much that was going to change everything else.

So that’s the first line. I keep debating whether I should start there, or just go back to the beginning, or maybe lead with a little history of the Freedom River Underground, how it was this thing, this movement, this small seed and how it was also just people. Like everything else. Just these people who said yes here and no there, who set their feet in a certain direction by some kind of faith or belief or conviction and what became of that.

Maybe I should start with Betts. Betts quitting her full ride after 2 years and joining up with a bunch of crazy ex-occupiers. Betts living in a house with a mix of neo-hippies and militant hipster Maoists, growing organic cucumbers and putting homemade stickers on everything from cars in the mall parking lot to gallons of milk at the grocery
store. Betts taking an unpaid internship at a local altnews radio station, going to protests and getting tear-gassed and detained and freaking the hell out of her mother. Betts getting obsessed with this story and digging through boxes of old pictures and microfiche rolls at the library and driving out to UT and digging around the site of an old warehouse storage place which is now a Popeye’s chicken and a gas station. How any of this relates to her, or how writing it, this, now, here, is Betts building a bridge out over a pit one plank at a time. Building myself the next place to stand. Because it’s shifty out there, and there’s a lot for one enraged and awake human being to feel she needs to do about it. And a lot of reasons to feel that there’s not that much she can do. I mean I’m just one person. It’s all just people. This organization and that group and this government and that army, it’s all just individuals. You and me. Which is why I keep coming back to Kettle.

I don't know why they called him Kettle, no one ever told me that story. I like to think it was his shape. Big beard and one of those substantial leatherclad bellies, the kind that when he's standing behind you, you feel solid, sure, like standing next to a planet. But maybe he just liked to drink tea. Or maybe people were always calling him black…

Kettle wasn't black though. Mugger was black—whose name, quaintly, comes from his habit of making faces. "Mugging" for the camera. For shits and giggles. I mean, can you believe it? It's so naïve it almost hurts. The 70's, man, equal parts Brady Bunch and Black Panthers. And Kane, though I'm pretty sure Kane was Dominican, and Darnell. And this other girl whose name isn't on any of the pictures. Sal's a little bit like that now. Big I mean, nice gravitational belly. Or, he was when we lived with them. It's been a
while since I've been home. But back then, back in Kettle's time, he was trim, all muscle and outrage and bell-bottom-anti-establishment stick-it-to-the-man-ish-ness.

There's this one picture I have of all of them, it was taken at a place called Rambo's maybe 8 months before the accident. It's one of those tiny square photos with the rounded edges. The ones that every Instagrammer tries to simulate. But this was the real deal. Twelve of them in the photo, Harvey and Darnell front and center, Darnell with his hand on the waist of that girl whose name no one remembers, his head thrown back, tough-guy stare, Harvey all NASA glasses and wilderness, grin on his face like a billboard for assurance, Mugger and a trucker named Knight, Felix, and Asher, Kettle taking up space in the back just wide and pleased and waiting for instructions. And sure enough there's Sal and Bunny, left center. His arm over her like the best thing. They're even smiling. All it says on the back is FRU, Rambo's,'73.

Right about here is where I should try to work in some backstory. Talk about Sal as a little Mexican kid from east Texas, patched jeans and hand-me-down huaraches, born to a family of farm workers. Say something about his five brothers and sisters, the house they shared with innumerable tios and tias and primos and nietos. See him in the fields, six years old, fabric pack wrapped to his back hauling in the season. Cucumbers, corn and squash in summer, apples in the fall, spring was cabbage and carrots and winter was beets, nothing but beets, come home with your fingers dyed a dirty mimeograph purple. The teachers made Sal wash his hands before he could come into class. Sent him
to the nurse's office where she'd scour him down, fingertips to elbows, with lye soap and a scrub brush. When he still wouldn't come clean, they'd send him home.

I hate beets. Sal as a kid, squirming under the hot water, his mother making him scrub the remaining beet stains off his hands with a raw potato. Whoever invented them should get punched in the neck.

Callese, hijo. God invented beets.

Then I want to punch God in the neck.

Don’t say such things— she’s making the sign of the cross, she’s interrupted by her brother, Sal’s uncle who strides through the room,

God doesn’t have a neck, muchacho. It’s the only reason he hasn’t been hanged yet.

The chicano movement, only just beginning in Los Angeles, hadn't yet swept east to Texas, but some of the tios and older primos went to secret meetings where there was a lot of hushed talk about huelgas and el sindicato. His father was more humilde. More rancho. Maybe just afraid of what would happen to his kids and ever-pregnant wife if the boat got rocked. You couldn't say that stuff out loud. The field bosses would turn you in. Get your ass fired like pinches lameculos hijos de su madre. Even though it was their land. Even though the dirt they shook off the bleeding beets was Mexican dirt. Even though this land had been in their family for almost a century. Even though it was theirs by right to own y sembrar y usar como pinches quisieron desde los años de la quinta madre, and to hell with the pinche gobierno Tejano. Even so. Even so it was better not to
stir things up. Just do what they asked. Just break your back every day. Just keep your head down. Just— just— just—

The tios cursed Sal's father for not standing with them. He cursed them right back for bringing the heat onto his family. They were known conspirators. The bosses gave them the shitty rows, tipped out their baskets at weighing time. They worked their asses off and got cheated regularly. And at the end of the day, imprecations rained over the dinner table like bitter manna. Fights broke out, threats were made. Brothers lunging over the chicharones, the stacks of tortillas, the--madre de dios--the beets; at each others throats with kitchen knives out of sheer desperation.

If you would just stand with us, brother. No one could stop us.

Ach, he was born without the cojones.

A la verga y a otro perro. If you would stop making such a commotion they wouldn't persecute us. Pudieramos ser felices.

Hijo de la gran puta, a que horas te hiciste ciego? Were you born so blind?

There was a lot of tension in the house.

When Sal was a little older, high school, he started going to the meetings himself. Listened to their speeches, saw what it was-- a boys club. A place for tired out men to come and sit around in beat-up folding chairs and bitch about how unfair it all was and get riled up and drink till they staggered. Till they brought the guns out. Till they laid the cards on the table and won and lost each other's rent money. Till they laughed so hard and so huge you could count every one of their missing teeth. Till their kids, their women, their grandchildren crept in to drag them home.
Algun día, soon enough -- it's one of Sal's neighbors talking, sweaty and slurred, an old man they call Huerto for his habit of talking about the huertas, the mango orchards where he grew up -- soon enough I will have taken all I can take. Este hijo de la verga will point to my basket and say That one's for me, y te lo juro pero te lo juro, I'll reach in and pull out the cuerno, and say, for once, jefe, you're right. And then-- he levels an imaginary gun-- pow-pow.

A younger man chimes in, Ira, viejo, you pull out your cuerno for the jefe, and I'll pull out mine for his wife. He grabs his crotch. Pow-pow. A rabble of laughter.

This was it? This was the big work they all talked about? Drunk Pancho Villa talk, his mother called it. It angered Sal. It disgusted him.

He skipped town the summer before his senior year. Not that anyone at the school gave a shit. He stole a bike from one of his uncles and rode on out of town. Rode till he came to Austin where he found work in a mechanic shop and met up with a local SDS chapter. Rage calls to rage, as we know from experience. Their discontent felt familiar to Sal and he stuck around, heard things he'd never heard before. Fell in love with the reasons that justified his anger.

I asked him about that ride once. What it had been like, leaving home, riding out all by himself, no idea where he was going or what might happen. He said he was scared. But he was more scared of his uncle. The one whose motorcycle he'd stolen. He was big and mean and quick with his fists. So he kept a bat in his bags and kept going. He thought he'd been caught before he even left the house. His mother had met him at the door.
I have to go, Mom. I can't stay here.

Go. She handed him a bundle. Some clothes and food she had packed for him.

Find a good place for yourself. You have a good mind, hijo, and a noble spirit. You will do great things. We didn't name you Salvador for nothing. She smiled. Kissed him. Made the sign of the cross, once for herself, once for him. And don't come back or your Uncle will kill you.
Chapter 2
:: One way to make a revolutionary ::

And what about Bernice? Aunt Bunny. Doesn't she need to come in sooner or later? People will forget she's even around. They won't know about the summer she was seven, how she laid down every day under the sprinkler, the kind that arcs back and forth like a windshield wiper, watching rainbows appear and disappear; a tiny fair-haired girl in a polka dot bathing suit, her live-wire mind fitzing and sizzling like a bead of hot oil smack in the middle of the Oklahoma skillet. She said it was like how it had been before she was born. They won't understand about Sunday dinners and Easter dresses and little white gloves and mom and aprons and pot roast and radio programs and small town parades and bike ride ice cream shop afternoons and listening to Dylan on the sly at the record shop and high school football games and fireflies like the whole floating universe out over Bonnard's field. How she felt herself floating too, but different, untranquil as a parasite, an uneasy play actor in a theatre built of pleasant. The world was small and so its concerns. Its people. Its movements. Mailbox living, she called it, laying her ear to the ground to hear the rumble of the trains that divided the city. On the other side of those tracks, people worked jobs that made them come home at night covered in the mud that was the product of sweat and silted Midwestern dust. People drank and played music on the streets. People tossed their wash water in the yard and ate beans on bread and screamed and sang and wept and died and argued loud torqued up arguments. Their problems were dire and fascinating and terrifying. Their gladness no less so. They
seemed to her large. Expansive and vital. Her life by contrast was a tedious exploration of insulated drab. Everyone here lives in a world that stops at the end of their driveway. She was talking to herself. To the slick rocks that lined the river. To the aqua air. There was no one else.

She was fifteen when the Creek County Unified School District was finally pressured into desegregating. The black kids, if they went to school at all, got their education at the Negro school in what had been an old barn. A few black teachers had been sent by the Oklahoma Board of Education fifteen or so years before to start a school in the black neighborhood. They had convinced the community to come together to turn the unused land and buildings into a working school as an alternative to having to drive the kids out to Tulsa County every day, or whenever it occurred to them, which they'd done up until the early 50's in a mule-drawn hay wagon. Bunny knew how her parents felt about Negros. Not that they ever spoke about it, they were too genteel, but there are things you don't have to tell a child. The condescending nod, the polite smile as the head turned away, the way mother would always wash the handkerchiefs the hired help, Sam and Jeremy, used separately, scrubbing them in a bucket in the sink and then scrubbing out the sink with a little extra washing soda. Or the way she'd bring them lemonade in paper cups and ask if they wouldn't mind sitting on the back porch to eat their lunch. That, my brothers and sisters, is what we call bigot culture these days. But it was the small-town south. And those days were not these. When she was younger Bunny - Bernice back then - would hang around the porch, wrapping the rails with daisy chains or balancing on the handrail while Jeremy and Sam talked. She liked when they talked.
They had wide grins that Bernice's parents never wore. They leaned back in their chairs and drank lemonade in the shade like it was what they were made to do. She liked bringing out the pitcher and filling their cups when they ran low. They'd ask her how she liked school and she'd say it was ok, and she'd ask how they liked fixing the cellar stairs or helping pull in the snap peas and they'd say they liked it just fine. Good work, they'd say. And sometimes Jeremy would bring his mouth organ and play something that sounded to her like grass growing or junebugs in the summertime.

She tried to talk to the girls when they came to school. The girls from across town. But they didn't like her. They seemed either distrustful or disdainful. She kept her distance. Everyone was wary.

She met Juggie in Sophomore history class when he'd gotten better marks on his civics paper than she had. Bernice always got the highest marks. How'd you do that? She asked in the hallway after class. In his soft, low way, Juggie had replied, What you're really asking is, how'd a nigger like me have the nerve to be smarter than you? There'd been some commotion at that comment. Some of the kids around were less than enthusiastic about a black boy talking to a white girl that way. Lunges were made, threats battled in the air to be heard over other threats. Teachers stepped in to settle the unrest. The bell rang and the crowd dissipated into muttering factions.

She'd seen him that afternoon. He was standing in front of the drugstore. There was a little girl next to him, her hair was tied up in two short braids, and her dress was torn at the sleeve and she was crying. Juggie held her hand. He was tugging on the one remaining ribbon and trying to get her to smile.
What happened? Bernice asked.

He looked up. Stiffened. Just a rough day at school.

Seems to be going around.

It does that.

They stood a minute.

Bernice faltered, and then walked to the drugstore counter and bought three root beers, cracking open the tops on the bottle opener. She knelt down in front of the girl. Do you like root beer? The girl nodded, hiding her face in her brother's arm. This kind is my favorite. She held out the bottle and the girl took it shyly. And don't you worry about that dress. I'm sure your mama can fix it right up.

The girl's face appeared from behind the cover of Juggie's arm. A proud smile. She sure can. She's about the best seamstress in the world.

See now? Isn't that the handiest thing you've ever heard? Bernice stood and handed a root beer to Juggie. He took it without speaking. You can't go around thinking everybody's like that, you know. He stared ahead. You don't even know me. You don't know how I think. She stopped. Took a sip of root beer. Grinned. And just so we're clear, there's no way you're smarter than me.

The next day she found a note in her locker. *Ok, smart girl. Meet me at the drugstore today after school. We'll work on your thinking. PS. Grape soda is my favorite.*

He took her to Beulah Colony. She'd driven through, of course, with her father a few times when they'd come to get their lawnmower blades sharpened, and once when they dropped off Sam and Jeremy who'd gotten overheated after a long day of working in
the sun. She and Juggie got off the bus two blocks past the Union Pacific tracks and Bernice felt herself simultaneously excited and terrified. It was a buoyant, hot-air-balloon feeling. They'd gone to his house, been introduced to Juggie's mother who was tall and beautiful—Stately was the word Bunny used when she told me about her—and warm and funny. She learned Juggie's real name was Jasper and that he was a year older than her, but had been enrolled in the 10th grade due to the poverty of curriculum that had been offered at the Negro school, what the district superintendent called "tossing a handicap." Juggie planned to do two years in one and graduate on time as scheduled. He had a job at the small Beulah Colony newspaper, which doubled as a printing press for reasons of a fiscal nature, and Clayton, his boss, told him as soon as he had a diploma he'd make him an honest-to-god reporter. Juggie's hero was Roscoe Dunjee who'd been the founder and chief editor of the Black Dispatch for more than forty years. He took Bernice to the newspaper office, showed her the presses, the copies of papers from Tulsa, Oklahoma City, Saint Louis, even Washington DC that he and Clayton and a secretary named Louisa read through each day. She watched him climb into a huge, gear-filled printing press to work out a clogged nozzle, all the while talking, explaining things to her, causes and effects, historical precedents, direct action activism, without missing a conversational beat. She watched him tuck his pay into his sock to take home to his mother. He rode with her on the bus home, but got off before the tracks.

It's the responsibility of a gentleman to see a lady home safely, but me walking you home might not be such a good thing for you. You'll be alright?

I can take care of myself.
I know you can. Just, pretend you can't sometimes. It'll make me feel better.

She was buzzing that night when she came home, told her mom everything. About what she'd seen, about Juggie and what he wanted to do. About how she couldn't wait to go back. Her mother seemed less enthusiastic. The next morning before school she stopped Bernice at the door.

I spoke with your father last night and he agrees that it's far too dangerous for a fifteen year old girl to be gallivanting around Beulah. Not to mention unseemly. You are not to go there today. Or ever.

It was the first time Bernice actively disobeyed her parents. She did go. And she continued to go. They put their foot down. She understood. And she went anyway. Juggie taught her about the presses. He taught her about civil rights and what it's like to be hunted by the KKK. He took her to meetings, where they were both kicked out when the talk got too heated, but huddled underneath windows or laid next to each other listening under the cracks of doors. Aunt Bunny heard about Dr. King from people who didn't think him a rabble-rouser. Heard congregations praying hallelujah for a Supreme Court decision. She learned about the NAACP, about the desegregation law that had been passed 14 years earlier and was only just being carried out. She learned about righteous fury.

Juggie took her to Tulsa one day, after he got his driver's license, and showed her where the race riots had happened.

They were right here. His hands were in his pockets. Gangs of them, police officers and business owners. Regular people. By the end, they were packing people in
cars and driving around shooting anything black that moved. Driving around in old Packards and Model T's can you imagine? He was taking in the ruined buildings that now, forty years later, still showed damage. That's how Beulah Colony came to be. They burned this down, the whole neighborhood. Most people fled. They'd lost everything. A bunch of them came out to Beulah thinking they could start again. Except the rest of the town wasn't so keen on welcoming them with open arms. They would have moved on, found someplace else if they hadn't been so tired. So desperate.

Do you feel like that?

Sometimes. Mostly it's just this kind of fire, you understand? Like here, He pointed to his ribcage. Like instead of lungs I got forges. And they're so hot. So hot I gotta get stuff out. Gotta say things. I got all this work, you understand? Work I'm itching to do.

It was Juggie's mother who gave Bernice her nickname. She called her Bernie, only having been born and raised in the Bayou by a Creole grandmother, it came out sounding more like Bunny. Beulah was a small enough neighborhood, and she stood out enough that people asked about her. Came to know her. Miss Bunny. The less affectionate people in the Colony called her Juggie's pet rabbit.

They fell in love, of course, and it was pure Romeo and Juliet shit. Nobody's parent's really approved. They made plans to run off to New York. Start a paper of their own. Defy the world.
And then Juggie got drafted. And shipped to Vietnam. And shot. And lost. And all that came back were medals. And a cavern of loneliness. And a tanker truck's worth of righteous fury.

I suppose there are a million reasons people join resistance movements, become political, whatever you want to call it. Some have felt the lash of injustice, some were born into the struggle, some do it for the conflict, the violence. Others maybe just have a better feeling about the way things should be. Their soul lives a little closer to right, and the gulf between what is and what ought to be hurts in a more insistent way. These are the righteous. The light warriors. The ones whose footstep makes the water tear itself in two.

God, I hope I'm not laying this on too thick. Making a goddamn Sundance film out of this. I'm sure it wasn't all justice all the time. There was still geometry, baseball games, clothes shopping, chores. Like the rest of us at 17, I'm sure Bunny spent too much time in front of the mirror, chewed gum and gossiped in the cafeteria, had crippling duels with self consciousness, obsessed over fashion magazines. Ok, that might be going too far. You know what I mean though. I'm not trying to paint her as some lofty figure-- saint Bernice, champion of justice, shunner of all things unworthy. She was a girl. Just a girl who lost something she loved. Who wanted the world to be better, bigger, more than it was.
Hector came by today. Looking to get laid or bum some cash or score a meal, some smokes. Any kind of scoring, really. I told him to get lost. Hector's not a bad guy. He has good intentions, talks kosher, but it’s just that. Just talk. It’s this way everyone has; I’m starting to see it. We’re all angry. We hate the way things are. We hate the injustice and the lies and the poison in our food and the floating island of plastic in the ocean and consumer ideology and the domination of the poor by the rich. We squawk and rail about it, but we’re just wriggling around griping about how uncomfortable life is in a straight jacket. I’m uncomfortable! We’re all uncomfortable! Make the jacket more comfortable! Equal buckles for all! Give us a little more room! I don’t like the color! All this yelling, and none of it matters. When what we need is a change of wardrobe.

Here’s Hector, used to be roommates with Charlie before Charlie got in with the NAACP and moved out to Baltimore. He was something when Charlie was around, but now, he’s just this scrungy kid with a duct taped guitar case and Frank Zappa hair trying to come on to me by talking about the latest massacre in Syria.

Puts things into perspective, Betts. He leans closer over the counter. Like each day is heightened. Every moment seems bigger. It could all just end.

Death gives meaning to life… Think that line got Nietzsche a lot of play?

He turns away, annoyed. Is Kelsie here?

There was a time not so long ago that I would have sat down with him, got all stirred up by Syria, taken it in, searched out and pinned down the place in him that responded to the deaths of innocent strangers, tried to find an outlet for that in something
at hand. Put him on a project or steered him toward some rally or demonstration… now I’m just tired.

He'll never do anything. Never be able to see it on his own. Syria’s just a symptom. Hector’s just a symptom. He’s pounded into the ground by inertia and a streak of moderate discontent, and I gotta get better at being heartless. You see the good in everyone, Milo told me once, You see every side. That's your downfall.

So I'm working on my bitchiness. It's good for me. Plus it'll prove Milo wrong, show him he doesn't know me as well as he thinks he does. It gets old after a while, that smug sigh. Like a put-upon parent. I know what's best for you, Bettsie, I know you sideways and in circles, better than you know yourself. Grates on your nerves after a while. Like I'm a static thing. Like I'm not a snow globe of weather phenomena, a flash of highway lights in a dark room. I got news, genius. Maybe neither of us know me very well.
Chapter 3
:: What the colonists have to do with it ::

Undergrounder: one who lives beneath, below the surface, sub-urban in the literal sense, inhabitant of the nether-city, familiar with the roots and below-the-scenes innards, the works behind the surface show; living by older ways, ways which have been buried, covered-over; friendly with dirt and the more common members of the annelid family; coming up only now and then to the toxic air of the surface always with purpose and always with protection. Synonyms: the sane, the can-not-live-and-pretend-its-all-ok-ers, the believers, the wakened, the human.

This is what I know about the event. It was Darnell's idea. Well, Darnell's and Kane's. They were always the reactionaries. Darnell had a cousin in the Black Panthers. An older cousin he was always trying to impress, who used to take him out in the car when Darnell was a kid-- we're talking 7 or 8 -- with his high school buddies and Darnell's older brothers. Hey, y'all wanna come out? We got work to do. Work: Noun. Here meaning setting fire to juniper bushes outside the police station; breaking into rich white houses and stealing the good china platters and shitting on them, leaving them on the dining room tables; shaking down white business owners, gluing the locks of the white landlord’s real estate offices, etc. Capeless Batmen, they thought themselves, modern Visigoths sacking around town in a ’58 DeSoto, emerald green.
The cousin would come over to the house, put his arms around Darnell's big brothers and turn to leave and then at the last minute, stop. Turn around, single Darnell out of the swarm of kids standing in for furniture in the dingy living room, and say You, now. You coming with us. And Darnell would go, and serve as lookout, or thief, fitting in through small windows, practiced at being silent and unseen. The older cousin was the reason Darnell joined up with Freedom River. He thought it would be a step on his path to becoming a Black Panther. I don't know if he ever made it.

So Darnell was raised, on trouble and discontent, and his ideas always tended toward the violent. Bunny and he clashed a lot, Bunny being all for direct action and nonviolence and education and the clever and devious use of logistics to thwart The Man. This time, however, this one time, she remained silent. Tired of the endless internal struggles that resulted in nothing getting done at all, tired of working and working and nothing ever changing, she sat tight-lipped and thorny in the corner of the warehouse basement where they made their plans.

The way she talks about it now, she still hasn't made peace. And it's not fair. In fact it's cruel. How can it be that one turbulent day, one moment when you say fuck it all, I don't even know why I try, what I'm working for; the single dark hour when the watchman loses his bearings, closes his eyes out of sheer physical weariness -- how that can have such implications? That so much can indeed depend.

Even Sal was keeping his distance from her that day. She would have no one. He didn't know what to do. Standing silent and worried on the other side of the room. Only half-listening as Darnell plotted out the framework of the plan. How quickly the details of
our immediate hearts overtake the concerns of the greater universe. Obliterate them. Render them meaningless and small.

So the way is clear for Darnell, and he doesn't waste any time. Here he is, palms planted on the table, shoulders forward, his muscles already tense, sweaty and impassioned, making his address--

Standing around in groups ain't gonna change nobody's mind about nothing. We gotta take action. Action action. We been trying to convince the world. Change it by making it want to change itself, but that's a losing battle. That's always been a losing battle. We got to change it ourselves, hear? Change it for them; they can deal with the fallout. You don't teach a bully to stop beating by standing around asking him. By making a sign that says you're angry. You take that boy to the woodshed and whoop his ass. And if that don't work, you break his arms so he can't hit nobody no more. He gotta deal with the pain himself.

Mugger, from the other side of the room-- I mean, the patriots asked nicely only so many times, right? Did it the right way, exhausted all the legal channels. But they only stood around and took it so long. Gave the Redcoats a chance to mend their ways, and when they didn't, we changed the way for them.

Harvey chimes in from his seat on an upturned bucket-- So you're saying you want to declare war on the United States?

Back to Darnell-- All I'm saying's we been asking a long time.
Kettle, he takes a while to pull his thoughts together, lace them in a line to make a sentence—But... But there's innocent... not everyone is... He pauses, starts again. What happens... what if one of th- - them

Kane interrupts-- Ain't nobody innocent, let's get clear on that first of all. Not the government, not the people who voted for that government, not the people who didn't vote at all, not the people who sit at home and pretend they ain't nothing wrong in the world. We got a problem. And that problem exists because every single one of us has allowed it to exist. We all accountable.

Kettle, feebly, looking at Bunny-- ... kids...?

When was the last time you saw kids in the capitol building after hours, Kettle? What's wrong with you? Darnell's patience has frayed. There's not much more room he has to give anyone.

Mugger, ever the maker of peace-- Kettle, it's gonna be late, man. Nobody's gonna be there. Nobody. It's symbolic. But not only symbolic, it's also effective. There ain't no more records, we gotta start over, right? We blow it up and call for a meeting. Make ourselves clear. Take an emergency vote. And once we do it here, other places will too. It just takes one act. Just one.

Kettle is appeased, or if not, then out-talked. Everyone shifts in their places. It only takes one act; it's a truth they all call on, but it feels flimsy in their hands. What if no one else steps up. What if it's all pointless.
Harvey thinks but doesn't say How's this any different than slashing tires, or tossing rocks through windows? How's this not just a glorified prank. He looks at Bunny— You got anything to say?

You idiots want to blow it all up, be my guest. She turns and walks out the door.

They turn to Sal, inquiring. He pretends not to notice.

I think about lenses a lot. And by lenses I mean the degree of magnification through which we choose to look at the world. You take a drop of water and zoom out and suddenly there’s an ocean, and we’re thinking about bio habitats or weather patterns or geopolitics or sailing in the Caribbean. Zoom in and you’re looking at microorganisms, larva, zooplankton, bacteria, diatomic algae. Go closer still and it all becomes molecules, then atoms, then subatomic particles which are the same the universe-over. And it’s all true all at the same time. The ocean is an ocean and a drop and a molecule and an atom and everything in between all at once. And so is everything else, because nothing is simple. Like there’s the fact that Kettle couldn’t read, at least, not well, and hid it because he was ashamed. Like how Harvey was short for Harvard, but he'd actually gone to Cornell. Two years as a chemistry major before he dropped out to join the resistance. And somewhere I beg you to remember that these were the days before the Internet. Before you could youtube 'How to make a pipe bomb' and pick everything up in one stop at WalMart, in some kind of fairy tale of dark justice. This was before all of that. And yet, isn't it funny, that whatever else has changed, the basic arguments are the same. That we're still sitting around in basements debating the use of
force. The problem with resistance movements is that we'll never be as organized as the incumbent system. We'll hem and haw ourselves to the grave. We'll die in work camps hung up on questions of morality, endlessly debating methodology. Do ends justify means? Can violence bring peace? What kind of system will replace the flawed state of what is? All this while the established apparatuses that govern our lives exist amorally. They do not fret about rightness and wrongness. They don't kick around the word 'should' -- at least not self-referentially. The offices of negotiation are internal. They are built into the system itself, and so the system always contains its own morality. Morality belongs to the apparatus that determines it. What I'm saying is that within the established system, there is no right and wrong, there is only lawful and unlawful, and the established means of determining lawfulness. Now, how does that law become established, and who regulates it? Those are questions that are assumed outside of the office of the regular citizen. At least anymore. What I'm saying is that a revolution can't concern itself with being good or bad. Ethical or unethical. Convenient or inconvenient. Only necessary.

Charlie says it's the basic flaw of a two-party system. That there will never be enough support of any third/fourth/fifth party to ever pose threat to the established ping and pong of our political system. The problem with Charlie's theory, I always say, is that you can't vote in anarchy.
Chapter 4
:: The Poem of Force ::

I went to pick up Sandra from work today. Sandra getting her MBA solely in order to infiltrate the system. Sandra in her Bergdorf suit with her junior manager heels, Sandra with her double life.

She has two wardrobes— or, more accurately, two separate boxes in the corner out of which she takes her clothes depending on what morning it is. Weekdays, 9-5, its pressed suits, pencil skirts and blouses and heels and matching jackets. Weekends and any time after 5:30 pm, its army pants and combat boots a slashed up slogan-blasting t-shirt. The Simone Weil of business administration. Sandra’s hardcore.

The best way to fight something is to get inside its head. Sandra’s dad was a boxer in Venezuela. The deepest kind of kung fu is to become your enemy. I have to know why these people do what they do. I have to understand their every thought before they even think it. She averages a 3.789 at UCLA. She’s our go-to for on-the-fly psychoanalysis of the bourgeoisie.

How do you do it? How do you ace your way through a major you hate? The student loan debt alone… I mean, is it worth the 60 grand? I remember asking her freshman year. My roommate the anti-capitalist spy.

Betts, I’m letting you in on a secret. I plan to rack up as much debt as humanly possible. She’s sitting on Mark’s knee, grinning, as she says this, dipping a habañero into a small cup of ranch. They’re deep into a bottle of Jameson. Student loans, credit cards,
new cars the whole nine. Conspicuous consumption all the way. In the mean time, I’m a— she waves her hands, searches for the word—a cornucopia of intel for our side. I’m going to meetings all day about how we’re gonna avoid regulation, and then writing bills at night. Kicking it down to our people lobbying, to the ones protesting, the guys writing the books. Then, when my time undercover is up, she sniffs like Mohamed Ali, slip the knots and shake the dust.

I must look confused, because she continues.

I’ll vanish, Anderson. Poof. Outta here. Go find some Zapatistas or something and disappear into the jungle.

Sandra’s version of method acting. Method activism. It’s an intense way of thinking. I can see how you could snap, go all American Psycho. Or … I mean, look how it ended for Simone Weil.

So I’m there picking her up because Mark took her car in to get brakes, but had to go in to work. I didn’t work today, so it fell to me to pick the car up from the shop and bring it to her. Sandra’s office is crazy to me. Like, we have to be insane to do what we do. Sit in these little three-sided packages, walls the color of old tennis balls, a desk laminated to look like wood. Hunching over because the walls are only five feet high and god all we ask is just a shred of privacy.

Sandra has an office. Well. A slightly larger cubicle. It has a door to the supply room. And a plant. The supply room is itself mystifying. A survival-sized cache of post-it notes. All sizes, all colors. If ever a disease broke out and the only cure was post-it notes, Sandra is prepared to save all of greater Los Angeles. I could shingle a house with the
post-its on one shelf alone. I could cover the floor in them like a 3M yellow brick road. Follow, friends! Off we go! Oz is calling! Only, Oz would turn out to be an abandoned parking structure, or a vending machine warehouse or something. Like a weird Beckett office supply acid road trip. And it’s not just post-its. There are boxes of pens by the hundreds of thousands. And little round cylinders full of paperclips, plastic groves of pink and yellow highlighters. I could build a house out of pen-box bricks, mortared together with liquid paper and spray adhesive, knit paperclips together to make blankets… what a world, what a world.

These people, I say, my voice low. Like I’m afraid of waking them. We’re walking through the cubicle maze. Right, right, left, two more rights, through a big door and then a little door… look at them. This is their life? I don’t know really how to think about it. Having a career. Being a part of the machine, the grand eco-socio-consumerist apparatus. It’s eight hours a day. Plus driving. It’s your life. Sit in a chair, believe in the three-sided cell, in partitioned real estate, in half-walls, in office extensions, in fluorescent lighting, in interdepartmental memos. Pretend you can’t hear the conversations they’re having in the next cubicle, 17 inches away. It’s the polite thing. Clock in. Clock out. Watch the flow of people, down hallways, out doors, into the parking lot like water. We are unsolid, conform to the shape of the vessel that holds us. We lap at the edges of civilization, we pour.

This is why I do this. Sandra’s talking low. I’m not supposed to be here. I ruin the game. I’m not someone Sandra Mendez, MBA candidate, keeper of an alarming stash of office supplies, should know. I’m the run in her stocking. The bruise not quite covered by
the sleeve. Them. Sandra’s voice is quiet. It’s Sandra’s voice, not Sandra-I-will-administratethe shit-out-of-this-business’s voice— I have to know what its like to be them. To think their thoughts. Have their goals.

We’re in her car. A spotless Civic. Leased. As it would be. It shocks me as it does every time. The scrupulousness of the clean car, against the mess and thrash that is her room back home. We’re halfway to the freeway and she’s changing her clothes as she drives.

So what’s the deal with this book? She shrugs out of the shoulder of her blouse. Flaps her hand at me, I pull the sleeve, she slides her arm out. Tosses the blouse into the back seat.

It’s not a book yet.

You think it’ll tell you something? She fishes around in her bag for a balled-up t-shirt. Pulls it out. Flips off the guy in the lifted Navigator next to us for staring. Reveal something to you about what you’re supposed to do? Look to the past and clear up the future? Like that? The t-shirt’s on. She struggles with the zipper on her skirt. Motions me to take the wheel.

I don’t know. Honestly.

I believe you.
Chapter 5
:: One Burning Monk ::

Sal met Bunny the day the UO riots started. Bunny was a sophomore at the University of Oklahoma, a psych major, moonlighting in the philosophy clubs and hanging around at revolutionary meetings. Sal had met up with Mugger and Darnell and Felix and the rest a few months before, Harvey was new, but quickly distinguishing himself as the leader. He had ideas. He was good at planning. He had history books and political meetings and fat glasses and big Ivy League words.

It was a Trojan horse endeavor. None of them knew how to play instruments. There was nothing in their guitar cases but cherry bombs and stack of pamphlets Harvey and Kane had thrown together. Anti-establishment, women's rights, down with Nixon, If the government doesn't stop the war, we will stop the government, draft beer not students, stop the war machine. It was a scattered discontent. That was part of Harvey's deal. It wasn't just that they wanted out of Vietnam, which they did, or that they wanted women's lib, which they thought they did, or real racial equality, which they didn't understand, who could?, but that they wanted it all. Everything had to change or none of it would. It was like having a mouth full of rotten teeth. You couldn't point to just one and say There's your problem. It was the whole fucking grill. And the issues were important, sure they were, but they were symptoms. What was needed was systemic change. A shift in ideology. So they threw everything into the pot --poverty, the war, the oppression of women and minorities, public education, environmental issues, foreign oil, foreign
policy, the whole big fucked up ball of fuckwax and the goal was just to, I guess, overwhelm people with the problems. Make them realize that it all had to change. That there was no fixing it piecemeal anymore. As though there ever had been.

Charlie says the same thing. I'm not saying he's wrong. The problem gets to be though, that then you have to get people to agree on how it should change. And that's where it all breaks down into factions and fighting. There won't ever be unity. It's pointless all this trying to convert and convince. A benign anarchy, it's the only way. Paired with radical personal responsibility. Let me get back to Bunny.

Shit, Betts, you keep running off on tangents, it's like smoke, it likes to dissipate, to explore all the places open to it, it resists its own telling. So they'd booked a stage at UO under the guise of being a psychedelic folk band. Their fake band name was The Holy Guthries. No joke. They rolled in on their choppers—did I mention they were bikers?—dressed in their usual cacophony of leather and spike and bandana and lumberjack, lugging these instrument cases—guitar, banjo, drums, violin, cello, stand-up bass. And there's nothing in them but cheap firecrackers and resistance literature.

It's kind of fabulous, really. Aunt Bunny loves to tell this story. We skype. She talks and I take notes.

I was up campus, walking, she says. It was late spring just starting to get hot around the edges. I was walking, sorting my head with all these problems I thought I had. Tell you what, you could wrap up all those problems and give them to me for a Christmas present and I’d be just about the gladdest woman. …Problems. I guess everything seems
like the only thing at the time, though, doesn’t it. She shakes her head, pours some tea, stares out the window at the pepper tree in the yard. She’s been drifting more lately, I can hear it over the phone, see it in her eyes when we video chat, there’s this new distance. Like there’ve been things following her for a while and she’s finally decided to turn and acknowledge them. She doesn’t seem to want to talk about whatever it is. I get the feeling she’s glad to talk about the past instead, hard as it must be. It makes me a little scared about whatever it is she’s not saying.

So I’m walking out past the baseball field, she continues, all wrapped up in my existential weariness, telling myself I have to quit it with Roger. Roger the sweater-vested professor I thought I could build something with. Some kind of intellect-based love life. Something that revolved around an idea of social justice rhetoric. He told me he loved me “in a way.” That it was a special way. That it had nothing to do with the way he loved his kids or how he felt about the rest of his life. It was a special feeling just for me. He was sedate when he said these things. He was always sedate. I decided on that walk that I didn’t want to be loved “in a way.” Who wants to be loved sedately? We want to be loved period.

So I’ve just come to this groundbreaking conclusion, when I see this gang roll up. They’re about the most claptrap band of worn out road hogs I’ve ever seen. Uncle Sal, leaning against the countertop, grins his big Sal grin and holds up a wrench he’s cleaning and receives the compliment. Sometimes they look at each other and it’s the most love I’ve ever seen in any two living organisms ever. It’s absolute openness. Complete raw individual humanity. Like it’s a collection of trees they possess—big, thick-ass, monster
trees, redwoods or something, and some of the trees are pure deep joy and some of them are these debilitating, intolerable hurts but you look under the ground and the roots are all the same. They’re the same tree. Which is just how it is, really, but the thing of it, the huge goddam beauty of it is that they connect with each other there. In those trees. Like each person’s individual grove is mutual property. I guess what I mean to say is that they’ve found a way to share existences, to be human together, in a way that makes them both better. Stronger. I see them look that way and it catches me off guard— every time. Cracks through the air like an invisible miracle and I feel it underneath, in my own roots, the sting of it. The lack.

There they are, this caravan of motorcycles. Aunt Bunny pauses to cough and grab a sweater off the hook in the hallway although it’s September in California which means it’s 86 Fahrenheit easy. And they look like the last thing in the world you’d expect. Ragged and outlaw, everything covered with a coat of road dust. Everything except for the fake logos they’d tacked onto their borrowed cases. The Holy Guthries. The hubris of band names, right Bugs? Do you know they stole them from a band that was playing at the ‘Dillo? She laughs. Some shitty little Beach Boys knock-off band—preppy surfer rock in east Texas, did you ever? —that was opening somehow for Deep Purple. Sal and Mugger and Felix just walked backstage while they were playing and walked off with the cases. So there they were driving into campus like they’re the road itself and every single snag of dust on it just rolling through the stadium parking lot. I was close, but not too close. Maybe 100 yards away, but even so they had this toughness,
this rough-edged realness to them. It made me think of back home and Beulah Colony. Same thinness, same sharp bone gaze, same weary toughness.

I watched them for a while, parking the bikes. Swinging their legs over the seats, stretching, standing and looking around. They looked at the same time like they were plotting a scheme and like they had no idea what they were doing. They did not look like musicians.

I couldn’t help it. Didn’t even know I was walking toward them till I was half way there. I walked up to Harvard. He was the most familiar. Darnell reminded me of Clayton, the way he stood, leaned on his bike, the way he held his cigarette between his thumb and ring finger. I knew his type, sure, but he didn’t know me. He was wearing a Come on over here, Honey look that I was practiced in ignoring. There was another kid there, what was his name? Ivan- Sal answers from the garage. Ah, right, Ivan. Whatever happened to Ivan? Last I heard he moved out to the Bronx. That was ages ago. Anyway, Ivan was there, and Kettle, this old guy, I thought then. Must have been about 30. And this tower of a Mexican, bearded, handkerchief around his head, wearing these boots look like they have to weigh at least 80 pounds. They laugh. I loved those boots, Sal smiles. But he was unfamiliar. There wasn’t a big Hispanic population in Creek County. There was something to him, though. Something that kind of floated in the corner. I didn’t look directly at him.

Well I was sure as hell looking at her. Uncle Sal crosses into the kitchen from the garage. She had on these short little shorts, and this top that, if you’d asked me then, I’d’ve said she was wearing a meadow. Yellow and brown and… kind of windy.
Aunt Bunny laughs— I’m glad you remember, I sure don’t.

How could I forget? That long hair... Reminded me of wood.

Listen to you with your meadows and wooden hair. You trying to flatter your way into some pancakes? She gets up, grabs the griddle from the shelf, but Sal takes it from her.

I got griddle duty today, he says gently. Do we want bananas in the batter or no? Something passes between them. I’m not sure what it is, but Bunny acquiesces. I can’t believe she’s letting him loose in the kitchen. To my knowledge, this may be the first time she’s let him touch anything but the outdoor grill. And without even an argument? There was a time he’d have had to pry that griddle from her cold, dead hands. Cooking was something strange and serious for Bunny when I was little. She’d go into the kitchen, tie back her hair, duck her head into an apron and it was like she dove into this meditative state, rolling out dough or stirring soup, tossing in salt, onions, a tablespoon of tomato paste. She was ‘in the zone’ she’d say, but it was more than that. On her best days, cooking seemed to be an act of redemption. On the worst days, more an act of penance. If I had to walk through the kitchen on those days, I did it on tiptoe.

So I walked up to Harvey, Bunny goes on. Admired the bikes. They thrilled me. This feeling you get sometimes. Like when we found this house, Sal. Like you know. You know that you’ve just stumbled onto something that’s going to be the next place. I asked if they needed help finding anything. There was this guilty look that passed between them. Nervous. Ok, I said. Do your thing.
Wait, Sal calls. I’m walking away. I turn around. They’re all looking at him. I’m looking at him. He does the beard thing. Sal, when he’s thinking or listening or something, has this habit of digging his fingers into his beard like a claw. Leaving them there, hanging. Tugging a little.

Do you happen to know how many Nixons it takes to screw in a light bulb in Vietnam?

I stared at him for a minute. Was he telling me a joke? You don’t know somebody, you know, it’s hard to read them. And here’s this huge dirty guy on a bike … telling me a Nixon joke? So I go over his joke’s head. See his light bulb, and raise him a little word play. You know the problem with political jokes? We keep electing them.

There was a weird moment where no one said anything. And then everyone kind of laughed like, did that really just happen? It was easier after that. So I hung around. Guess I’m still hanging around, huh. She has this new smile. It’s heavy. I don’t know how to explain it. Like the smile has to expend a lot of effort to exist.

Sal wraps his arm around her like armor. —Can’t get rid of her.

Tell about the show, Aunt Bunny.

Ah, you want the revolution. So of course, it’s all a sham. There are no instruments. No music. They wanted a PA system and a captive audience. And they got it. There’s Harvey, hugging up to the mic all wild-hair and thick glasses. Wearing a week-old t-shirt and some open laced steel-toes. Darnell and Mugger flank him, cases at their feet. Open, but away from the crowd. Back in the back’s Sal and Ivan and this girl
named Carmen, holding the big cases—bass and drums like the world’s most nervous secret service agents. Then Harvey starts in.

Good morning everyone. He begins. He’s nervous. Coughs. It hasn’t hit him until this very moment how far he’s come from Cornell. The kids in the crowd are college kids. It’s 1973. The girls wear short skirts and long hair. They’re clean and their clothes in front of him look like rainbow sprinkles. Like a pile of leaves from the most festive tree ever. He suddenly felt his filthy boots, his torn dirt-colored jeans, his thin, obsessive shoulders, the crawl and itch of his beard. He wonders what they think of him. Here were a hundred - two hundred kids. Each with his own set of ideas, his own political and spiritual make up. Each one convinced of his own rightness. They’d come to hear some music. To roll themselves up into tight packed pellets of gunpowder and be shot into the air on the force of a wailing lead and a steady kick drum. What the hell was he going to tell them? What did he have to offer? He wavered. And then he thought of the monk.

This whole thing’s Tich Quang Duc’s fault if you want to know the truth. The fault of Malcom Browne for taking the photos that haunted Harvey with such insistence. The fault of the South Vietnamese government who decided to say they felt like maybe starting to torture monks. The fault of France, of Japan, of Ho Chi Minh’s arrogant mystery, of Ngo Dinh Diem’s unrelentance, the fault of men being let loose on this planet like a spill of oil, the fault of a certain alignment of atoms, of electrical impulses at the heart of the universe back before the evolution of time. But mostly, it was that monk.

Harvey carried a copy of that paper around in his bag. Who knows where he’d gotten it. He didn’t want to clip the article. Nothing so clinical. So definite. It was like he
had to tell himself it was just a paper. Just a 10 year old piece of shit newspaper and he’d throw it away tomorrow. To tell himself that each day. It had that hard a hold on him. He slept with it under his pillow, Bunny said. He’d wake up breathless clawing the air, believing he was on fire.

I have copies of the photos. I had them taped to my window, before I moved out. One, two, three, a progression of immolated human. I don’t let myself think of them too much. Don’t stare at them for too long. Just small sips. The robes of the monk as he pours out the gasoline over his friend like a drink offering. The straight back and fixed round head of Duc amid the wall of flames. The final shot, where the monk is bowing before the body, blackened and smoking and twisted and scrunched like a fourth of July snake. Tich Quang Duc, I don’t yet know how to think of you. Tich Quang Duc, your death is a vacancy, a lead question mark, a door I can’t open. I set fresh flowers on the window for you. Tich Quang Duc, what is the price of a life? What is the price of the absence of life?

Do you see? Nothing can stop him now. Harvey has found his groove. Do you see the danger? The Damage? Something must be done. Something must be stopped. This is our world. Do you hear me? This is our world!

The speech got people riled up. They too were stirred by Tich Quang Duc. They too loved and regretted him. They saw the insidious fingers of evil worming their way through the earth of society from every side, and how they were slowly choking the life from it. Pamphlets were shot into the air. They were gathered from the grass like piñata
candy. The spirit moved. The angel of revolution. The crowd groaned. It swayed and moaned. It cheered and pled. It bled onto the field. Into the classes. It turned over tables. It started a revolution of unrest. For nine days fires burned on campus. Classes were cancelled. Meetings were held on street corners and under trees. Movements were sparked. Windows were smashed. It curled and waved in the tentacle air. It was a living being.

At the end of the nine days the police had calmed things down. People were placed back in their lives like knickknacks on a shelf. The ones who would not sit quietly were taken downtown to think things over. Professors either left their places and went on to further revolution, or they cleared their throats, straightened their ties, and opened their doors, swept porches as after a hurricane. And Bunny left campus on the back of Sal’s bike.
Chapter 6
:: Activator ::

Maybe I’m making too much of Kettle’s death. Maybe it’s just the thing they like to point to. Some reason that they can give for bailing out. For abandoning their ideals. For selling out. Maybe it was a convenient escape route. Like when you’re looking to break up with someone and there isn’t really any one specific reason so you just grab at any old thing that comes by.

Or maybe that’s totally unfair. And there isn’t ever any one thing and life is a kind of jazz. All these strange notes and nothing to tell you where you’re supposed to go next. Like how there aren’t any rules for which way a tree can grow. Where the next branch has to push out and at what angle, how tall to reach, how many leaves. You just feel the air around you and when its time to push you just push.

I had to leave the house. Too many drugs burning too many holes in too many people. I mean I love Sandra to death but she’s the only real thing in that place and she works a 40 hr week.

Eddie’s the leader over there and he has his own agenda. He’s not a bad guy. Just a whiny kid who decided to whine about injustice instead of how the guys who detail his car always miss the ash tray. He gets on these kicks about whatever the new activist fad is and looks to me to make it all happen. Like I’m a fucking grassroots Kinkos. Organize a meeting, send out emails to remind people to donate, and bring drinks to the
revolutionary mixer, and call their congressperson. He just builds them castles. And who
doesn’t want a castle? Castles are soothing. But they’ve got so substance. Nobody wants
to put their feet on the ground and push. They’ll meet themselves to death.

I have to find something else. Something real that doesn't have to keep posturing
about its realness.

I'll sleep in the car tonight I guess. Don't want to lose the job, shitty as is it. I'll
have to wake up and move the car every once in a while, but it’s not so bad. The sun's
just going down--magic time, mom used to call it--light running like a scarf over this
sidewalk ficus hedge. I remember once when I was little getting so frustrated with the
markers in my 10-color Crayola set. I wanted there to be a color that was light. Just use
yellow, my teacher said. But that wasn't right. I sat at my desk and cried. ...The things
that matter to us. All these delicate points in our lives.

If I had a marker the color of light right now, I'd keep it in my pocket, carry it
around with me all the time. Pull it out and draw complicated lines on the walls, color in
all the corners, outline a house (the green one, on the corner by the donut shop, the one
with the thousand potted plants), a tree, a face, the docks. I'd slip out at night and tag
under bridges. Six feet high messages, indecipherable. Ontic screams of light.

They're sitting around the table. Kane, Harvey, Darnell and Sal. Kettle and Felix
and Mugger and Bunny were working. Mugger washing dishes, Felix and Kettle were
loading boxes at the stockyard. Bunny was painting a garage. Styrofoam cups of coffee
sat cold on the table from the night before. If you worked, you were responsible for bringing home food. That was how they did it. Till then, everybody went hungry.

Kane was changing out the bearings on Felix's bike. We don't even know how to make a bomb.

Speak for yourself.

What, they taught explosives 101 at Harvard?

Cornell. Bombs are easy. You need four things, an activator, an initiator, a power source, and your explosive. But there's this stuff they use to blast mines. ANFO. It's pretty effective, and not that hard to make.

What do we need?

Gas and a few hundred pounds of ammonium nitrate should do the trick. NH4 NO3. Prilled, of course. Oh, and a couple sticks of dynamite for boosters.

Boosters?

They kick off the explosion.

How dangerous is it?

It blasts mines. It'll kill that building flat.

That's not what I asked.

Ok. Darnell is jumpy, Stands up. Walks around the table. So. How's this gonna work? How do we get this shit?

Here's what I'm thinking. I've got this guy at the lab.

The lab?

At school. At Cornell. I worked there four years. I can call and get work there.
Just like that? You just make a call?

Yeah.

Darnell raised his eyebrows, looked to Sal for confirmation. Sal shrugged.

Ok then. So you get this job.

Right, and then I place the order.

How you gonna do that?

That's my problem.

How's that your problem? His hands are pressed flat against the table. They seem to hold all his weight. His head is low between his shoulders. That's all of our problem. We all sitting here. His hand sweeps around the room. We all involved. Everybody's problem is everybody's problem. We not one ounce stronger than our weakest link.

The hell's that supposed to mean?

Sal stepped in. There was something going on between Harvey and Darnell. Something tense and feral. It was a big thing they were doing. Someone was going to jail. Possibly everyone. No one had talked about that yet.

Sal put a hand on Darnell's shoulder, leaned in over the table. So Harvey gets the order placed. Then what?

Harvey took a deep breath, pounded a shot of the cold, dusty coffee, grimaced, spat on the ground. The chem plant we order from is in Pennsylvania. The plant manager's name is Stu. You guys go in there, run some recon. We call in Knight, he brings his rig, we go in after hours and load the order straight into the semi.

The idea sits in the middle of the table. Everyone regards the idea.
It'll work, right? It'll work.

Where are we taking it after that?

We bring it here.

Here?

We ain't gonna blow ourselves up, right? Even the air is nervous.

Not if we don't fuck around.
Chapter 7

:: After this he'll be a perfectly normal human being,

and you know what stinkers they are ::

So fine, they weren't *biker*, bikers. They weren't Hells Angels or 1%ers. They didn't have matching patches. There was no getting jumped in or murderous initiation rites. They rode bikes because bikes were cheaper than cars. And most of the time you can kind of ride the coattails of a serious biker's reputation. Like, people leave you alone. You look a certain way and ride with a group of people and you're assumed a lifestyle. People think they know who you are, what you do, what you're about. It can come in handy sometimes. Plus bikes are fun as hell.

They'd been together -- as a group, and Sal and Bunny as a couple -- for nearly two years. It's a long time in real life, not so long in biker years. It was the year Aunt Bunny would have graduated had she stayed in school. It was the year Sal turned 26, the date he'd set for himself to have his shit together. 26, he'd thought. At 16, it had seemed ages away. Plenty of time for him to have things figured out. And here he was, camping and riding, working odd jobs and scrounging for gas money, no permanent address, no solid sense of his place in the world, of his mission.

Like, what the hell does it mean to be a grown up anyway? Is that something that changes as society evolves? Does it mean you have a house? Furniture? That you pay your cell phone bill before it's due, and spend weekends at Target? I mean... or is it
something about having a kind of rigidity of idea. Of knowing something. Of knowing anything at all, and believing entirely in that knowing. Settling into some kind of assurance. What exactly would it take happening in my life for me to consider myself an adult? I have no answer to that question.

Keeping track of everyone was a little more complicated than it would be today. Some members of the group had jobs, families. Had to stay in one place. There was a fair amount of sending off postcards and stopping at pay phones.

Knight was a long-haul trucker. He had been blacklisted in Hollywood in the 50s for making a film about Joseph Swing and Operation Wetback. He'd worked under the pseudonym Eliot Marsh for a while, until it was discovered that Marsh and the militantly just Abel Knight (nobody seems to know if that was even his real name. I mean it couldn't be, could it?) were one and the same, and he was double blacklisted. He bought a rig after that, and moved Jackie, his wife, camerawoman, and filmmaking partner, out to middle-of-fuck, Ohio where, after being turned down for every film school teaching position in the state, she proceeded to make furious documentaries about Midwestern life, filming things like steel mills, county fairs, train stations, 4-H clubs, used car lots, tent revivals; interviewing people and using clips like "Rubber is to Akron, what salt is to the sea. She is impregnated with it" and "Ohio, the great buckeye state. Where once the roaming Indian had his happy hunting ground, where now the soaring stacks of the thundering steel mills make a smoking majesty of the skies," collaged together with snippets of speeches from Mao and the sounds of barnyard animals and barge whistles.
They had a young boy named Seth and a pack of dogs that served as satisfactory deterents to the overly curious.

Knight was in his fifties and paranoid. He only communicated through postcards. He knew Harvey through Jackie who was out at Cornell working on a project with the film department head. A piece on activism and university campuses. Knight was the one who had given Harvey his nickname. Harvard, he'd called him, and Jackie had shortened it to Harvey. Like the rabbit, she'd teased. Knight had just about choked to death on the beer he was drinking. Which one of us is Elwood Dowd? It was only a month or so later that Harvey left school and set out on his own with Mugger and Sal. The road between Dalton MacMurray, chem student and research ingénue, and Harvey, biker outlaw and political renegade bore a solid resemblance to the distance between New York and Central Texas.

Harvey sent off a postcard to Jackie. On it was a picture of a rabbit and the number of a PO Box they rented in town. Three days later they got a postcard back. On the front was a photo of the largest light bulb in the world, taken at the Thomas Alva Edison Birthplace Museum in Milan, Ohio; and on the back a badly drawn cartoon of Jimmy Stewart in a fedora and a phone number and time, Wednesday 6pm.

At 5:45 on Wednesday with a pocketful of change, Harvey left the park where he'd been making plans in a notebook he kept tucked in his waste band under his shirt and headed for the pay phone near the Alfies Fish and Chips. It had a booth with an unbroken door.
Knight?

Harvey! How's my favorite imaginary bunny?

I've wrestled with reality for 35 years, Doctor, and I'm happy to state I finally won out over it.

That's m'boy. What you got cooking over there?

Harvey rough-outlined the plan.

Bully. I'm in. What do you need?

We need you as transport. You and your rig in Pottsville, Pennsylvania, pick up the load, and bring it here.

Pottsville to ... where you at?

Cameron. Northwest of Austin.

'Bout a 24 hr run.

A round 55, round trip. Unless you want to stay a while.

I'll consider it.

Staying? Or picking up.

I'll pick up. Give me as much notice as you can. Can't have too big of a break in business.

Thought you worked your own runs.

I do. Jackie's got it in her head she's done with it. Wants out. She's got us Australian visas.

Australia?

You know Jackie.
That doesn't sound like her. Tell her I said she can't skip out. We need her in the fight.

She's almost out of fight, bunny boy. There was a long pause. Seth is sick.

Aw, man, Knight. What is it?

They don't know.

They don't know?

He's... he gets these seizures, you know? They did a spinal tap, thought it might be meningitis, but it's not. They got him going in for oxygen every few days. Sometimes every day if it gets bad.

Abel...

We're ready to get out, you know?

Is there anything I can do? Anything you need?

Yeah. You let me help you blow some shit up on the way out.

Absolutely, man. I'll be in touch. Give my love to Jackie. And hug that boy.

10-4, cap’n.
Tell me some kettle stories. I ask it while, 300 miles away, she spills pills out of a plastic organizer. The M T W letters have all been rubbed off of the top of the containers and re-lettered in with sharpie. Who keeps a pill organizer that long? I wonder. And then—well, why would you ever buy another one? I suddenly remember that Bunny’s mother was sick. I was little, maybe 5, but she lived at the house with us for a while. Did she die there? God, how can I not know that? I remember having to tiptoe past her door because she was sleeping. It seemed like she was always sleeping. How have I not remembered this before? Did she have cancer too? Mental note: find a good time (is there such a thing?) to ask Bunny about her mom. Maybe ask Sal.

Kettle stories. Now. There gotta be a million of those lying around. Kettle was, he was the heart and soul of it, you know? He was like a big kid. He was the one jumping his bike over the bonfire at night, badgering Mugger into doing his Richard Pryor impression, stealing candy from stores and keeping it in his pockets for the kids we’d meet. And that boy could eat. He ate more than the rest of us combined, I’d say. I’d make this chili, road chili, sometimes and I’d usually have to make two pots. One for Kettle and one for the rest of us.

He came from the Northwest. Oregon or Seattle or somewhere. He didn’t really like to say. But he talked about the rain, and logging. He’d been an honest to god lumberjack in his early days. Quit high school at 15 and hopped on a logging truck. Big
as he was, he could stand on a bike wheel and hot-foot it across a parking lot. Said he learned it from standing on logs clearing jams. He saw a friend of his go under during a jam. None of the other loggers really said anything, or made any attempt to find the kid. It shocked him so much— how everyone just let this kid go, just stepped back, looked down at their hands, went on with their work like there wasn’t a man drowning under their feet— he walked off the top of the jam and left the job that minute.

He thought about becoming a trucker, but a bike was cheaper than a rig, so he took his lumber money and bought a bike. He tried to get in with a few gangs but ended up leaving – usually without their consent and with a number of broken bones – because he didn’t square with the way they did things. Kettle was big and crazy but he had a moral code that wouldn’t budge. It didn’t always make sense at times, especially to me back then, but he didn’t waver from it. Not for a second.

Like this one time, we heard this story from another friend of his we ran into. Kettle wasn’t really one to talk about himself. Story goes that he and this bike gang he was running with knocked over a fish and tackle store, kind of place that sells guns and ammo and hunting gear and whatnot. Kettle had no issue with robbery. Darnell and Kane were all about it too, but it was more conscientious for them, like a way of flipping capitalism the bird. Kettle, though, Kettle just stole shit. Since he was a kid. It’s how he got by. I don’t know how he got away with it. He was huge, he attracted attention wherever he was. Maybe people just didn’t think it was worth it to mess with him… So they’d knocked over this store, got the cash, some guns, some ammo, they’re leaving, got the shop owner, his toupe sliding half off his bald head, and his wife cowering against the
wall, and someone in the gang turns around and there’s Kettle with a fist full of fishing
rods and a tackle box. And on his head? A fishing hat. One of those floppy ones with the
lures on it.

You’re kidding.

The fuck’r you doing, man? They ask. These are hardcore bikers. 40 and 50 year
old dudes. Crusty and mean, ratnest beards and rap sheets long as their dicks are short.

I g-got m-mmy reasons. Kettle had a stutter when he was little. Got beat up for it
daily by anyone with a fist. He learned to keep it short when he spoke.

Put that shit back, what’re you a fuggin retard?

Kettle puts the tackle box down on a display table, and picks up a hatchet. It’s one
of those camping ones, for chopping kindling. He hefts it in his hand, pries open the
snaps of the leather cover with his teeth.

Oh no you don’t, you stupid shit. The biker takes the gun that’s been menacing
the shopkeep and his wife, and points it at Kettle. Whatever idiot idea you got in your
idiot head, you better—

But he doesn’t get to finish telling Kettle what he better because Kettle, calling
back all those bored hours at the logging camp, tomahawked that hatchet right at his gun
hand. Crustybeard drops the gun, drops to his knees. The hatchet is stuck in his wrist like
an axe in a log.

Kettle picks the tackle box back up, raises the fishing hat in a salute to the
terrified owners, and walks out of the store. He hops on his bike and that was the end of
his time with that gang. Fare thee well, Cisco.
What did he do with the fishing poles?

That’s the thing. He’d seen some kids down at a creek on the way into town. They were fishing with nothing but empty milk jugs and line. He rode back out to where they were and gave them the poles and tackle box.

No way. Did he have kids of his own or something? Was there something he was trying to make up for?

No kids. He’d just had a shitty childhood, I think. There was a girl. He never told me her story, but he was devoted. I mean, don’t get me wrong, he was no saint. There were women, but they were just... road women. This girl was something else. He carried a picture around of her. Folded it up in his helmet. She was beautiful.

He was older than the rest of you, right?

He was older but he seemed like such a kid to me then. Always asking me to explain things. Telling me how smart I was. Always bring everyone little presents. Stuff he thought they’d like, the way a kid does. A flower he picked for me, some bearings he cleaned for Felix, a book for Harvey… Being in the group was less about the specific convictions for him, I think now. He didn’t care so much about Watts or Vietnam or the Equal Pay Act or any of the things we got ourselves all twisted about. He just wanted to belong. It was hard for someone like him. Do you agree, Sal?

He nods. We all kind of rode the edge, right? Living like we did, but Kettle… he was just wild. I don’t mean wild like Darnell and Kane, angry and chaotic, I mean WILD wild. Like you had the feeling he could kill a bear with a rock and skin it and eat it and
live out in the back woods somewhere and not talk to anyone for years if he had to. He was wild. He repeats himself. Wilderness.

You spend enough time in your car, you become an expert at locating unwanted spaces. The warehouse shipyard corners, the back of shopping centers at night, houses abandoned by the builders, anywhere off the 76. Coordinates about which no one gives a damn. They seemed sad to me at first. Little graveyards. The abandoned car, the unmatched hubcap, the pile of ruined sweatshirts, the single shoe. And nobody to clean it up. Nobody to care. Nothing tended to. I think it has something to do with the reason I like old photographs. I always have. Doesn’t matter if they’re of people I don’t know. Like I walk into this antique store on State St., and usually there’s this old guy there goes by Pop, but Pop was out and there was this girl, and on the counter she’d put a china pie plate full of old photographs. Photos of young men in uniform; snapshots of children, Easter hats and gloves, lined up tallest to shortest in front of the lilac bush; Polaroids of the grand canyon; girls with roses in their hair; first communions; a boy in a cardigan leaning against a Ford Fairlane, *Thomas and his baby* in dim spidery script on the back. Some were torn, or faded to ghosts. I bought a handful of them. My favorite, a young woman in a black print dress, hair in perfect satin curls, brows arched, looking over her shoulder defiant and alive. The Queen Bee, someone had written in block letters across the bottom of the photo. I stuck it in the dash, covering up the check engine light. I think of Kettle’s girl. In my head I name her Dot. Dorothy. Queenie to her friends.
Someday when I have a house, I’ll have dishes full of old photographs lying around and you’ll walk by and flip through them, maybe lay them out on the table or on a windowsill, this one here, next to the sisters on the porch swing, this one over here, after the dad asleep at the beach and it will be like an endless puzzle, like deciphering something. I do that sometimes—furnish imaginary houses. I wonder if that’s something guys do. Is furnishing houses a particularly feminine pastime? I used to think about that a lot. What guys do or do not do. If it seems like something they wouldn’t do, I usually try to not do it too. I mean, feminism. Nobody wants to be a cliché. The one racking up all the eye rolls when she has to go to the bathroom or check her make-up… again. “I can do anything you can do, better,” right? But that pretty much limits the scope of “things we both do” to whatever the boys do. Which smells a lot like bullshit to me. I ought to be able to brazenly decorate invisible houses. Why not? Still, though, tidying up fantasy real estate is a pleasure that rides shotgun to guilt. Like I’m cheating on feminism. Letting Susan B. Anthony down.

Suffragettes or no suffragettes, I lay down in the dark and arrange the imaginary succulents on my imaginary back porch. Adjust the wind chime, trim the rosemary. One night I might live in a bungalow and collect depression glass and have a bead door, and the next day it’s a loft in New York and everything is white but the artwork on the walls and a gigantic irregular table made from a single cross-section of a baobab tree. And then I think good lord, how pretentious can I get, and roll over and peel my thighs off the vinyl seats of my Cutlass Cierra and think, Fuck it. All of it. Over and over with a rusty harpoon. If I can’t carry it on my back, I don’t want it.
Mugger and Darnell and Kettle were already out in PA. They’d gone ahead to set up camp, scope the place. Bunny and Sal were riding in with Knight. They met up in Springfield, made their acquaintances, joked back and forth about Harvey, and got on the road. It was roughly a thousand miles. Two day’s ride.

Knight had a drop in Columbus. For now, Bunny and Sal rode out behind the semi, taking the north and south positions to the side of the rig to avoid the exhaust.

September, and the world was wide and dry. They rode through the long flatiron day like a meditation; into the rolled-out afternoon and on through to the drop. It was quick—loading dock and forklift, and when it was done they pushed the bikes into the back and climbed in the cab. They drove on, the feeling of being on the road. Transience. Taking turns talking, and not talking, your body packed away, content to not know, to take the road ahead of you as it comes, until Knight called it and pulled the rig over somewhere outside of Yukon.

The engine was shut down, hot and weary, legs were swung over sweat-slick vinyl, brows were wiped, hair was taken down and put back up again, water jugs were tipped, passed around, tipped again.

Welp. We roll out here, I guess. Sal nodded toward the forest on either side of the highway. We got anything to eat?
Naw, y'all never camped on a rig before. C'mon up. He put his hands on his hips and leaned back, stretching his head up to the salted sky.

Up?

Up. *UP.* Knight pointed to the ladder on the side of the rig. Slinging his backpack over one shoulder, he aped himself up onto the first rung.

Over his shoulder he called, Bring some firewood.

When they got back, Knight had a tiny barbecue set up on the roof, and a couple of tins of Dinty Moore, a sleeve of saltines, and a fold over bag of instant coffee. Sal and Bunny had scrounged some dry wood by the dim yellow beam of a flashlight, and they set to making a meal of it.

Harvey told us your boy was sick. Bunny swirled the dregs of her coffee in the bottom of the flecked enamelware mug. We’re so sorry.

Thank you. He leaned over and stirred the fire. Being a parent, you know? It’s brutal. Makes you question everything. Every single goddamn thing you thought you knew. Everything you thought you were sure of, suddenly has to be re-figured. When we were on the run, and it was just Jackie and me, no problem. We could tell ourselves it was romantic, you know what I mean? Couple’a hot-trotskyites dodging that stooge McCarthy. But then Seth came along and suddenly everything’s real. It’s heavy and we’re thinking how he needs things to be stable, place to grow up. So we do our best to settle down, and still stay in it. In the fight. Stay alive, you know, on the inside. And we’re ok like that for a while. I mean it ain’t what the normals would call normal, but
we’re good with it. And then he gets sick and you have to do it all again. Now there’s doctor bills gotta be paid, and medicine and it costs money and you’re suddenly having a conversation about insurance and payment plans and credit cards...

It gets complicated.

He nods, a motion that includes his shoulders and chest. Gets complicated as hell. And it’s not just that. I mean, you got a kid, and suddenly you’re thinking about your own childhood, and how your parents did it, and all the things you had to go through to get who you are now. And you want to kind of bypass all that with your kid, you know? Help him start out a little closer to the finish line, and so you’re wondering what to tell him. How to raise him. And everyone’s got opinions about that. Even your kid. Even at seven he’s got his own opinions. And you think you’re all fair and open minded, but when your son comes home from school and tells you he wants to be a banker and have a Cadillac like his pal’s dad, or he wants to join the army, or be a cop when he grows up... I mean, how open minded are you, then?

They talk, a still center of the spinning stars. Knight produces pictures of Seth and Jackie playing with the hose in the yard. Seth and Jackie fishing, waving and grinning, creekside, Seth and Jackie in the hospital.

They roll out their beds, lay back, play a shooting stars drinking game. Bunny reaches for Sal’s hand in the dark. He pulls her closer and she wraps her body around his. The wind is low, but it shakes the rig. Knight is already snoring.

Who else gets to do this?
She loves Sal’s voice when he whispers. It’s almost sub sonic. She feels she hears it in her chest rather than in her ears. She didn’t feel tired. Only that she needed everything to go still. The hours to crumble and fall away. Sleep on a rig? Or hijack explosives?

Take your pick.

The talk was light. Long spaces of silence. They knew what was coming. This wasn't gonna be no sit-in. These were real bombs. It felt outlaw. It felt righteous. They were connected. Reflected points in the expanding dark.

I love you.

I love you back.

Sandra walks in to the library where I go to read and sometimes nap; tosses a paper bag on the table.

I have all these letters for you from the house. You ever going to read them?

I don’t want them.

Right. Who wants to read a love letter.

Are we going to the meeting tonight?

There are like nine of them here, Betts. I mean, what the fuck is this boy saying?

Right? We both stare at the stack of letters.

What if he needs something? What if he like got kidnapped and he steals napkins and writes on them with ink he makes out of dirt and his own spit.
Mhm… and there’s an obliging kidnapper accomplice who takes them to town and posts them for him?

You never know.

The postmark is Seattle. He’s still up there.

Ah, so you have looked.

Can we just go now?

We walk down the stairs to the car.

I’m reading Foucault.

You say that like you’re telling me you relapsed.

Yeah.

You have to open one. I’m dying.

I haven’t showered in like three days. Can we go back to the house for ten minutes, or am I still banished?

Eddie’s being weird.

One shower, god.

You kind of shattered him.

What?

Like you didn’t believe in him, or something, you know? When you leave it’s like a breakup. Other people are all, well maybe this group isn’t that great… I don’t know. He just doesn’t want to see you.

See what I mean, though? This kind of kindergarten bullshit?
One letter, Betts. Come on. Mark has never written me a letter in his life. Not even a birthday card.

He’s just not the letter type.

I mean, he’s great. We’re great. Just… a letter man, that’s so…

Romantic?

Like Jane fucking Austen. She picks up a letter, looks at it.

I sit with the letters in my lap. They feel warm. So I’m going to the meeting looking like a stray dog?

Smelling like one too.

Oy.

Turn the key Anderson.

We’re at the meeting. I don’t know why I’m here. Maybe just to see if things seem any different when I’m not in charge. See how the scene feels from the other side. Maybe just to earn points with Eddie so I can take a goddamn shower at the house. Eddie. Who died and made him Che Guevara. Some kid with Daddy’s money trying to be edgy. If he’s wearing a beanie tonight I swear to god…

Hey everyone. Thanks for coming out tonight. If you haven’t signed in yet, go ahead and do that now. The clipboard is on the wall over there. There’s a place for your email too, if you want to get notifications about what’s going on…

… and on and on … it’s like a church potluck or a neighborhood watch meeting.
I get a text, look down, Sandra.

That has to be the saddest thing ever.

?

A love letter that’s never even opened.

Christ. I stick my tongue out at her. I didn’t want the letters with me. I can feel them in my backpack. Sitting there. Full of him.

They watch a documentary about race relations. I don’t know why it makes me grind my teeth. It’s not bad. Eight or nine people here who aren’t at home watching Netflix, who aren’t buying things on Amazon. There’s a professor here. Adjunct, but still. The documentary ends and they go around the room and reiterate the points the movie made, eat some fake oreos off small paper plates with ivy on them.

Hey Eddie. Good meeting.

Done with your little tissy fit yet? Ready to do some real work?

I can’t even think of one thing to say to this. I reach up and pull the beanie off his head. It’s June, Eddie. In San Diego.
Chapter 10
:: Al•ter•nate ::

There must be a million songs titled Hold On. I think it's the most populous song name of all time. Conclusion: we humans exist in a situation of perpetual tenuousness. We're always one chorus away from falling.

We're in front of screens. Me on my phone at a cement bench outside of a Subway in Oceanside, Bunny in the kitchen, same mug of tea, same checked curtains, same red geraniums in the window. She has a scarf around her head. Stage 2 lymphoma. This is the thing no one’s been saying. Now they’re saying. It's just a thing, she says. Cancer-- everybody's getting it. Like a few years ago when everybody got smart phones. 57 year old women taking selfies and googling slang on the street corner... It's just a thing.

Mom's been there for a few days. James is flying out on the weekend. She's there in the kitchen, Mom, like she used to be when I was little, making waffles on Aunt Bunny's 40lb waffle iron.

So tell me about getting the supplies, I prompt.

She takes a sip of tea. Adjusts the scarf. I try not to think about the word Lymphoma. About the vocabulary of illness: therapy, radiation, Clonapin, chemo, Dexamethasone, stem cells, blastoid, Hodgkins, the meds schedule I see written on a whiteboard behind her where a framed embroidered rooster used to strut, the worn look around her eyes. I will it to be 1973. She's 22 and wild and perfect. I will the gas and hot
chrome smell of motorcycles. The space before everything that already happened
happened.

We were up there in New England. Just a couple of weeks, but the world wasn't
any different up there. In reality I mean. Still got the papers. The war was still raging.
Only it seemed more distant. It's not like we'd never been in quiet little towns before, I'd
been most everywhere with Sal those past two years, but this place was different. Or
maybe I was just getting a little more tired. It was this tiny town in Pennsylvania.
Pottsville, of all things for a town to be named. There was the chemical plant and a
sawmill, and a few small dairy farms. Middle of September, just going fall. And it's like
you think it is. All golden and rich and people baking apples and mist rising off lakes and
the honks of geese migrating, and tall white steeples in little river valleys.

She goes on talking about it in travel ad terms, a land of flannel shirts and logging
boots and hot coffee in thermoses and blue skies so crisp you could reach up and snap off
a piece. She could see herself there, she said. For a moment she could see it. She and Sal,
tucked away in a log cabin. They'd have a garden, join the Back to the Land movement,
sell vegetables in a little stand at the side of the road.

They got into town. Hadn't even landed yet, sitting at a light, and there’s a
moment. She is overcome with a memory, only it isn't a memory. I mean it hadn't
happened. But it was like it had. Bunny is in a cabin, the cabin folded in among the high
hills. It’s a chilly fall day, the leaves outside on the trees blowing, torn at by the wind.
There’s a wood-burning stove with a fire going; she has on thick socks and a giant
sweater. She’s dozing on a couch. There is an intense weightless feeling, a fuzziness that
creeps over her, bobbing half in and half out of consciousness. The tick of a clock somewhere. She climbs it like a staircase into a strange warm drowsiness.

The weight of what they were doing could get overwhelming. The pressure of it. Like being deep underwater, with about as much visibility. It was all as it should be. She didn't want to be doing anything else, but it got so heavy. Maybe they just needed a break. Or maybe it was the other problem. The one she turned away from in her mind whenever it threatened to overtake her.

The light turned. She gutted the throttle hard, burned ahead, log cabin dreaminess discarded by the side of the road.

There was this moment in the car the other day. I mean I'm saying I know what she's talking about. When you feel something so hard. Something that isn't. I didn't have anywhere to go after work so I drove out to the hills. Not like I have gas to waste, but I needed to get out. I drove all night. Down to Dulzura. It's this nothing town. Township, probably. Stepchild village offspring of El Centro or something. This nothing there at all but this tiny little truck stop restaurant. Across the street, a clapboard stadium, used to have a rodeo there, but it's long since vanished. One pump gas station. I mean it's nothing. Only it's surrounded by these hills. God, these hills. They're green and long, Oaks and pepper trees, long arroyos, a stream running through. I don't do anything. Just drive through, and it's like I can see myself in this whole other existence. An old farmhouse, wraparound porch with a swing. Couple dogs. I'm wearing one of those coats that looks like it's made from a Navajo blanket. There's a barn out back that's falling
apart, I know the layout of the house, the way the hallway runs from the front door straight to the back, like a long portal, the heavy oak banister, the strange fixtures in the bathroom, the closet under the back stairs... the lives we build, entirely unrelated to the lives we actually live.

Only not really. Not always. They help us live these lives too. Like the farmhouse with the porch swing and the dogs, it's all there. Just one shade away. I can almost feel it. The way you know an orgasm is coming even before it starts to build.

I have this feeling that if I stop the car, if I get out and jump the highway guardrail, if I climb one of the hills, I'll find it all there on the other side. The house, the porch swing, the barn, the dogs-- all of it. And I'll be that Betts. And when I come back over the hill again, the car won't be here anymore and I'll have stepped into a different way of being.

So I do it. Can you believe it? I pull the car over. Sit there in the dark listening to the car click and ping. And it's dark and I lean in to look at the stars through the windshield. Only the windshield's got so many bugs on it it's hard to tell the difference between stars and moth guts. I sit there for the longest time. Every time I think about getting out of the car, about going for it, jumping the rail, walking through the night-damp grass, finding my way over the hills, I'm hit with this paralysis. My hands are frozen to the steering wheel. My lungs feel like they've turned to concrete. I suddenly know that if I get out of the car, I will find the house. I'll cross some barrier we're not supposed to cross and I won't be able to come back. And, I mean right now I'm living in my car. Eating gas station food. Showering with paper towels in the Starbucks bathroom.
I've left the group. There's nobody really important. Milo's gone. No kids. No big career.
No intention of going to live with mom. I'm not in the greatest of circumstances. A big
house on the beautiful hill would be a decided come-up in pure lifestyle terms. But at the
same time, I don't mind where I am. It feels like the center of something. Very still. Like
being the axis of some huge wheel. Not a lot of movement, just the slow revolution of
each day, but I feel like we're going somewhere even so. That I can choose the door I
want to go through. I just have to decide.

I was sweating when I turned the car around.
You want to know the truth, Milo, I'm scared. I'm scared of the world. I don't know how to live in it anymore. Do you know what's going on out there? Have you seen? Up north reading Ashbury and Zizek and Lao Tsu, hiding ink below people’s skin, burying it there permanently, a deliberate stain; how’s your window?

No response. I kick an empty SoBe bottle. It clinks across the dark sidewalk. I cut through the park. Betts of the black hoodie. There may or may not be a can of spray paint in her pocket. What is so fearsome about a can of spray paint? What is so fearsome about what it might contain?

How do you summon an idea? How do you call to that idea inside another person? I’m tired of words. I’m tired of the digital yes or no, the immaterial thumbs-up. If it can’t be real here, in this place, X at time Y with persons A, B, and C, then it’s not real at all.

Remember Trystero? Lot 49? What it meant or had the ability to mean, what it did to meaning in general? There has to be a sign. A bat signal. In the early days of Christianity when the followers of Christ were hunted and everything had to be done in secret, they would announce a meeting by making an arc in the dirt or on a wall at a designated spot. Someone would see the arc and make another one beside it. The arcs
would touch at one end and cross at the other. It was the sign of the fish. It meant come. It might cost you your life, but come.

I’ve secretly looked for the muted trumpet for years. Not the hipster one. There’s some fake-ass google group that puts stickers on shit and you can go online and get some mail delivered, like that’s all it’s about. I’m talking about the real thing. Which might not even be a trumpet. Or a single arc. It might look like anything at all. I just keep looking, thinking that when I see it, I’ll know. Hoping to find it under a bridge or on a dumpster in an alley behind an Indian restaurant, on a book flap at the library. I found it tonight. In my pocket. Inside a can of spray paint.

Nobody around to roll their eyes. To witness an act of sublime foolishness. Betts points the can at a blank block wall. The sound of someone’s television, its blue alien light, near and distant at the same time, a hot wind in some juniper bushes. Out of the can comes a circle. It attaches itself to the wall. Extending tangential to the circle, a horizontal line, branching off into two paths. The paths connect. Instead of the mute, three wavy lines. The Freedom River symbol. Calling all undergrounders.


You hear that, world? You messy green marble egg, you filthy rolled-out rug of virtuous America? Lift your eyes to the projects! I sally forth, open your hands ye
dwellers of this traitor land, open and receive, behold the Enuma Elish of the awakening world.

Does it always have to be so grand? Can't it just be good? Solid? Sweet? This is what it's come to. I am running backup plans in my head. I keep an on the fly inventory of my B.O.B. at all times. I am cataloguing information about nomadic and post-urban farming. About buying and selling gold. About distilling water from nonpoisonous plants. I hoard the information, pack it into my cheeks like a rodent. Store it away for nuclear winter. I no longer find things like a man's sense of style or earning potential or whether he is or is not into electronica relevant.

Sandra calls me the other day, asks what the hell I'm doing. What I hope to accomplish by being homeless. I say I don't know. She says I'm burning out, that there's no use in all this idealism. That you can't pretend things don’t exist as they are. You have to work within the existing system or you may as well piss into a tsunami.

All I want is someone I can survive the apocalypse with.
Chapter 12
:: Domino Rally ::

Maybe it was because she was pregnant and hadn't told anyone. Not even Sal. Maybe it was the stress of the job and trying to pull a heist in order to make a bomb in order to destroy a government building in order to start some kind of political tectonic shift, and all the backflips and handsprings you have to do in your head to hold together those lines of right and wrong. Or maybe it was just life and being a woman with intense passions battling her own sense of duty who called herself Bunny because it was either that or Sun Yat Sen, because here's the thing. When you're a woman, and you're strong and smart and capable and good looking, no matter how much you smile at people or how nice you are, you're kind of a fearsome creature. People get out of your way. Which isn't to say they don't want you around. On the contrary, you're everyone's go-to. They all want you. They want you to solve their problems and take care of their issues. They need your opinion, your eye, your organizational skills, your know-how, your body, your style, your energy. They need the credibility you lend them, the particular way you disturb the air around you, but nobody really looks at you. Not you. And it's not their fault, really. I mean, I guess it is, but you can't really blame them. It's like you're running around in a tank and how the hell is anyone supposed to see through that?

So when it happens, you know, it kind of breaks you down. Into little tiny pieces the size of pinwheels that all go weak in the connectors and spin off into the who knows
where and you're left raw and skinless and exposed. It was the guy at the chem plant, of all places. On the day of the night of the heist of all days.

She'd been in to the chemical plant twice now, getting friendly with Harvey’s contact, Stu. Their cover was that she was a reporter, doing a story on the plant and its relationship to the town, meanwhile casing the place and waiting for Harvey’s order of the ammonium nitrate to come through. He said it would be any day now. Stu was the plant manager; forty something, owner of a Dodge wagon, and a hairline that was slowly eroding, that he tried to cover up with various kinds of chemical plant related headgear. He wore wire-rimmed glasses and a lab coat and had what Bunny called "a noble face."
The way he looked at you, she said. There was a forthrightness. Which isn't even really a word people say, but I know what she means. Like all his windows are open. She'd been in once or twice for a tour, which was really a recon mission, and some follow-up questions which were things Darnell and Felix and Sal needed to know if they were going to get in and out without getting caught.

They were nervous, not being seasoned thieves, and wanted one last look at the schedule to confirm the shipping date and time for the ammonium nitrate. It had to be already packed and palletized and ready to go, or it would be worthless to them. They'd thought about just hijacking the truck on its way, but it seemed like a riskier play, what with CHiPs on the road, and a truck that was on everybody's tracking bills, and how were they going to get the pallets out of one truck and onto the other, drive a forklift down the highway? And then there was the issue of the driver. He'd be a witness, and
what then? No, it was much cleaner to go in the night before. There was a lone security
duty on guard, and he'd be easy enough to distract. They'd drive Knight's truck right up to
the loading dock and be in and out in ten minutes. They just needed to confirm that the
shipment would be ready to go the night before.

Bunny made a call.

Stu sounded glad to hear from her.

Donna! It was the name she'd given him. He went breathless whenever he said it.

'Course. Come on by. Door's always open for you. She could almost see the half-open
smile of his, sheepish and hopeful. Like a little boy. She couldn't stand to think how he'd
hate her later. How he'd feel she'd betrayed him. We're running a few tests this morning--
oh nothing to worry about, just routine. I'm only telling you because I might not be right
there in the office when you get there. But I'll be out as soon's I can. June can get you
some coffee-- June, do you think you could put on a fresh pot? Donna's coming by...

Well I think it'd be nice. You can just pour the rest in a thermos if you think it'll go to
waste. June, I'm not... Can't you just... ? Oh never mind, I'll do it-- So we'll put some on
for you. And Ralph'll be done before me, so if you're in a hurry--

Gosh, Stu, don't go to any trouble about me.

No trouble at all. Oops, looks like they're starting. We'll see you soon?

See you soon. She shoved her foot into a pair of pantyhose. Guilt made her angry.

The pantyhose weren't helping any either. Why should she have to be made to feel
guilty? Why should doing the right thing mean having to screw over a decent guy like
Stu? What if this ended up getting him fired?
When Bunny was eleven she was obsessed with dominoes. Not playing the game-bones, they'd called it in Juggie's world, the old men at the diner, table in the back, suspenders and cups of coffee making rings on the formica, clicking their black spotted bones down, the sound so fast it was almost like a tap dance, dem bones dem bones dem dry bones, O hear the word of the Lord—but that wasn’t her game. Bunny’s way with bones was to set them upright in complicated lines around the house and then knock them down. The paths got trickier and trickier, up and down stairs, around the legs of the dining room table, under the china cabinet, off the tops of bookshelves. She'd spend an entire afternoon setting them up, testing and re-testing the complicated sections, and then, after her father came home, after she'd pulled him by the hand around the house to observe the intricacies of the tiles, the switchbacks and surprises, only then, only with him watching, his gaze and attention giving her the necessary courage, only then would she have the guts to curl her fingers into a fist, slowly extend the index finger, and, with a motion like pressing a doorbell, give the first domino a gentle push.

Bernice, dear Bunny, do you dare disturb the universe? Do you know what this kind of disturbance will do? Who can tell? Who will feel it? How many things will topple? Whose courage will you borrow this time?

She shoved the heaviness aside, and pulled the wool skirt up over her hips. It smelled of campfire. She wondered if Stu would notice. She'd gone to the thrift store in town to pick out a proper female reporter outfit. It wouldn't fly to sashay into the chemical plant wearing her usual cutoffs and fringed leather jacket. She had to look the part. But they'd been camping outside of town, and it was hard to keep the skirt suit tidy.
Her stockings had a noticeable run halfway up the left calf. The heels of her pumps were covered in mud. This would be her last visit.

Sal came over as she was tying the bow at the neck of her blouse. He stood behind her, smoothed his hands around her waist. Nervous?

It's just not fair. She was stiff. Sharp. Anxious.

I know. You won't have to do it again. This is the last time.

No, I mean it’s not fair what we're doing.

This again? They make it this way, honey, you know that. Make it so that the only way to do the right thing is to become a criminal.

I'm not talking about the law. And don't talk to me like I don't know how it is.

What then?

God. Nothing. I'm sure Ghandi sends his girlfriend in to fuck with innocent, hard-working plant managers all the time. She straightened the hem of her suit jacket.

What are you even--? Ghandi?

Let's just get this over with.

She got off the bus a block from the plant. The skit was snug around her stomach. The feeling was strange, and strangely adult. It reminded her of the way she used to think of her grown self when she was a girl. She would sit on the porch swing and try to imagine what her life might be like, what it would feel like to be grown. She imagined herself like her mother in dresses and stockings, lighting candles for dinner, pinning up her hair and tucking her feet decorously under her chair as she sat with other ladies. That
grown-up Bernice had felt infinitely distant. Like a photograph of a stranger. The feeling of the skirt tugging at her waistline as she walked past shop windows in the early fall carried a similar unfamiliar flavor. She stopped at the gate to the plant.

Now let's get clear on this: June did not like Bunny. Correction: June did not like Donna. June didn't have a clue about Bunny, but we can sit on a fair amount of assurance that she probably wouldn't have liked her either. June was nearing a watery 50, with a froth of died red hair. She was partial to tartan scarves and loafers, which, when the weather turned, she would leave under the desk at work, changing into sturdy fleece-lined boots for the trip home. She resembled nothing so much as a plaid sea sponge. But she was the only woman employed by the Athalon Group and she was proud of that in a Lucy-from-Twin-Peaks kind of way. She enjoyed making the coffee, setting out the donuts in the break room, arranging the potted plants and desk calendar in the small reception area in the tan portable with the metal access ramp. She did not enjoy visits from Donna, the too-eager, too-interested too attractive co-ed. Donna was shrewd. June could see it. She had all the boys' heads turned, donning her safety goggles, tucking her stupidly long hair up under a chem cap. But June was no fool. June knew better. Donna wasn't from around here. You could hear it. Or rather, you couldn't. Not to mention she didn't own a decent jacket. And those pumps? Who exactly did she take Stu for? Gregory Peck? She could at least clean them if she was going to insist on wearing the fool things. Looked like she'd been high-heeling through a mudslide. I mean would it kill the girl to
take an iron to that suit coat? And oh-ho. Would you get a load of that. Miss Goldilocks couldn't even keep her stockings from running.

Good morning, June.

Looks about three gusts up from sleet.

You think it's going to rain?

Might that.

June was always so surly to her. Bunny sighed. It was so needless. And she was so tired. Is Stu around?

June's jaw clenched into a rictus of sourness. She glowered up at Bunny. Stu is a very busy man. Running this plant is a tireless job.

Oh god, she's in love with Stu. Bunny sat down. Switched tracks. Maybe she could get the intel she needed right here. He's really lucky to have you, June. She glanced at the wall behind the reception desk. Four calendars, shingled with notes and receipts and schedules paper-clipped to each other. Someone who cares about the work, who really understands it. You're the perfect partner.

June lifted one shoulder, raised her eyes to a corner of the ceiling. She wasn't going to retract her bristles.

Bunny leaned back. Sighed. I certainly don't get it. I mean I have to write this piece, and I just don't get it. All those big chemical names. I can't even pronounce half of them. I can't ask Stu this, but what's all this even for? Who even uses all this? I mean do people really order chemicals like they order pancakes?
June looked disgusted. Do people use this? She let out a pahsaw of air. Do you really think we'd all be here doing what we do if it didn't matter? She leaned over her desk. These chemicals *save lives*.

Bunny raised her eyebrows. Save lives?

We supply some of the largest pharmaceutical companies in the *nation*. They make medicine. Medicine saves people's lives. We supply labs that do research. They're working on things that will *change the world*. Make it a better place for all of us to live. Not that anyone appreciates it.

That's amazing. I had no idea. Bunny perked in her seat. Pulled out a notebook and pencil from her purse. So do you have any deliveries going out today?

We ship every day. Seven days a week. 365 days a year.

That was a lie. Stu had told her they averaged one or two shipments a week. Bunny made her eyes go wide. Far out. So you're shipping today?

Bunny didn't think June's face could pucker in on itself any more. It would implode. I just said we ship every day. Is today a day?

Oh, right. I'm sorry. Just-- this is really interesting. Who are you shipping to? Are you shipping medicine?

June opened her mouth but nothing came out. This had to be the dumbest girl alive. We don't ship medicine. We ship *chemicals*? We're a *chemical plant*. We ship-- she glanced at a pink sheet of paper on her desk-- six hundred thirty pounds of ammonium nitrate to the Cornell University chemistry lab. They use it in their research.

Bingo. Wow. What are they researching?
I'm sure I don't know. I make it a point never to pry.

Oh of course. How mysterious.

June actually rolled her eyes. It's science, Donna. She threw the name at Bunny like a dart. It's 1973.

The door opened with a rusty screech.

Well! Stu's smile was open and generous. Donna, if you could just give me one minute.

He walked over to June's desk. Picked up the phone. Did you get the readouts yet? Seven forty-two? He ran a hand through his hair. Let out a worried uuuuhhhhh. He dropped his hand to his belt. Tipped his head to the ceiling and took a deep breath. Run it again. I'll be right there.

He set the phone down, leaned his hands on the desk. June looked like those cartoon firemen you see running around underneath a burning building with a trampoline.

This will be the third time. We don't get a clean readout, we're going to have to pull everyone off building four.

But what about--

I know. I know. What else can I do?

June laid a hand over his. I'll get a notice ready.

He nodded. Turned. Donna.

She stood.

I'm so sorry. Something urgent has come up and I have to run back into the lab.

Oh of course. I understand.
I'll walk you out.

He held the door open. They walked in silence for a way. The driveway was long and curving. Stu stopped under a spreading Hawthorn tree, red as a burn, leaned against it, pulled a pack of Winfields out of his shirt pocket. Do you mind?

She shook her head. He offered her one. His lighter was a zippo, it had a weighty look. Bunny imagined it had been his father's. Maybe he'd fought overseas. They let out simultaneous streams of smoke.

Is it bad?

It's not dangerous. No one will get hurt. But if we don't get a clean readout on our system, we'll have to shut down one of the buildings for repairs. That will cripple us. Business-wise, I mean. I may have to lay off some of my men. They have families. He exhaled smoke through his nose. Jeremy had smoked like that.

That's terrible.

I don't know how I can do that. I've already taken a 60% pay cut in order to keep Ansel on. His wife had a baby last year that was born with a heart condition. So many medical bills, how was I supposed to tell him the boss wants to trim the lab?

You did that?

What am I going to do now? That's 15 guys. Even if I work for free it won't cover it.

God, Stu. The man was agonized. So much care. He was showing her something dark and vital, pulling it out from beneath his jacket like children. She wanted to show that she appreciated the load he carried. That she saw. What are the lines between right
and right? She was here for information. Will this halt other things you're working on? 
Other projects? Deliveries? She felt like a scumbag.

Not immediately. He stubbed out the cigarette on the bottom of his shoe. These tests have taken more time than we expected, but everyone's pushed to cover what has to get done. These are good men, Donna.

She nodded. Smiled. The best.

They walked to the gate and Stu let her out. She double checked that the number combination hadn't changed. 17742. Check. Double scumbag.

He turned to her. I'm sorry I couldn't be more help to you.

Oh please don't be sorry. You've helped so much. I'm sorry things are so heavy for you.

I just... He looked at the ground. Adjusted his key ring. It's always really nice to see you. You're a very special person, Donna. He looked at her. At her.

She felt herself loosen. A boat coming loose at the moorings.

She wanted to hug him. To say that she thought he was noble. That she understood. That they were on the same side and she was so so sorry. She held out her hand. Smiled. Thank you so much for everything.

She made it to the bus stop and sat down. Sal was there waiting for her.

How'd it go?

God, Sal. ... She wobbled. She toppled.

What's wrong?

She was shivering. God... she sobbed, god.
He put his arm around her. Hey. Hey, what is it?

Everything tilted inside. Plates slid off the shelves, hit the floor like waterfalls.

She almost couldn't get the words out, I'm pregnant.
So tell me how you got your name.

We're on the phone tonight. Bunny says her hands are too shaky to Skype, which sounds like bullshit to me. Like she just doesn't want me to see her. She's been through three rounds of radiation so far, and Mom says she's holding up which means that she's feeling like shit but being all stoic about it. I told her we could wait, but she insisted. As long as you promise not to say the words cancer or chemo or mention my dosage or refer in any way to my bodily functions... It'll be a goddamned relief to talk about anything else. Deal, I said. And then she'd coughed for about 8 minutes straight.

The name? Freedom River? That was Harvey and Sal. Before I came into the picture. Harvey had seen this little film, a six minute animated parable called Freedom River, in his intro poli-sci class. Orson Welles was the narrator. The film attacked immigration, racism, class structure, commercialism, colonialism... It wasn't comprehensive, but it was concise and broad enough to suit Harvey. He liked it and the professor ended up giving him the reels at the end of the semester. He played it for Sal and Mugger and they thought it was as good a motif as any. That's what we need, Sal said, A new freedom river. And so it was born: The Freedom River Underground. The last line of the film became a kind of motto. The life or death of the river of freedom is in our hands. We put it on the newspapers. Dispatch from the Freedom River Underground;
The life or death of the river of freedom is in our hands. Heavy handed, I know, but it was a blunter world.

I asked if she still had any copies of the newspaper.

In a box somewhere, maybe? Up in the crawlspace? I'd have to dig.

I can come up there and poke around. You shouldn't be--

Uhp! Don't you dare mention my 'condition' bugaboo, or I will hang up this phone.

Alright alright. I'm just offering my services, for the greater good.

Noted. Maybe I'll send Sal up there to see if he can find anything.

It would be amazing if I could get my hands on those.

I don't know if I have the stomach to look at them anymore.

Why not?

What's that rule about time travel? That you can't go back and meet yourself or it'll tear a hole in the fabric of the universe or something? The state of my personal universe is a little too threadbare at the moment to be tearing shit up all willy nilly.

Fair enough. But if you find them, can I look at them?

I'll think about it. In the mean time, see to your universe, Bethany Anderson. Do that for me, ok? I'm partial the shape of your stars.

I hung up and googled Freedom River, Orson Wells. Video looks like it was animated by School House Rock.
Imagine Harvey, carrying around reels of political cartoons in his backpack. Setting them up on a projection machine. Sharing the film as a kind of intro to social discontent. Anti-nationalism 101.

I wonder what Harvey's voice sounded like.

You know those moments when you catch your reflection in a window, and for a god’s honest second you don’t know who you are. A moment of looking at yourself from the outside, of being strange to yourself. Here I am, picking up coffee at 7eleven at 2 in the morning with the latest Agamben text and Sayings of the Desert Fathers under her arm, a pen which has been mostly forgotten shoved into her day old braid. I was the one walking into philosophy club meetings with a stack of books making everyone groan. Nobody wants to talk about the questions. They want to get hammered and crack clever existentialist jokes and plan the club Christmas party. Maybe that’s why I dropped out.

Reason for turning down your full ride: Obsession.

Any obsession in particular?: Obsession with the question of how to live.

I don’t even understand how this doesn’t plague everyone. I mean I’ve come to terms with it, that for the most part nobody really gives a shit, but I don’t understand how they don’t. How people can say “I’m not religious,” or “I’m not political” as if they had any choice in the matter. As though they didn’t live in a universe of mystery, or possess a life governed by political forces. You’re in it whether you like it or not. The only choice you get is how you choose to be while you’re here. And that’s the question. The how. Because in the thickness, in the very thickest thickness of it, I find there is no way to be. I
cannot make sense, and when I say that I mean I cannot create sense. I cannot configure anything into sense. And so instead of going insane, I decide to notice. To take note. I study everything. It has made me quiet. I think less and less of spouting the words and more and more of discovering them.

This pisses Charlie off. Charlie thinks I’m giving up. Flaking out. Dropping the great Revolution ball and leaving him in the big fat anarchic lurch like an asshole. I won’t even go into what Eddie thinks. I’m just opting out of the noise of it. … Maybe. Or maybe I am flaking out. It’s too soon to tell.

To Do:

Drift away from time for a moment. Come back on feet that feel like sieves. Stand on emptiness. 96 percent of everything is empty space. Nothing exists except atoms and empty space, everything else is opinion - Democritus of Abdera. What exactly is empty space. It is nothing. Nonsense, nothing is nothing. It is a vacuum. A vacuum is nothing. It is a word. A word full of energy and dark matter. A word that when you say it with no sound, looks like you’re saying Fuck you.

Don’t misunderstand, then. I’m writing this story as an instance of noticing. There are things that must not escape notice.

When I was little, we’d go out to watch the meteor showers sometimes. The Perseids were always our favorite. We’d drive out somewhere dark, which is a trick in itself when you live in Southern California and the sky never gets darker than a murky shade of mauve. So we’d go to the beach, or the foothills, and bring sleeping bags and blankets and thermoses of hot chocolate and coffee, and we’d lay on top of the car and
count the space rocks as they burned through the atmosphere. Where do the ashes go? I’d ask. I don’t know, Mom’s answer, I guess it just becomes part of the air. We’d stay all night sometimes and Mom would always tell me it was ok to fall asleep, but I couldn’t. I had to watch. Had to bear witness. It was like a duty. To notice each one that fell. They deserved to be seen. Even if it was just by little Betts in her Power Puff Girls sleeping bag.

And it’s not just for the sake of the thing being noticed. It teaches you. You stare long enough at the night sky, you realize that first and foremost we’re all space travelers. Hunkered together on this hulk of a spacecraft, tumbling through the galaxy. Ground control to Major Tom.
Chapter 14

:: When is the Anarchist like the Amish? ::

The heist went off as planned. Textbook. Like when does that ever even happen? Bunny distracted the guards and got them to open the door with a story about a nonexistent blown tire and a plea to use the phone. Kettle hung around out of sight as backup in case things got hairy, which they did not, whilst Sal and the rest of the goons slipped in the door that Bunny had propped open and Knight opened the loading gate with the passcode Bunny had supplied and drove right up, docked the rig, rode the pallet jack right into the back of the truck, and took off. Everything tight as a drum and just as tense.

Knight made the delivery to the basement two days later. Harvey was already there, having quit the lab and headed back to Texas after he'd confirmed the delivery. Bunny says he was nervous. Much more nervous after he got back than he had been before. She thinks something happened up at Cornell. He didn't talk about it, but it's hard going back to your old life, after you've done a lot of changing. It's hard in every way. Hard to feel how much something doesn't fit that used to. Hard to remember all the good things you left behind. Hard when you have to face people that maybe you--whether knowingly or not--abandoned in some way. Bunny says she thinks it was a girl. That maybe he had to make the same hard choice all over again. Stay and be happy with someone but miserable for not doing what you know you have to do, or leave and be
miserable for being alone, but happy for doing what you can't not do... gah, why does it have to be like that?

So they were all there. Six stunned insurgents in a windowless basement with 630 lbs of prilled ammonium nitrate and a crazy hairless one-eyed giant who was supposedly there to give them "pointers" on explosives.

Who knows where Harvey dug him up. Sal’s talking to me while he straightens bent nails. He skypes me from the back porch, a pile of nails he removed from some pallets someone gave him. He pounds them back into shape with a hammer. Talk, pound, talk.

He called himself Asherbanipal, after the Assyrian king. The one who'd built him some big-ass library in Nineveh back in the day. The one who kept his enemies on leashes in cages.

Fucker had about a million books, Sal said, stacked on shelves in a blown-out grocery store. He'd been a professor or lecturer or something, Harvey met him at some conference before he went skunky. Dumped all his money into buying this rattlesnake and stinkbug property in lovely downtown Cistern, Texas --"downtown," here, being a euphemism for two commercial streets on the sketchy side of a shitkicking township off the 95-- after a fire had taken out a Bryce's Supermarket, a piano shop, and an Western Auto. He built a wall around the property out of old pallets and scrap lumber and corrugated garage doors, much to the ire of the neighborhood, like he was the king of some medieval junk yard. Didn't bother tearing down the buildings but moved right in,
stepping around blackened pianos and swampy smoke-scarred frozen food lockers, filling the aisles with his own personal library. His collection held more titles than the UT library, and he kept it all up himself. Called himself the keeper of the lamp or some such thing. He lived with a hulking dog named Sindbad and a black woman who practiced Voodoo and studied rabbinic literature. Here's a joke for you, Bug, What d'you call a Tibetan who practices Voodoo? A Voodist! Don't remember her name though, only that Asher kept referring to her as the Torah, like she and the scriptures had merged alchemically.

We went down there, Harvey and me, to help him load up some supplies we needed for the explosives. The FO in ANFO was fuel oil and the Keeper of the Lamp had a 700 gallon water tower tanker in his yard filled with diesel fuel. The ratio was 94:6, AN to FO which meant for our 630 lbs AN we'd need roughly 40 lbs of diesel. According to Knight, diesel at room temperature weighed about 7.5 lbs per gallon. We were gonna bring back 8 gallons just to be safe, a roll of little plastic bags like the ones they sold vegetables in, a spool of electrical wire and some switches, and about forty 5-gallon buckets. Asher might have been 6'7" and lacking in eyebrows, and covered in what looked like self-inflicted tattoos, but he was older and had some trouble with his shoulder and back that didn't let him move properly. When he walked he looked like a bald, fleshy Robocop. Well, if Robocop had dressed up as Buffalo Bill Cody for Halloween. Asher had a thing for beaded belt buckles and fringe. He was one weird sumbitch.
I haven’t even said hello to him, right, laying eyes on him for the first time, and he shakes my hand and leans in, goes, You know its scientifically impossible to land on the moon.

That so? I say, meanwhile he’s squeezing my hand, testing me out, you know.

He spins his finger in a circle, The Van Allen radiation belts, man. You need a solid lead barrier. That wouldn’t make it three feet off the ground.

Here’s another one, I’m thinking. You go south of center like we were, you can’t help running into the crazies. They’re thicker’n land mines.

For another one, he didn't believe in firing weapons but he had no problem arming his less enlightened brothers. He'd run guns to the FARC in Columbia in the late 50's and he could quote from the Vedas and write Sanskrit and he'd met J. Edgar Hoover and marched with Dr. King and claimed to have arm wrestled Thomas Kuhn at a poker club outside of Geneva. We got all that just on the way back to HQ.

Scientifically impossible to land on the moon… Sal shakes his head, a nail sticking out of the corner of his mouth, It is with my foot up your ass.

Bunny didn't go on the supply run. Bunny was holed up in the single bathroom with the peach-colored plastic fold-up partition bent over the commode with morning sickness. Morning sickness which rarely had the courtesy to restrain itself to mornings. She estimated she was about 10 weeks pregnant and nauseous every second she was awake. She had a factory job at the time and was working night shifts, coming home to write pamphlets and distribute them at women's clubs where the ladies of the town drank
lemonade and played bunco and criticized their husband's skill in the bedroom and rivaled each other for largest corsage, shiniest Mercedes, and tightest beehive, and who could best honor LadyBird Johnson both in pants suits and windy, Texan wildflower acreage. They listened to Bunny, clapped politely, and left her pamphlets untouched on the table next to the recipe swap cards and the sign up list for next month's charity auction. The club's treasurer, a woman in her fifties with perfectly flipped, platinum hair and a matching skirt and jacket ensemble in the creamiest avocado green was the only one who spoke to Bunny after her speech.

You're a pretty girl, dearie. But it's not seemly to get so hot under the collar. I say this not out of a sense of meanness you understand, but as a friendly tip, one loud-mouthed woman to another. You get a lot further with your message if you tend a little to your appearance. With women, you have to make them envious before they'll listen. Make them wish they were you up there. Play to their feminine jealousies. Oh I know you're young and beautiful and it's beneath you, but it works. Lordy, I wished I could've held up a mirror for you while you were speaking. Let you see what you look like. Positively ferine, child. We had a mad stoat up at the house not too long ago, typhus, my husband said. Listen when I say that nobody wants to listen to a female lunatic. We vipers are most effective when we hide in the grass, only let our teeth show when we're ready with the venom.

Bunny shook the woman's slippery, lavender-scented hand and in turn, on her way out, used a permanent marker to change the Mercedes logos on the cars in the parking lot to peace signs. She came back to HQ fuming and slamming doors.
What did you expect?

It's a CIVICS club. I expected some civically minded discussion.

From the hivers? From the June Cleavers and Carol Bradys?

Alright, fine. My mistake. Won't happen again. She went into the bathroom, retched, came out, and leaned against the doorframe. I have an idea though.

We got back the next day, unloaded Asher's truck and got to work mixing. We'd take a specific portion of the ammonium nitrate and mix it in the bucket with a little of the diesel, then scoop the mixture into the plastic bags. We were nervous, I'm not gonna lie, but after Asher and Harvey proved the stuff wasn't volatile without a detonation of some kind by kicking around one of the bags like a hacky sack, everyone mellowed out a little. Mugger was clowning, Darnell's smile went all the way around his head. Harvey and Asher were swapping old stories. The energy was high. Bunny was measuring out the ammonium nitrate, Asher was mixing, me and Harvey would fill the bags and toss them to Mugger who'd toss them to Felix and Darnell who'd stack them in the empty buckets lined up against the wall. Kane and Kettle were rolling smokes for everyone out of some pipe tobacco someone'd picked up from somewhere. It smelled like oranges. We'd call out Smoke! And Kettle or Kane would run over and hold one up for us to take a drag while we worked. We had the radio on. A blues station out of the UT campus. Kane was partial to the blues. Chicago and Delta varieties especially. He had a couple socket
wrenches and he was drumming like fever on one of the upturned buckets. It was like one of those barn-building parties. A radical leftist quilting bee.

Something beeps in the kitchen, and Sal gets up to grab the meds chart and a glass of water. Wheels Bunny in. She's been doing radiation for about ten days now and I can hardly bear to look at her. Sal places three pills carefully in her palm. She tips them to her mouth and leans her head back. Sal holds the water to her lips. She drinks. Coughs. Drinks again.

One thing about Asher, though, he could throw a hell of a dinner party. Huh, honey?

I will remember those short ribs till the day I die.

The short ribs night turns out to be the night they took that photo. The one I have of all of them. They ate and then rode over to this bar Rambo’s for a toast. There are moments you have to commemorate. Moments that demand immediate recognition. Not later after you realize their importance, but in the middle of the happening. They sat around a table, Sal lifted his glass. To the life in every single one of you. He looked around. To the Freedom River. You all make me a better person. You keep the world from giving up on itself.

The table was quiet with smiles and nods across the table. Everyone’s glass in the air inviting the angels to agree. To the river. They held it up for long seconds.

Mugger, for the laugh, … Just don’t let Kettle piss in it.
Chapter 15

:: These Songs of Freedom ::

Nineteen days. Nineteen days I've been living in this car. It's taken on a smell. I made a deal with myself that I have to stay here till I make up my mind. No hotels, no crashing at friends' places, no apartments that are 'temporary' and then end up just lasting. I have to decide what to do. What do I do?

Charlie called. He's on this thing about corruption in the Supreme Court. There's a demonstration in D.C. It's not that I don't want to go. That I don't think it's important. It's just that I feel removed. Like looking at city lights from the top of a mountain.

There's nobody I want there more than you, he says. You're the one, Betts. Nobody else sees what I see. You could move things. Like, really move them.

I can't do it, Charlie. I need to think.

You're gonna go be a monk out in the desert and what? Save your soul while the rest of us go to hell fighting? You can't be that selfish. It's not fair.

Jesus Charlie. What's the mileage on that high horse?

Fuck you. You're coming to D.C. Next week. You got money for the ticket?

I gotta go.

Damn right you do.
Charlie's ok. But there's this blind streak in him. This part that refuses to accept realities. Like climate change isn't going to reverse itself. And everything we do won't be enough and people are always going to take the path of least resistance. But you do it anyway, you know? Like bailing a sinking ship because not bailing means actively adding water. But when does it become an exercise in foolishness? And when do we just call it? Abandon ship and try something else? And what else is there? Maybe that's what I have to think about.

But first, find something to eat. Take a real shower somewhere. There's a campground not too far from here. I think I can hang there for a few days. They have those pay showers. Maybe I can make a fire; that would be nice.

Bunny told them she had picked up another shift. It wasn't that she was going to go do it. Or that she couldn't tell the group. Or that she was hiding. It was just something she wanted to do herself. Alone. She walked out into the alley behind the warehouse and zipped herself into her leathers. It was the kind of 2pm that felt warm and delicious on your skin in the sun and frigid in the shadows. She'd read once that if you stood on the planet Mercury, you'd burn to death in the sun and freeze to death in the shade. Funny how freezing and burning feel pretty much the same in the end.

She'd heard about the place from a contact they had in St. Luis. The girl went by the handle Guido, and she was tough and mean and sharp as a blade and nearly always drunk. Bunny didn't like her much, but she knew about things like this. And it wasn't like it was illegal. Roe v. Wade was almost a year ago. It wouldn't be any back alley butcher.
An actual doctor. A nurse, maybe. A table covered with white tissue paper. A tray of cold, thirsty instruments that gleamed and waited. Besides, she didn't have to go in. She'd just have a look. The address, written in stubbed pencil on a folded matchbook cover, had lain hibernating in her pocket for six days now. She had felt better knowing it was there. But she'd had a strange, anxious thought yesterday that maybe the address was wrong. Maybe she'd misheard Guido's crackly slogged voice on the phone. Maybe Guido's information had been wrong to begin with. Maybe the place had moved. I'll just go get a visual, she'd told herself.

She arc'd a leg over the bike and strapped on her helmet. Bunny rode a 66 Honda CA77 Dream. Motorcycles hadn't been a part of her life back in Creek County, but she picked it up fast. It was like riding horses, which she had done a lot of. The same listen and lean, the same sinking of your body into the motion, the same feeling out of temperament, delicate almost mental guidance--a nudge, a whisper, a shift of the shoulders, a tightening of the knees--and a hell of a lot more speed.

The speed was the thing. Laying low over the engine, arms thrown forward, prostrate as a prayer, knees in, body tight and light, there was nothing else. She was a comet, a bullet, a photon catapulted off the sun light-speeding through space, a missile, a desert cat, the fine, infinite line of time, driving.

She took the long highway, 77 out to the 10, and the Sonoran Desert fell around her like an open palm, nailed to the planet and bone old. Nothing but wind burnt grass and scrub trees and one yellow line. And her. Bunny. Juggie's Bunny, Sal's Bunny, Bunny's Bunny, accelerating into the curves, eyeing the straightaways, ratcheting up to
70, 80, then laying lower, tucking tighter and pushing the throttle to a scream. Higher, faster, more, more.

Sal wanted the baby. He was starry about it. Maybe it would be a little girl with Bunny's blonde hair, little pigtails and pink sundresses and she'd follow him around everywhere. He could wear her in those packs they had now, like a backpack but you put the kid in it, and her falling asleep, her head heavy on his shoulder. Or maybe it would be a boy and they'd build things and he could teach him how to fix a bike and they'd sit on the porch drinking Yoo-hoos and he'd collect baseball cards and keep them in a shoebox, and they'd take him to the movies. And Bunny. Bunny, all beautiful and mothery sewing clothes and hanging curtains. He'd say these things in the dark early hours when Bunny would come home from the factory. She'd unbutton her uniform, shivering in the chilled stillness and crawl under the sleeping bag they shared on a futon mattress in the loft space that was theirs for the time being. Lying with his head on her chest, stroking her barely rounded stomach, he'd tell her that she was his precious thing. How could he deserve so much happiness. It was too much. The lights of the home he was building for them out of sheer belief sang out of his eyes in the darkness. What could she possibly say?

She sped on.

It wasn't just Sal. Kettle too. Does that make me Uncle Kettle? He'd asked, when Sal had made the announcement. They were sitting around the fire pit, a metal trash bin they set up in the alley. On cold nights a fire outside was warmer than no fire inside. Damn right you're Uncle Kettle, Sal grabbed his hand, slapped him on the shoulder. They
lifted their bottles to baby River. Everyone was buoyant, laughing, making plans to build a cradle out of an oil drum, a swing out of a bike seat. A baby made everyone happy.

Until it cried, Bunny thought. Until it got hungry and colicky and started teething and then walking and getting into everything. And they'd need clothes and shoes and then it would be two and ornery and then five and it would have to go to school and everyone liked the idea of a baby, but they all seemed to forget that the baby would grow up and it wasn't a baby, some cute little mascot, but a person. A new person in the world and they'd be responsible.

Harvey caught her eye from across the fire. His face wore the same concern.

The address Guido had given her was in a suburb of San Antonio called Castle Hills. Upper middle class. Neat hedges and polished chrome on all the station wagons in the driveways. She rode past an elementary school, kids playing a game of neighborhood baseball, a drugstore, about 15 churches. This was the life Sal wanted for them. Well, maybe a few neighborhoods over from this, but still. The house. The yard. The porch. The picket fence. It was what she had escaped from. Mailbox life. She couldn't go back.

She pulled into a modest row of offices. The sign boasted Carl Winston, DDS and Martin Lowenstein MD, Doctor of Obstetrics and Gynecology. A live oak draped its branches low over a grassy space to the left of the buildings. A few benches and a birdbath furnished the outdoor area, and on one of the benches sat a woman in a housedress, a scarf tied over greying curls, and a man in a brown suit. He was long-boned and a shock of white skin was visible above the top of a pair of thin black socks. They
held signs. Two sat propped up against the bench: Choose Life, your mother did, and Stop the Baby Slayers. Two more they held in their hands on sticks: Everyone deserves a Birthday, and You are Pro-Death.

Lowenstein, that was the guy. Looked like he was here after all. She didn't fault the couple. This is what it was all about. The ability to sit on a bench with a sign and let someone know you thought they were a piece of shit.

Wasn't that just what they themselves were doing with all this Freedom River business? Weren't these people just as convinced of their own rightness as she and Sal? The thoughts spooled in her like a litany, a vaccine against the irritation. She set the kick stand and stretched her back in the shade.

The couple eyed her. Leather jacket, long hair, sunglasses, heavy boots. She already knew what they thought of her. She was bored of their opinions. Of their Labrador kind of loyalty. It was tedious to carry, the weight of their predictable stares. She wanted to march right up to the office, swing open the glass door with the address painted in white letters, and defy their contempt. But she wouldn't be bullied into anything. By anyone, let alone these two scarecrows.

She pulled a bag of walnuts from her backpack. Sal was changing. Turning into something sweet and wonderful and frightening and impractical. How are we going to raise a child? She'd asked. Look around you. This is our life. We're going to have him playing with explosives in the playpen? Throw him on the back of the bike? An oil drum as a cradle?
He propped himself on one elbow. It was like he hadn't listened. What are we doing all this for? He asked. For change. For a chance at peace. The life or death of the river is in our hands. Bunny, we can have our own peace. Right here. We make our own world. Our own river. Fuck the rest of them. And we can still work. Knight does it. Who says any of it has to stop? You can still run the paper, you and Harvey, we'll still be in it. Right in the middle of it. We'll just create a little corner, you know? A little pocket.

She didn't respond. It was so clear to him. They could have it all. But it never worked that way. You sacrificed. One thing for another. That was life. Later she'd said, This, Sal? This--what we're doing right now? There's no looking past it. Everything will change. He didn't respond. He was already asleep, his breathing clear and soft. It didn't matter, I know, he would have said, thinking she meant the baby, not the 40 buckets of ANFO that lined the warehouse. Maybe she had meant both.
Chapter 16

:: "They tried to bury us, they didn't know we were seeds." – Mexican Proverb ::

In 1990, in the U.S. the 101st congress passed the National Defense Authorization Act, which allowed for the transfer of surplus military equipment to domestic law enforcement agencies. Six years later, under the auspices of arming police agencies to fight the war on drugs, the 1033 Project came into play. Since then roughly 5 million dollars worth of military equipment, from sleeping bags and flashlights to automatic weapons like M-16s, M-14s, grenade launchers and silencers, UAVs, ammunition, armored vehicles like HMMWV's and MRAPs— that's a Mine-Resistant Ambush-Protected vehicle... got a lot of land mines in your city, do ya?— and armed combat helicopters like the Bell OH-58D Kiowa Warrior, have been lent out to deserving police stations across the nation. Like a lending library for war mongers. No fucking joke. Oh, and the DOD would also like you to know that they have plenty of bayonets available. BAYONETS. If you're a law enforcement agency, or even a school district (like the one here in San Diego), you can fax over an application, toss in a few bucks for shipping, and Uncle Sam'll rush a delivery right out. Section 1033 falls under the heading of counterterrorism in the official DOD document. That means, 1). that 1033 procurements are not a matter of public record, and 2). that when your local police department rolls through town in their tanks and pepper sprays the shit out of the first amendment, that they have deemed that most basic of human and democratic rights an act of terrorism.
I’m writing a segment for the station. I do this once or twice a week, they kick me down a segment or two at the weekly meetings, and I dog it to the UCSB library and Pelican Brief my way through the current events section.

The MRAPs have gotten a lot of attention. Probably because they're, um, gigantic, and seeing them in a town square calls to mind Tiananmen. Those on the pro side are quick to point out that the vehicles are for protection, and are great for use in rescue situations, such as floods or fires. I guess my response is, Great. Now tell me how many flood victims you've saved with an M-16.

The deeper problem, though, as I see it, is not the equipment. It's the mindset of the person holding the equipment. If the officer behind the M-16, the one with the smoke grenade in his hand, the one at the controls of the UAV, thinks of him or herself as a public servant, here to serve and protect, things are going to go a certain way. If she's been trained by active-duty military personnel, however, and sees any kind of resistance activity, however legal or benign, as a threat both personal and national, things are going to look a little different.

Case in point: WTO protests, Seattle, 1999
Case in point: Portland, 2002
Case in point Alberta Spruill, 2003
Case in point: Aiyana Jones, 2010
Case in point: UC Davis, 2011
Stop and frisk is still a policy that is being enacted every day in the state of New York, despite its being ruled unconstitutional, that targets black and Hispanic men almost exclusively and more or less at the sole discretion of the officer. We're still afraid of each other. Is that not strange? We're all born. We all eat and sleep and shit and fret through the learning of fractions. We all laugh and have a favorite song and get anxious in the heart about love. We all die.

The Evan Brown case hit everyone hard. Everyone at the station, people back at the house, even your everyday human on the street knew the name. The black man, father of two, died of asphyxiation from being placed in a choke hold by an over-zealous New York police officer. The video footage was brutal and searing.

Brown, seeming the picture of harassed rationality, ganged-up on and treated like a miscreant gorilla, like a stain. And when they go too hard, when they forget he's a human and choke his last words out of him, even when those words are *I can't breathe,*
the refusal to look at him afterward. The disassociated Stand back please. Nothing to see here. The irritated passive glance. The calls to the union reps. Who are they protecting? Who's protecting Brown?

Protestors marched in Staten Island after the officers involved in the case were not indicted. Groups carried signs and fake coffins bearing the names of victims of police shootings. People wore tape over their mouths, the words I can't breathe written in sharpie. Groups were heard chanting, Who do you protect? The police were there as well. They brought the pepper spray and riot gear.

Die-ins were staged in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Boston, London. The chant changed from I can't breathe, to We can't breathe.

I went to a demonstration. Drove up to L.A. We all did. How could you not go? Those of us raised on Niemöller philosophy— first they came for the black folks, and I did not speak up because I was not black… but it’s not even so much to save our own skin in the end. It’s because goddammit it’s wrong and democracy means we are the ones that hold the ones in charge accountable. I don’t even claim to believe in democracy, in the false hope of a republic, but I’ll sure as hell call bullshit on a system that refuses to play by its own rules. I’ll say no to murder on the streets by the keepers of peace.

Demonstrations get your blood up. Like a parade or a hockey game. There’s this rush of team spirit. This sense of power and inclusion and the force of collective will. You feel righteous. Clean. Larger than yourself.
We marched. We had signs. Respect Human Rights. Stop the Violence. We can’t breathe. Now we know why “Protect and Serve” is always in quotes. Signs that just said EVAN. Those ones hit me the hardest. We marched with our hands up, we marched carrying coffins. At City Hall we laid down and died in the streets. 3 minutes.

I didn’t see how it started. Someone said police had pointed a gun at an old man, told him if he wanted to die, the officer would be happy to oblige. Somebody else said an officer had been forced to the ground, held there by demonstrators, forced to be one of the ‘dead.’ However it started, there was unrest along the outskirts. Fire hoses shot streams of water over the ersatz cemetery, pushes came to shoves, loudspeakers barked threats, people started running, other people were run over.

Uprising. What does it mean. Flares of humanity, here and there like explosions on the sun. It's always been this way, the historians tell us. There's always someone pushing down, and always someone pushing back.

And so? Do we, because it has always been so, go gentle? Roll over? Do we hold out our hands for the cuffs? Lift our faces for the pepper spray? Close our mouths when they don't like what we say? Do we keep our rights in a drawer, where we can't be accused of ever using them? Disappear when our existence is inconvenient? What do we teach our kids?

Sandra and Mark were arrested. I was detained but let go. Eric and Kelsie ran when they started in with the tear gas. Hector and Pria and Dom hijacked the backseat of
an SUV to hide out, and then the owners of the vehicle got in and started driving and they rode out to almost Pasadena before popping up and scaring the shit out of the guy and his wife, and asking if they could please just drop them at the corner.

Sandra and Mark spent the night in county. I have a card to Sandra’s checking account. This isn’t the first time I’ve had to bail her out. Luckily she has a kickass job to fund her more and more expensive protest arrest habit.

I picked up Sandra and Mark at about ten in the morning. Everyone else had connected and driven back home in the still early hours. I was discharged at around 4 and said I’d stick around. I slide the cash under the window. The lady on the other side of the glass could not look more bored. She licks her fingers and flips through some paperwork.

Sandra Ophelia Mendez and Mark Greenberg Stoltmeyer?

That’s them.

She clears her throat and sends the paperwork out of the room with a uniformed officer. Tells me I can wait for my friends around the corner.

Sandra comes out of the door like she’s made of kerosene. She sloshes. Anyone with a lit cigarette is urged to run like hell. I hug her.

Lead me to coffee, Anderson. I have something to tell you. She’s already out the door.

I hug Mark. Did she dream? Sandra almost never dreams, unless she’s in jail. She falls asleep and dreams these really wild intense dreams.

Mark nods. She just woke up.
Ah. Coffee it is, then.

So what was the dream? We’ve talked about the tear gas, Didn’t this time seem more thick than last time? Maybe we were closer. Maybe they’re strengthening the dosage, examined our zip-tie injuries. Once I got detained and they left the ties on for like six hours. When they finally took them off I could see my left wrist bone. This time wasn’t so bad.

So give it up, Mendez.

What?

The dream, sunshine. What did the lockup gods lay on you this time?

She sips at her coffee, dabs at a few scone crumbs with a fingertip. Shakes them off over a napkin. All the stars were falling.

Her voice is low. We lean in.

All of them. Only it was daylight, so no one could see. You couldn’t see them fall, she repeats. But you knew they were falling. And then the night came. And it was so dark. She shudders. You could feel the darkness around you like … she shakes her head, looks around… like this cold gel. It swallowed everything.

I mean what can be done about that? Catch the stars? Paste them back up into the void? Think that they’ll spontaneously regenerate? There’s nothing. When the light’s gone, it’s gone. There’s only what the monk did… goddamn. Rub two sticks together,
create a friction, everybody’s got something. Mind and body. Ignition and a flashpoint.

Light yourself up. As high and as hot as you can. As long as the burn can last.
Here's the thing, we needed cash. Bunny's talking strange. I can't tell whether it's weakness from being sick, or fogginess from the meds, or if we're getting to something she doesn't want to talk about. She clears her throat.

We had the nitrate. We had the detonators-- Harvey and Asher had taken care of that. But there was the problem of getting the explosives into the capital.

We'd had a guy. Some lowlife security guard who was down to look the other way on the night in question for a reasonable sum. He didn't know who we were or what we were doing, probably assumed we wanted access to information of some kind. Or didn't assume anything at all. Maybe those kinds of deals went down all the time, what did we know? But he was drunk on the job one night and got himself fired so we were in a spot.

We couldn't break in without tripping every alarm in the city and having the cops on our asses before we could set out the 45 buckets and run the lines and get the hell out of the way. We didn't want to wait for one of us to get a job in security and get promoted to key status. That could take years, and this soaked nitrate had a shelf life. The only way was drilling. Just like blowing a stump out of the yard.

The deal was we had to drill around the base of the building. Get into the foundation. The way they did when they were blasting in the mines. We'd dig maybe ten
holes, wide enough for a bucket, deep enough to matter; stuff four buckets down each, run a line from each hole to the two detonators... and that'd be that.

We'd work at night, snatch some official looking coveralls, grab some orange cones, dig our way to freedom.

But we needed cash. We needed drills. Big drills. We'd asked around, but nobody who would lend them to us had them, and nobody who had them would lend them to us. We could rent, but then there'd be a trace. Names on paper. Addresses. Driver's licenses. We lived in a different world. Not to mention we'd need to get clear for a while afterward. We'd have to separate, lay low. Sal and I were going to meet up with a MeCHA group in Tucson, Harvey was going up north, Darnell was taking Kane out to Tennessee... strategic disbursement, that was the plan. See what we could foment in the other groups after they saw what we did in Austin. But all that took cash. And pooling our $2.00 an hour, part-time jobs wasn't cutting it.

So. Asher had this connection. She paused, adjusted some papers on the counter, looked up. South America. They needed guns. And ammo. As much as we could carry. Their supplier had it, and Asher was the middle man. Or a middle man, anyway. He gave us the address. Go pick up supplies from this warehouse out near Santa Fe, drive them down to the drop-off point, some coordinates in the middle of the desert, southwest of Juarez. Two grand to make the run. With that we'd be set up. He even had a car.

They'd load us up in Santa Fe, with some dummy boxes of supplies -- canned goods and old clothes -- to match our cover story that we were missionaries bringing
supplies to an orphanage. We decided we really would drop off the supplies. That's just the kind of ruthless guerrilla warriors we were.

I wasn't going to go. Sal put his foot down. You're pregnant. No fucking way. I didn't even think I wanted to go. It felt mercenary. Guns and money. We didn't know these people. According to Asher, they were defense weapons. The state--Columbian or Honduran, it wasn't quite clear--was bringing in military, running people off their land, arresting and more often disappearing anyone who tried to get in their way. We have a responsibility to stand in front of the steamroller, right? Even if it doesn't stop it. Even if we get flattened. Because otherwise, watching it go by is giving our consent. Stand up, Stand up. The guns were going to help people defend their right to their own lives. But that was just Asher talking. Who knew what hands we were delivering guns into. Could just as easily be jungle extremists kidnapping kids from their homes and drafting them into service and reeducation camps. It would be easier not to know.

But that line of thinking has never really worked for me. So I insisted on going. If we were gonna be gun runners, I was going to know who the fuck we were delivering to. I had to have full veto power. We all did. You go against your conscience and it's all over. Besides, I argued, a pregnant woman missionary? Who's going to question that?

So it was Sal and me. Sal was Mexican, spoke Spanish, and was tough enough to not get laughed at when we went to pick up the guns in Santa Fe. Plus he said if I was going, he was going or the whole thing was off and fuck the capitol building it could blow itself up.
The car turned out to be a van. A 1960 Dodge, heretofore a milk truck, the words *Wilton Dairy, It's Mighty-Fine!*, painted over, but still visible on the sides. It was morning, the sun stretching itself flat across the plain behind Asher's fortress. He closed the door of the scorched piano store where we'd wheeled the bikes. Stood them up among a boneyard of burnt pianos, some nothing but char and twisted metal, others tipped, as though bowing, missing a limb.

Asher checked the gas and oil on the van, went over the route for the twelfth time, gave the door a slap, like it was a horse starting out of the gate, and we were off.

The trip out was kind of fantastic. Sal and I didn't have a lot of time to just be with each other. I mean we were with each other all day every day, but alone together? not working or planning or setting up camp or breaking down camp or being hungry or cold, or feeling shitty about the way the world was going? That was hard to come by. This trip was like stolen time. We were any everyday couple taking a road trip. The radio was on, the windows were down, Texas flew past us so perfect and sunlit it was like a movie of Texas. I didn't even throw up till Abeline.

We hit a truck stop near Clovis around lunchtime. Got out to gas up and stretch our legs. We had pooled our cash to pay for the trip. Lay it on the table, Mugger called, slapping down eight one dollar bills. We gotta get Bonnie and Clyde here to big bad Juarez or this shit's gonna go bad. The soaked nitrate was on everyone's mind. It would be fine, Harvey had assured us, ...for a while. Explaining again that it couldn't explode without a detonator. But sleeping and eating and working five feet from 600 pounds of
explosives, however benign, gets you a little nervous. And Harvey was never specific about how long 'a while' actually was. All in all, we'd left town with $34.87, twelve of those dollars jangling in a sock tied to the inside of Sal's backpack. It would be enough to get us there, so long as there were no mistakes.

There were two lines of bikes filed up outside the truck stop. You can tell by the way a group stacks their bikes who they are. One line was pure soldiered Harleys, even as a yardstick, the other was a mixed collection, a few HD's, some Hondas, a few of those Japanese racers and an old Ural with a sidecar. Their line was haphazard and confused. There was no easy escape route if you parked like that, no clear leader. These guys were out for fun. The other guys were serious shit.

A big one in rough leathers pushed open the door and walked around the side of the building to piss on the wall. On the back of his vest, a white patch with black letters proclaimed, MONGOLS.

Goddamn, Sal muttered.

We're in the van. We're invisible. Just another couple of cagers.

They sat in the car a while, the sun heating up the dashboard, making the air inside the cab thermal and thick.

We could just go, Bunny offered. Get gas at the next place.

We don't know how far that's gonna be. Sal was fiddling with his blade, a 4 inch folding Buck, turning it end over end against his thigh. He'd pulled it out plenty of times since his father had given it to him on his tenth birthday, but only once had he ever used it on another person. They'd run into a Mongol gang about a year before in Los Angeles.
Sal drove a Triumph and a group of them had come over to check it out. They'd taken some liberties, putting their hands on the bike, flipping the switch on and off like kindergarteners, kicking at Kane and Mugger's tires, being general assholes. Sal'd had about enough of it, and went to swing his leg over the bike and get out of there, but one of them-- a short, skinny dude with a long grey beard and a bandana tied around his head, point standing straight up like a patterned dunce cap--stepped into the swing. Did you boys see that? Did this motherfucker just try to kick me? It was like a code. A murmur rippled through the circle. I believe he did, Captain. Captain, did that wetback just throw a roundhouse? Look at this little cocksucker spic with his cocksucking nigger fag boyfriends. What's the deal, man, you tryin'a be Bruce Lee? From all sides. The little one in the dunce cap, the one they called Captain, looked around at the group, arms raised, head bobbing, as though he were directing a choir. When he turned back to Sal, he had a blade out. Well, we can't have that, can we.

They'd gotten out, mostly thanks to Kettle who'd fought his way into the fray and more or less picked up Sal in one arm and the Triumph in the other and walked out, swinging the bike, leveling Mongols left and right.

Two broken ribs, a menagerie of bruises, and a deep gash from the back of his ear to his collar bone, and Sal was pretty much done with the Mongols for life.

He bounced his knee up and down, slid the Buck into his back pocket, squeezed Bunny's hand. C'mon. Gas and go. We don't have time for this shit.
The truck stop restaurant didn't have a bar. A waitress brought warm beers to customers seated at tables and low backed booths upholstered in bowling alley yellow. Mongols in black with boots like ship anchors sat facing each other over flecked formica, calling for rounds. In the center of the room three tables had been pushed together and a colorful group sat eating burgers and singing kumbaya-style while a young guy in a curly beard and a T-shirt announcing ONE WAY strummed a guitar.

It happened fast, the way it always happens. Someone in a Mongols vest pumped nickels into the Jukebox. Someone else was yelling for beers, but the waitress couldn't hear over the clash of the group sing and the jangle of CCR inviting everyone within earshot down to Green River. You wanna cut that shit out? Someone yelled. And then someone else in leathers was at the center table, smacking it with the side of his fist. You assholes deaf or suicidal? The man said cut it out! The curly bearded boy smiled up into the gravel face of hard rage. We're just praising the Lord, brother. Take up your cross and follow me. And that was it. The room was suddenly a heave of bodies, slugging, swinging, running, crying, shouting. An old man in tie-dyes crashed into the jukebox. Curly beard recited the Nicene Creed and slammed a vinyl chair over the back of a man with spiked wrist guards. A woman stood on a table like a flood victim, hallelujah hands raised to the ceiling, praying out a stream of unintelligible syllables.

Bunny lunged toward the center of the room. Sal grabbed her and pulled her back. We have to stop this, her look said. Not our problem, Sal answered. He motioned to the cash register. The waitress had fled into the back room, and the truck stop owner was standing on a booth table with a baseball bat, bringing it down over his head onto
whoever was within reach like the patron saint of whack-a-mole. The register was deserted. Bunny ran around the counter and flipped the switch for the gas pump.
Chapter 18

:: In dreams what we seek is annihilation ::

It’s rough sometimes. When it just builds and builds, and love isn’t the answer and work isn’t the answer and whatever the answer is isn’t the answer because maybe there isn’t even a question. Maybe there’s just so many things that are broken and they just are broken.

When you’re the kind of person who sees that the world is broken and it breaks you too. When you realize that all your efforts to stand against it, to repair and rebuild and reimagine and articulate that in words and movement are also part of the world and you are part of the world and therefore also broken.

Can broken fix broken?

And there’s nobody you can say this to. Nobody wants your despair. They have enough of their own.

Ache and the best you can do is sit down on the street with your back against the wall, sunglasses like shields and the music full and warm in your ears, taking your brain in its soft hands, letting you just exist, one more broken thing on the street.

Get a job, someone tosses the words at you like garbage. Fuckin junkies. Someone kicks at your feet. A little girl with silver teeth smiles at you and her mother yanks her away. You suddenly understand the attraction of sleep. You could just curl up here in this small corner of sun outside the Walgreens and sleep like the dead. It would be
an absolution. A release. Someone handed you the reigns long ago or you imagined they did which is the same thing, and you haven’t let them drop. Ever. But maybe you could. Maybe all that’s just self-important bullshit. Maybe it’s not all on you.

You’ve fanaticized about getting sick. About going to the hospital and no one would blame you for not working, finally off the goddamn hook can I get an Amen.

Hallelujah and pass the Jager. Oh these giving up days.

But your ass hurts. And you haven’t eaten for a while and you’re light headed and the sun will be gone soon. So you stand up. It’s wobbly. You feel a hollowness in your shoulders. Surely someone has taken away your central nervous system and replaced it with balloon animals. There’s a 7eleven on the corner. Maybe you get up and go over there. Get a coffee. That would be something.

You wonder where you left your car. Where you left other things. Your self, for instance. This body doesn’t feel familiar. Why you suddenly feel like only here, at the edges, the borderline chain link fences where the wind blows all the unwanted things, why this is where you feel you need to be. You suddenly are weightless. So light; somewhere a little above your skin, made of glass and cellophane. So, you have blown here too.

And you walk and walk and it’s like you’re pushing the planet around with your feet. Like you can feel it sliding backward away from you. And the sun ducks out, got other places to be, and the stars fade in and you find you’re at the beach and the stars are everywhere. Overhead and in the water and under the water, swimming, and the water is beneath you and around you and you’re walking on stars and a few moments ago you
were thinking how if you were a star you wouldn’t even know you. The you down here.
You, standing five small feet and a few inches off the skin of the planet, you’re a mote, a
speck of space dust, a temporarily ambulatory piece of ash, but now, now you aren’t even
that. Now only two feet of you sticks out into the air, now 16 inches, and you’re surprised
how warm the water is, and now you’re just a head, now two dark eyes, now you aren’t.
Chapter 19
:: Chihuahua ::

They'd picked up the shipment from a warehouse in Santa Fe, two silent men loading the crates, showing them the top third of each box, packed with clothes and canned goods, a few dummy boxes near the rear of the van, shoes, old purses, belts, knit stocking caps, what looked like a handmade afghan. Someone had made that, sat with the blanket half-created over her knees, a ball of yarn in a basket at her side, weaving, unconscious motions of the hand and wrist, twist-pull-twist, a run of yarn. The question of the balled wool is answered in the practice of the movement of small bones.

The highway at night, running south through Las Cruces, lights like distant planets. There are places in the world that seem unattached to any other place. When you're in them it's like not belonging to anything at all. Sal pressed his foot to the gas. When he was a boy, riding in the back of the truck through the fields, he used to play this game: Hold your hand out the side of the car, cupped like a C and with it, collect everything in its path. Entire rows were harvested in seconds, houses gave way, trees were plucked like shoots of grass, row bosses, neighbors, road signs, the old cow in the back field, fence posts, hills, the melting sun, all of it fell before the scythe of his small brown hand. He would collect and collect, lakes, bushes, lines of wash, and when he felt he had a good stash, he'd pull it to him, an armful of the world, hold it to his chest and feel all the things pass into him one by one.
The van sped, the tires spun, they passed no one.

Sal became conscious of the structure of his body, seated as it was. He saw himself bent at 90 degree angles, chair-shaped, floating above the dark pavement, gliding along, untouched by winds. He saw again and the car was back, only just the machinery. Engine, drive shaft, fuel pump, steering column. He too was reduced to machinery. Skinless, he became aware of his own mechanical works, hip to ligament, knee to shin, the ankle and its archipelago of bones. He noticed the pressure of the bottom of his foot against the pedal, the displacement of air. It was on him as a revelation, that he was a piece of the car's machinery. A human car part. Of the Rube Goldberg progression of elements that resulted in the propulsion of this vehicle full of armaments across the darklands, his bones and blood were a part. It's completion. Without him, the machine could not perform its function, and wasn't he made of the same pieces? Belts and cycles, tubes and valves and pumps. Fuel and water and internal combustion.

Bunny stirred in the seat beside him, opened her eyes, murmured, It can't rest. The world is always making itself strange.

He wasn't sure whether she had spoken in her sleep or if she was commenting on the landscape. He spoke to her anyway, told her of his revelation. His tones were low and his words seemed to float between them in the cab before, with longing, with a sense of loss, being released out the window, stretching long over the wastes, swelling and twisting in the air like invisible serpents.

For a long time they were quiet, then, from the passenger seat, That's the way it is with everything. We're a skeleton key. We wind all the clocks. She reached her arm out
the window. It hung in the warm night, I dreamed it was all on fire. All of this. Just miles and miles of burning. It wasn't hot so much as soft, windy. And these schools of fish, silver, swimming in the heat.

What happens after it all burns away?

Who can say?

They passed into Mexico without incident.

They gassed up at a solo pump in Juarez, a hand-lettered sign out front declaring in a collage of English and Spanish, *Tires y Tacos,* and Bunny took over driving. Sal yawned and curled up in the passenger seat. It always baffled and delighted Bunny to see him like that, muscles slack, head against the window, his large, insistent frame made small, trusting himself to the forward motion of the car, of their given task.

The road was long and strange. The hours warped. She felt lunar and desolate, ages away from everything familiar. She said words aloud to herself to check whether sound still existed. Blake, Tiger, Tiger, Burning bright. If she were to stay here any length of time, it would be easy to forget what had been so important. Easy to let the causes lotus away. Difficult to hold on to the vision, the fury. Would the work of maintaining it be noble, or foolish. Perhaps they would give way to new rages. New strains of purpose. Perhaps not.

For a while they rode parallel to a set of old railroad tracks. The rails lay reptilian, low among a thickening of sparse grass. Abandoned train cars petrified beside the track, some upright, others on their sides like monstrous children’s blocks left behind to rust
and sink into the earth. Here and there she spotted fires, encampments full of smoke and quick movements. Shapes elongated in the preborn hours, families and groups squatting in the cars. Here and there a line of wash lonely beside the tracks, now and again a child looking out from the darkness of the cargo holds, small hands on the graffitied doors, their dark heads limned with moon.

The sky lightened and she drove on, consulting the map from time to time. She imagined she saw herself, she and Sal, the faded blue van, the carefully packed boxes, tracking south on the folded page. On the map, the desert was a pale scar between oceans. The roads here were more unruly, less ordered and inert. They seemed to twist, to try to shake her off. She pulled over.

Being sick outside a vehicle transferring illegal munitions in the middle of Chihuahua at 5 in the morning left Bunny shaky and chilled. She leaned on the side of the truck and counted the hours.

They were to meet their contact at 9:00. It was 8:02. They'd arrived at the location -- a stand of rocks and torqued, stunted trees on a ridge behind a small concrete and cinderblock building which, by the hand painted sign resting against a boulder that even at dawn, even in February was shimmering with heat, dealt in cactus, nopales, piedras de poder, and adivinacion -- at around 7:30. The faded image of a palmist's hand on the wall stared at them across the desert from behind its one unsleeping eye.

There wasn't much food left. A few apples tumbled around in the back of the van, about a third of a loaf of raisin bread Torah had given them when they left Asher's, a
gallon or so of warm water. They drank the water, shared their last cigarette, gauged that they had about three gallons of gas left in the tank, and another three in a gas can under the passenger seat. $2.19 was left in the sock. The heat flared. Bunny threw up the water. Then threw up again. Nothing left in her stomach, but she threw up anyway. Again and again, rangy threads of acid, green and acrid were all her body had to offer. Sal helped her to a patchy spate of shade. They'll be here soon, honey. Just rest. We made it.

The air was thin and sharp, like there was nothing between anything but heat. It burned all the molecules to nothing and then filled all the spaces. An early morning heat that hadn't flattened yet. A blade heat. Bunny felt it in her mouth, her nose, her lungs. Her throat burned from heat and acid. Her head felt like balloons. Around the edges of her vision, things darkened and wriggled. Take the iron off the fire, she mumbled, the plants are dying. The sky blackened and fell upon her.

Bunny? Sweetheart? Sal was lifting her off the burning sand, holding her on his lap, doing that thing he'd seen in movies where they rubbed the inside of someone's wrist. Chafing, he thought, uselessly. Chafe the wrists. Bunny? She stirred, but didn't open her eyes. He laid her as gently as he could in the shade where the ground was cooler, and ran for the car. He stripped off his shirt and soaked it with water from the gallon container. He was shaking. The water was bathwater hot. He wrung the shirt out gently and laid it over Bunny's forehead. He dabbed at her temples, at her throat and chest, her arms felt fiery. She opened her eyes. It was 8:17. Sal?

I'm here.
She closed her eyes again. Moaned. Sal poured water from the jug into the cap of the thermos.

Sit up, honey. He sat behind her, propped her up against his chest, held the cup for her. She drank a small sip, sighed.

How do you feel? What a stupid question, the one we always ask. Bunny didn't answer. Words are such heavy things. She had her hands on her stomach. Sal moved the damp shirt to the back of her neck. She was trembling. I need to get you to a hospital.

The cement hut with the palm reader and the cactus was roughly half a mile away. Adjusting the shirt to cover her head, Sal lifted Bunny, laid her gently in the passenger seat. His heart felt huge. Swollen. Pounding. If anything happened-- the thought ended there, like the edge of a cliff. There was no seeing past it.

Bunny mumbled a protest. The delivery. The meeting.

That worry would have to wait.

8:29
Chapter 20
:: Meteorite ::

There are people who come into your life and barely skim the outskirts. They glance off your atmosphere without leaving so much as a skid mark. Other people linger, they decorate your airspace, offer up a song; a few even land on your surface and settle in, grow roots, construct cities… And then there are the others. The one or two or three who drop onto you like a meteor; who hit ground zero and keep going. Tunneling through to your boiling coil core and settling in like it was home; become part of the sphere of you you weren’t entirely sure even existed.

I met Milo the summer before sixth grade. At first he was just part of that new Indian family that moved in across the street. He was the fourth of six kids, brainy and artsy and ass-over-teakettle in love with skateboarding. Upper middle class, they weren’t Indians from India. They were Indians from Berkley. His dad, Mr. Ganaka was an archaeologist and Mrs. Ganaka designed sports cars. But those were all things I found out later. That first afternoon, Milo was just the boy with all the jackets, and Betts was the upside-down girl.

She was the kind of kid that you could tell spent most of her time with grown-ups. When she talked, she used words like resources and plausibility. She wanted to know if it was true that the colors we saw were only really the colors that a given object reflected, and whether that meant that something that was black was really white and vice versa; and if that meant that the object itself was the opposite color, or whether it was the words
that were backwards. Whether white really meant black, and the word yellow really
referred to objects that were blue. She was thinking of this as she swung from her knees
on the jungle gym, chewing a red vine, eyeing the green grass.

Green is just the color it shows you. She said it aloud, thinking herself alone in the
park, The rest of the colors it keeps inside. She lived with artists and musicians and
writers. One of the artists was working on a light installation and had explained to her the
visible spectrum.

Did you know there are over 100 different shades of green?

She stopped chewing on the red vine. Twisted her body to look to her left. A
surprise of a boy was standing in a diamond of light between the tree shadows. He looked
about her age. Eleven, maybe twelve. He had a skateboard under his arm, a hat with a
cartoon ghost and the words Silent but Deadly scribbled in with a sharpie, and three
jackets tied around his waist. A pencil stuck out from the side of his hatband near his ear.
They eyed each other.

My mom’s an artist. He shrugged.

She flipped herself off the bar. You have a lot of jackets.

He was taking them off, tying the arms around the vertical poles of the jungle
gym. A blue windbreaker, a yellow hoodie, a red snap-front; they made a little tent. You
can come in if you want.

She stood there a minute more, taking in the situation, then dropped to her knees
and scooted inside. The yellow hoodie fell closed behind her. She looked around. The sun
through the windbreaker gave the light a bluish tint, like being underwater. It seemed
warmer inside. Betts dug her fingers into the sand and looked up at the square space of sky overhead. A cloud hovered in one corner.

They come in handy sometimes. He motioned to the jackets. They flagged a little in the wind. You can use them for a lot of things.

Like what?

Oh anything. A hat, a cushion, a disguise, a parachute… We went to Pennsylvania to visit my grandma and I used one for a sled.

Really?

Really. I mean it’s not as good as a real sled, but in an emergency… He shrugged, It worked ok. The red one’s good and slippery.

I went sledding once when I visited my dad in Boston. The hill we went on was really big. But I was only three, so maybe I just thought it was big. Sometimes that happens.

Yeah. He had pulled the pencil out of his hat and was drawing something in a notebook. He looked at her, making up his mind, and then flipped the notebook around so she could see. It looked like a beehive connected by ribbons. I’m gonna build this city someday. Everyone can live here and work together and the only thing people use to get around is skateboards.

Betts pulled off half of her red vine— the unchewed half— and passed it to him. She leaned closer to get a better look. How big of a water supply do you think you’d need for a city that size? … I mean, theoretically…
And so they passed that day. And that summer. And pretty nearly every day after
that until halfway through high school when they decided they liked each other more than
just as best friends and co-conspirators, and started going out and sneaking away to
unearth truths about the feeling of being close to the person whose soul you love above
all others, and making plans that included the words After grad school… When we get
our first house… and on into their first year as undergrads, Milo at Washington State and
Betts at UCLA, long weekends driving to meet in Humboldt or Big Sur, camping out in
the woods, filling each other in non-stop on what they’d read, who they’d talked to, the
way their philosophies were shaping out. Making plans, plans, plans, Milo always
wanting a solid map under their feet, until it seemed like a cage, like a trap, like there was
no room for becoming, only perpetuating what already was, and the only thing to do
inside a cage is escape.

Or maybe that’s just Betts’ stubborn rationale. Because Milo’s not really a rigid
guy. He’s a skater, for chrissakes. Easy as Combinatorial Calculus, as they used to say.
Meaning you can’t really reduce things like that, wriggle them down to simplest terms.
Maybe Betts just got scared of her life being all and only Milo. What if she was wrong?
How could she even judge how she felt or how much she should feel or how much
feelings should play into the rest of her life. She’d never known anything else.

But the parsing of relationships is endless and furious work. She needed to grow
up. They both did. This thought kept surfacing in her as she drove home from their last
camping trip.

I love you, I’ll always love you. But I can’t be us anymore.
Rock, paper, scissors you for it? His stab at lightheartedness. Like this might be a mood that would pass. It was how they had decided things as kids. Whose house to watch a movie at, whether to go swimming or ride bikes, who was asking for the car that weekend…

She kissed him. I was crying but trying to not cry which makes me shake like I have hypothermia. Not this time.

And now there are these letters. Somehow in my lap again. I flip the corners. If I open them I’ll write him back. Or call. Or just go up there. I’ll be pulled in. To this place where everything’s better. You don’t have to be a martyr, my mom tells me. It doesn’t make your fight any more valid. Sandra agrees. You’re allowed to be happy, she tells me, sliding another letter into my glove compartment. Her voice is gentle. Her voice is never gentle. It suddenly occurs to me that she might someday be a mother. Hearts have a shelf life, the gentleness is undoing. I start to shake, Don’t miss your chance.

I shove the letters into the pocket behind the passenger seat. Get out of the car. I’m parked at this old drive in theater. It’s abandoned, like all the other drive ins. This seems inexplicable to me. I climb up onto the hood. Onto the roof of the car. My shadow on the screen is huge. Heat from the car’s exhaust rises and wavers behind my projected self. I have a blanket wrapped around me like a shawl. I raise my arms. I am 45 feet tall and winged. The air around me moves like water.
Chapter 21

:: The man who trusts no one is not to be trusted ::

He didn't bother knocking. Stumbling backward through the door, Bunny in his arms, he called out. Help! Please!

Sal looked around. A small table and plastic chair were both covered by potted cactus and rocks sitting on plates. He thought he might crack in two. Hello? Por favor, ocupamos medico. Is there a doctor? A telephone?

There was a shuffling from the back of the room. A curtain was pushed aside, and a figure stepped into the cool gloom. The figure was large and shirtless and buckling his pants and appeared unhappy to have been disturbed. Que paso, pues?

Sal started talking, but the man wasn't listening. He looked at Bunny, draped around Sal's neck like a bad Aztec mural, and grunted back through the curtain. Te buscan.

He crossed the room without giving Sal another look and walked out the door. A woman appeared at the curtain. She was pinning up a braid, hairpins clamped between her lips, and motioned for Sal to pass through into the back room.

Que le paso?

Sal laid Bunny on the narrow bed and told the woman what had happened, the pregnancy, the vomiting, the long drive, the heat. The woman lit a fire on a propane burner and set something on to boil. She pulled a handful of ice out of a tiny refrigerator and laid the pieces on Bunny's body like Stonehenge stones. One on the forehead, one on
each shoulder, one in the hollow of the throat, one on her belly, a few small pieces in her mouth. She put something in each of Bunny's hands. Eggs.

Eggs? Sal asked.

A cupboard in the corner was full of bottles and boxes and stones and papers and candles that looked homemade. Bunches of herbs hung on the walls. The woman took down one bundle and stuck it in the fire. She was singing something.

Standing in the tiny room Sal felt enormous. If he spread his arms out, he would be able to touch both walls. And he seemed to be growing larger every minute. Or the walls were shrinking. Bunny seemed very far away. Her eyes were open and she was saying something.

What?

The woman pushed something into Sal's hand and opened the curtain, motioning him out. Pa'lla. She said, in a low voice, like old wind, Este's entre mujeres. Between women. She shut the curtain.

Sal paced around the tiny cactus room. He sat down on a rock the size of a truck tire, looked at what the woman had put in his hand. A bottle of orange Crush. He opened it on a nail exposed in the bare concrete wall, drank. The woman was singing. He crept to the curtain. From outside came the sound of a car door slamming.

A rogue thought crossed Sal's mind that the large shirtless guy had come back and was going to make trouble. He stepped outside to ward him off, and stopped. A white pickup sat in a cloud of dust blocking the van's exit. The back doors of the van were open and two men were going through the boxes. Two more men, shirts tied around their head
against the sun, bandanas over their faces, stood in the back of the pickup, ammo belts slung across their chests, rifles pointed at Sal. 8:48. They were early. Shit.


Halcón, one of the men in the truck called.

A man in mirrored sunglasses came around the side of the building. Halcón. It meant hawk. The one they were supposed to meet. He wore slacks and cowboy boots and a gun belt and hip pistol. The two men withdrew their heads from the back of the van. Halcón looked at them. They nodded. He folded his arms across his chest and looked at Sal.

Dijimos que alla, he said, jerking his head toward the rise where they had agreed to meet.

Sal started to explain. My wife... Halcón walked up to him. Leaned into Sal's face. He took the pistol from its holster, tapped it against Sal's chest. Dijimos. Que. Alla. He clicked back the hammer, and jammed the gun into Sal's ribs. Donde estan las llaves?

These weren't desperado resistance fighters. Sal stared at twin reflections of himself, convexed in Halcón's sunglasses. These were arms dealers. Had Asher known? Goddamn you, Ash.

The keys, the mirrored sunglasses repeated, digging the barrel deeper into Sal's ribcage.

Sal reached in his pocket, brought them out. Y el efectivo? The cash?
The mirrored sunglasses laughed. Tell you what, Cabrito. We'll let you keep the garbage. The men pulled the dummy boxes out of the van and dumped them out on the dirt. Halcón punched Sal in the stomach, indifferently but with a swiftness and force that knocked him breathless. Sal bent over, surprised, and found a black slack-covered knee connecting solidly with his face. A hit to the side of his head with the butt of the pistol left him looking at the scene from the white sand earth, a sour glassy sound chiming in his ears.

The two in the truck kept their rifles trained on Sal while the drivers loaded up and drove away.