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about 80,000 words

STRAIGHT TO HELL
by
Colin Cohen

I don't know how I got here. All I know is what I see.

The sun's about to rise, so I don't have much time. I make it out of the barn, and I stumble between the barracks on my bad ankle. I stumble toward the gate, which sets off the motion sensors and the flickering light. My heart is thumping, and desperation mixes with hesitation as I step farther but shorter into the nothingness.

I've now stopped. I'm also looking around, unable to decide which way to go or what to do. So I look for something I really can't see. I look for Rudi, spiked peroxide blonde hair and all. She'd know what to do, or she'd at least fake it. But I'm not her. I'm not larger than life. I'm not strong. I'm not punk. I'm not unconquerable.

Instead of doing I ask. I ask myself how. How a Jewish urban professional got stuck at a fundamentalist Christian men's home, in the middle of a forest.

I don't know the answer. All I know is what I see.

#

I'm in the back of a white SUV, speeding past the Sierra Road onramp to Interstate 15.

Outside under the blistering evening sun there's nothing in front of me — nothing but trees and mountains. I'm suffocating in here. I want out. I want out of the car.

Rudi would get out. She'd force the driver over — violently if necessary — and she'd run. She wouldn't even care where she was running.

She snickers at this. I can hear and see her do this. Sorta. But she can't tell me what to do. So I just sit here and watch. I watch us hurtle into the San Bernardino National Forest, and I watch us climb a hill toward Lytle Creek: a town no one in the hospital could tell me anything about despite it being only 15 miles away. I watch all this from the back seat. There I lean forward, not exactly frightened, but I should be.

I don't even know where I'm going. Sure, I know I'm going to Pastor John's, but I don't know what this means. All I know is the place where I left, and that I'm thankful I left, and that thankful is something I haven't felt in a long time.

I lean forward even more. I lean toward the driver, who looks and talks just like Morgan Freeman. He even chuckles a bit when I ask him if anyone's ever told him that. He chuckles and says, "All the time." He says this just like Morgan Freeman.

Maybe he really is Morgan Freeman, and maybe he's playing Dante's Virgil, and maybe he's guiding me to the inferno. Maybe this is just a movie, and maybe someone will scream cut.

Morgan doesn't say much. He doesn't talk unless spoken to, and even then he says as little as possible — while being as disinterested as possible.

"Have you been here before?" I mutter to him, while gazing into the endlessness encroaching us from everywhere. It looks beautiful, but it's also repulsive. It's like a gilded cage, whose door is closing in on me and fast.

"Sure," Morgan replies in eerie monotone. "I've been."

"What's it like?" I reply back, while feeling myself sinking, both literally and metaphorically.

"It's real nice. They even got a basketball net."

I'm not sure how to respond to this, so I say nothing. I think nothing. I just keep gazing. Maybe I'm looking for her. Maybe I'm looking for Rudi to save me.

Instead, the SUV breaks hard coming around a bend, and it screeches to a stop in the driveway of a small wooden chapel. From there, I can see an unlit Jesus Saves sign in front, and a few shacks behind the chapel on a hill.

I don't want to get out of the car. I don't want to go nowhere, especially when I stare into the blank stares of a half-dozen men on the chapel porch, not far from the basketball net. I don't want to go, but there's nowhere else to go.

#

I'm somewhere else — in a different time and in a different place, and I'm almost a someone else, too. This someone else lies spread out on a bed in a darkened room. I look asleep, but I'm not. The only thing I am is afraid.

I can see her here, too. I can see Rudi standing nearby with her arms crossed. She's pissed. She's so pissed she won't even look at me. But this doesn't change how I feel about her. I've been thinking of her all day. Though I stop. I stop and turn my head, and I check the clock atop an old steamer trunk full of things, and memories, of Europe and possibility.

It's a little after one in the morning. There's no reason to procrastinate, but still I look for one. I look and look, but when none comes, I fall off the bed and step into the kitchen, and I grab what's waiting for me there: a bag of instant charcoal, a lighter, an old frying pan, and some duct tape.

It sounds like the opening of a bad joke, and maybe it is. In this joke, I grab everything and step into the bathroom. I further put the frying pan in the tub and dump a dozen charcoals onto it. Right away, I can smell the lighter fluid the coals have been presoaked in. I can smell it, and I breathe it in.

This isn't the way Rudi would do it. She'd do it far more bloodily, and she'd have a much better reason. But I'm not her. So I flick on the lighter. I flick it on, but I don't light the coals. Instead, I just stand there, for a reason I don't know.

I soon figure out why, and I put the lighter on the sink and step out of the bathroom and my apartment. I live in one of the many buildings in Southern California that looks like a motel.

The kind with a courtyard and units facing each other across it. They're everywhere in LA, but they're especially here in Long Beach.

From just outside my door, I glance around. I glance around the building while smelling the faint smells of the sea — something that's so intoxicating that it helped bring me out here from the east coast more than a decade earlier.

It doesn't take me long to see that every unit on both floors is dark and quiet, including the one next door. The one I was worried about. The one that belongs to a someone who's usually up late, just to hear himself making noise. But not tonight. Tonight he's quiet. Tonight I have no excuse. So I step back into the apartment and into the bathroom, and I tape over the door. I also tape over the medicine cabinet that connects to my neighbor's, through the thinnest of walls.

I'm sure right now I'm gonna hesitate. But I don't. I light the coals. Actually, I scorch my hand more than them. But I keep trying, and I eventually get them burning, and I wait for the inevitable.

But something else happens: my lungs ignite, and I feel pain and desperation. I also feel anger — at being cheated. I was led to believe this would be painless and comfortable, and it's not.

I've done something wrong. I realize this and put out the coals with water — one of the benefits of doing this in a bathtub. I also rip down the tape from the door and rush out of the bathroom — and I suck in some air.

"You're such a fuckup!" I quietly screech at myself.

A silent voice whispers back. It whispers way too loud. It whispers: *Just forget about it.*

I know this voice. I know it well. I've listened to it whenever things go wrong. It's the voice that always tries to make failure tolerable.

Forget about it! Forget about it and try something else! You still have two weeks!

I nod, and I hear my neighbor burst into his bathroom, upset about something. Thinking it's me, I grab the frying pan and run downstairs with it — and I toss the coals into the dumpster outside the building, like the guiltiest of thieves. I also return inside, and I'm pissed — at myself, and my ineptitude. This drives me to try again — this time with only a handful of coals, which I put in the frying pan and carry into my bedroom — and to the bureau by my bed.

Quickly, I light them — this time with ease, and I close the door and all the closets, and again I wait. The fumes aren't as strong as before, but I think they'll be just as lethal. I'm betting my life on it.

I hear something. I hear a noise in the courtyard. It's a cop. It's a fucking cop talking into a walkie-talkie just below me. I'm certain my neighbor has called him, and I'm certain he'll smell the smoke when he comes upstairs, and I'm certain he'll either arrest me or take me to a mental hospital. But I do nothing. I do this because I'm not afraid anymore. I swear I'm not. I just calmly wait.

The sounds of the walkie-talkie continue, along with footsteps. But they're not rising up the stairs. They're leaving the building.

Slowly, the sounds fade, and I fall on top of my bed, and I again wait. I also breathe in the fumes, while feeling my eyes close.

But I can still see her. I can still see Rudi. I can see her crying.

#

Again I'm someplace and sometime else. This time I'm sitting along Ft. Irwin Road, just outside Barstow — in the middle of a sparkling July 4th afternoon.

Even here in the Mojave I can see Rudi. She's sitting across the way — and glaring at me.

It's barren and hot here, more than 110 degrees hot. By this road I've been sitting for more than 5 hours, and I've been in the sun since early in the morning. I have no more water and I'm quickly running out of grapes. But I'm actually calm. The heat no longer bothers me. I'm not even sweating anymore.

If this is how and where, I could've chosen worse. It's beautiful here. It's as beautiful as Barstow is ugly. Especially the mountains surrounding me, drenched by both the bright yellow sun and the deep blue sky. It's all mine. I stand in dominion of it all. There aren't even animals around, or birds, and most of the plants seem dead. But I'm alive. I'm more alive than I've ever been, and I'm at peace, too. I'm comfortable with me.

I hear something: sirens — lots of them. A whole fucking army of them, and they're getting louder, which probably means they're getting closer.

Maybe I'm hallucinating, like I was a few hours ago when I saw Him. When I saw Him leading me toward Him. Or was He leading me somewhere else?

This time I don't think I'm hallucinating. This time I think someone's coming for me, and it's my own fault. I shouldn't have sat by the side of the road. I should've sat deeper in the desert, or continued on to the Rainbow Basin like I had planned, in spite of my ankle and my exhaustion.

But I didn't, and I have to admit something: part of the reason I stayed by the road was that I was curious. Just a little. I was curious if anyone would care. I'm not talking about someone caring enough to help. I'm talking about someone caring at all that someone else was lying by the side of a barren desert road on the Fourth of July.

Many cars have passed in these hours — maybe a hundred, but only a couple have stopped to see if I was all right. This includes the one that came by minutes earlier. I told him I

was fine and he nodded, but I don't think he believed me. Which is why I think the sirens are for me.

This is the moment. Rudi would know what I'm talking about. She's read the same damn Borges story I have. This is the moment he described — the one singular moment in life in which you discover who you really are. I could easily hide from those sirens. I could step into the desert and hide. But will I?

#

I'm inside the SUV again, and I'm making no effort to leave. Nor is Rudi. She looks even more frightened than me. The big tough punk girl from Irvington, New Jersey actually looks afraid.

"This is it," Morgan Freeman says, as matter-of-factly as possible.

This is it.

With all kinds of unenthusiasm, I swing open the back door of the vehicle and force myself outside. I further put my dirty and overstuffed blue backpack over my shoulders and place a large shopping bag in my hand. Which is filled with clothes the hospital gave me, along with paperwork and prescriptions. The latter of which I plan to dump as soon as I can.

Slowly and with a noticeable limp, I step toward the chapel entrance, watched by the men on the porch. They watch me with blank gazes. They watch me as if I were an aberration they've never seen.

I've actually seen this look before. I saw it when I lived in Prague, when my excessively Semitic face contrasted with all the Slavic ones. It contrasted as well later on in Vilnius, when a bunch of Russian teenage boys — from 50 yards away — saw this Semitic face and started chasing me, while screaming "*Zhid!*" — the Russian word for "kike."

I'm contrasting here as well. This time the faces I'm contrasting with are a combination of Hispanic and deep WASP. Though they could be staring at me because I look like an extra from *The Walking Dead*. Worse, actually.

I really don't know which it is or care, so I ignore the stares. I ignore them and reach the chapel porch, and I say to the handful of people perched there, "I'm looking for Pastor John."

"You want Manuel," says a tall gaunt man in his twenties, who's got lots of acne and a chipped front tooth. He further points to the open door of the chapel.

I really don't want to go inside, so I instead look at the SUV, which is backing out of the driveway. It backs out and speeds down Lytle Creek Road, leaving Rudi standing there. She's standing there and giving me a look that says, you're shit out of luck.

With even more unenthusiasm than before, I walk inside the chapel and into a nave that's cooled by two large ceiling fans. It's a small place, with two sets of 10 pews that can hold maybe 50 or 60 people. It's further connected to a narrow dining room, and there I can see the swinging doors of a kitchen. I can also see men. I see about a half-dozen of them sitting around finishing dinner. But I only notice one — in the first pew, just a short distance from me. He's a large old man with big thick glasses, who looks at me with his enormous eyes as if he were trying to recognize me.

Trying to ignore this, I mutter, "I'm new here. I —"

I'm interrupted by a voice. It comes from a smiling man my age who's just exited the kitchen.

"— Welcome, brother!" he calls out, as he struts toward me. He struts toward me as if I were prey.

I kinda force a smile — the kind that hides all kinds of fears — and the man stops. He stops in front of me and gives me a way-too-strong handshake — the kind that hides all kinds of

insecurity. He also grins, exposing more than a few missing teeth. Which makes me think that, while I certainly don't have the best or nicest-looking teeth, I'm fucking Jimmy Carter compared to these people.

"I'm Ted," he tells me. "An assistant here."

"Colin," I reply.

"Collins?"

"Colin."

"Colin. Would you like some dinner, Colin?"

"Sure," I tell him, even though I'm not really hungry. I'm not really anything.

He leads me toward the kitchen, and we pass both men and stares. We also pass a boy of five, who eyes me like I'm from outer space. I eye him, too, while trying to figure out what he could be doing here.

Ted and I continue on. We push our way through the swinging doors, and he offers me a plate with a roast turkey wing, as well as a pair of tacos and some salad.

I take it and myself into the nave, and I start eating in the first pew. There I can see Rudi glowering at me, with her arms crossed. She's doing this because I'm eating meat. But it'd be kinda stupid to refuse it when I can't feed myself. Still, I've given up a decade of vegetarianism, and I'm not proud of it. I'm not proud of anything that has happened to me in the past month, but I'm really not proud of that.

In spite of this, the food is good — better than good, especially after mostly not eating hospital food for more than two weeks.

"You can't eat in the pews," growls a tall aging man with huge jowls, who's sitting on a bench across from me. He's also pointing at me, pointing as if I had crucified Christ myself. I heard someone call him Mike.

Hurriedly, I pick up my plate and sit next to Mike on the bench, which is right next to the pulpit, and again I start eating.

“Hey,” murmurs someone nearby.

I look up, and I see a stocky Hispanic man around 30, whose neck is completely tattooed, and who seems to have some kind of strange markings on his face. Next to him stands the boy, who’s holding the man’s hand and continuing to look at me with astonishment.

“I’m Manuel,” the man says. “The director of the program.”

I rise and shake his hand, and I thank him for letting me stay here, even though I’m anything but thankful.

He tells his son Manny to go outside, and the two of us sit across from each other — and, while eyeing me blankly, he says, “I don’t know how much Pastor John told you about the program and how everything works around here.”

“He mentioned something about going to church everyday,” I say back, while trying to hide my unenthusiasm. Strangely, the church requirement was the least troubling of the things the pastor told me on the phone during our interview.

“Wakeup’s at 7 and breakfast at 7:30,” Manuel begins. “First come, first served. Don’t come, don’t get served. At 8:30, we have Bible study right here until 10, which is when chores start. They last until 3, with a half hour for lunch at noon. Then, you have free time until dinner’s served at 5. This is a good time to take a shower, and we expect you to take one regularly. At 6, at 6 we have church service. Thursdays and Saturdays the service is right here in this room. It’s also here Sunday afternoons.”

“Today’s Thursday, right?” I ask, quite seriously.

“Yeah,” he says. “Wednesdays, Fridays, and Sundays, service is at the pastor’s church down the hill. We all get into a van and drive down there. We also go there Sunday morning for Bible study before having service here.”

“I thought you said Sunday service was down there.”

“We have Bible study down there in the morning, service here in the afternoon, and then another service down the hill that night.

Three times on Sunday?

I again recall that this was the least troubling aspect of living here. I again also see Rudi. I see her in the corner of my eyes. She’s smirking. She thinks this is funny. She thinks it’s hilarious. Though if she were me, she’d be walking out the door. But I’m not her, so I don’t do that. I just want to.

“We also have Bible study here Tuesday night,” Manuel goes on. “But you have Mondays off, apart from Bible study in the morning. There are no chores that day.”

“Anything else?” I ask, while not really wanting to know.

“No alcohol, no drugs, no sex, no smoking of any kind.”

“I knew that.”

“No shorts, no tank tops, no secular music. No cursing. And no personal contact with unrelated women for the entire year you’re here.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“And no phone contact with anyone for 30 days.”

“I knew that.”

I feel a bit numb right now, unable to visualize just how fucked I am. But I can kinda see it on Rudi’s face. I feel so numb that I’m having trouble talking, but somehow I blurt out, “I guess, I guess there’s no Internet access.”

“Nope,” he says.

“What about a library?”

Manuel shakes his head, and adds, “And the only book you’ll find here is the Bible.”

“Town?” I mumble.

“There’s a convenience store next door. But you can’t go there without a graduate of the program going with you. Actually, you can’t leave the property at all.”

“What’s that?”

“If you step even one foot off the property without permission and supervision, you will be asked to leave the program, and the home.”

“Even on our day off we can’t leave?”

“Even on your day off.”

My mind recalls the drive up here into the wild — a drive that went on for lots of miles, and that’s just from the freeway exit in Fontana — a city I never heard of before today. Even if I had the will to leave and could make it down there with my ankle, I’d still be lost — maybe worse than now. This is when I realize something: this isn’t a Christian men’s home, or even a Christian labor camp. It’s a prison.

#

I awake in my darkened bedroom, and I jump to my waist, with my throat on fire. I’m also gasping for air and scared. I’m really fucking scared.

Worst of all, I’m alone. Not even Rudi is here.

Turning my head, I see the smoldering coals on the bureau, and I rise out of bed. Only I don’t have control of my arms and legs, and I collapse onto the floor like a ragdoll.

There I struggle. I struggle for air and I feel pain pouring out and into me from everywhere. Still, I crawl toward the door — the only escape. I move slowly — so slowly that I'm not sure I'll make it. I'm even less sure why I want to make it. But I do.

The fumes aren't as strong on the floor and I reach the door, and I reach up both my limp arms. Barely, I grab the knob and I climb up. Again, I move slowly, but I get to my feet and yank open the door — and I breathe. I breathe hard. I breathe in all the air I can. I breathe while knowing I must've been close to death, and probably would've died if I hadn't woken.

Why did I?

I have no answer, but I refuse to give up after getting so close. Never have I gotten close to this close, and it hasn't been from a lack of trying. I once even put my head in an oven, only to discover that modern ovens can't kill you like that.

I limp back inside the bedroom. I do this using the walls to keep my balance. The fumes are still strong, and again I'm gasping in pain. Instinctively, I slide down the wall to the floor. My lungs and throat are still burning, but not as much. I'm certain I can take it and I'm almost certain that the gas can still kill me.

Again, my eyes close. They close while thinking all kinds of good thoughts. I'm thinking of Rudi.

#

Three of them are coming toward me: a firetruck, an ambulance, and a San Bernardino County Sheriff's car.

It sounds like the beginning of another bad joke, and this joke will soon be here. Rudi's here, too. She's still sitting across the street, and she's gazing at me incredulously.

I wanted to hide from them. I really did. But my body wouldn't listen. It wouldn't budge.

Rudi doesn't believe me, and I don't blame her. I don't believe me, either. I also now know who I really am, and I don't like it.

I stare at her, hoping she can help me. But she can't tell me what to do, and the vehicles stop in front of me. Two paramedics soon exit, along with three firefighters and a cop. The beginnings of yet another joke.

"Are you all right?" the cop asks me.

"I'm fine," I tell him, and it's the truth.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm just resting."

"Where you heading?"

"The Rainbow Basin. I hear it's beautiful there."

"It's gotta be 10 miles from here."

"Closer to 5."

"How long have you been out here?" one of the firefighters ask.

"Awhile."

"Do you have any water?"

"I've got grapes."

"*Grapes?* In this kind of heat, you need to drink a gallon of water for every hour you're outside."

I shrug.

"We could take you to a cooling center," says a female firefighter. "Or to the Del Taco down the road."

“I passed it on the way,” I tell her, with a shake of my head, while recalling the sign out front, which mentioned that it was the very first Del Taco ever. But mostly I recall how much of a struggle it was getting from there to here.

“How about we get you some water?” asks a paramedic.

I want to tell him no. But my body betrays me and says, “All right.”

“And we’d like to take your blood pressure,” adds the second paramedic.

“I’m fine.”

“You don’t look fine. You look like you’re gonna pass out.”

“I’m —”

“ — I’m gonna have to insist,” the cop interjects.

“If you insist.”

The two paramedics return to their ambulance, and the cop asks me for my ID, and I give it to him.

“Do you know what date it is, Colin?” he asks.

“July 4th,” I tell him.

“And the year?”

“2017.”

“Who’s the president?”

“Donald Trump,” I say, with a bit of a grin, thinking I must really sound insane.

He grins, too, and returns my driver’s license. The two paramedics have now returned. One’s carrying two bottles of ice cold water, and the other’s got some kind of portable blood pressure machine.

I take one of the water bottles and start guzzling it, and the other guy puts the blood pressure device on my arm. As he finishes, I take the second bottle of water, and I guzzle that, too.

“Your blood pressure’s through the roof,” he tells me. “You’re about an hour away from a stroke, if that.”

I look at the machine, but I don’t know what the numbers mean, nor care. I just shrug again.

“Do you want to die?” the cop asks.

I don’t reply.

“How about something worse than death?” one of the firefighters says. “How about lying in a bed for the rest of your life, unable to move? Unable to even wipe your ass? Because that’s what’s gonna happen if you have a stroke.”

Once again, I don’t reply. But when the paramedic offers me a third bottle of water, I guzzle it, too.

“We can’t make you do anything,” says the cop. “But before we go, I’d like to see if you can walk. All you gotta do is get up and walk to the firetruck.”

“If I show you I can walk,” I say back, “you’ll leave me alone?”

“Yes.”

I stand up. I do this and say, “I’ve got a sprained ankle.”

“How’d that happen?”

“An accident.”

Slowly, I limp to the truck. I limp there surprisingly well.

“All right,” I say to everyone. “I’m fine.” But I’m not fine, and they all know it. I know it, too. So does Rudi.

“What’s really going on here, Colin?” asks the female firefighter. “No one walks from Barstow to the Rainbow Basin. No one. Especially in this heat and without water.”

“I’m just waiting for the sun to go down,” I insist. “Then I’ll be on my way.”

“It’s not going down for another 4 hours,” barks another firefighter. “*Four hours*. And then you’ll have to worry about coyotes and cougars. Maybe even some mountain lions.”

I try to shrug, but I just don’t have it in me.

“Why are you really here?” the woman asks.

“I’ve got nowhere else to go,” I tell her.

“No home?”

“Not anymore.”

“What about family?”

“No.”

“Friends?”

“I’ve got nothing.”

“You must have something.”

“I’ve got three dollars in my wallet, and about 30 thousand in debt.”

“You came out here to die,” the woman says.

“I came out here because this is the only place I make sense.”

“You came out here to die.”

I don’t answer, but this is still an answer, and everyone knows it, including me.

“I’m gonna give you two choices, Colin,” the cop says. “Either we take you to Del Taco or I take you into custody, for your own protection.”

I don’t know how to reply to this, so I don’t. I just try to figure out what Rudi would do. But not even she has been this fucked, and that’s saying something.

“Well?” the cop demands.

“I can’t choose,” I tell him.

“Then I’ll choose for you.”

He does this by grabbing my arms and pulling them behind my back — and by yanking out a pair of handcuffs.

#

I’ve just finished dinner, and I’m putting my dish, utensils, and a cup on top of a big mountain of others in the kitchen sink, while hoping my chore tomorrow isn’t cleaning them.

The time’s approaching 6:00, and men begin flocking into the nave from all directions, like homing birds. They come through the front and back doors of the nave — and from the dining room. They all flock inside and head toward the back pews, with the first three rows reserved for guests.

A shade beyond dazed, I slither toward the back of the room myself. I slither to the way back — to the farthest back I can go, and it’s still not back enough. There, unlike the padded pews up front, the benches are hard. But I don’t care. I don’t care about anything, especially my comfort. I just sit down. I sit next to a husky guy my height, which is to say he’s short. He’s also got a medium complexion and an infectious smile, and I smile, too. I smile in spite of everything. I smile because he’s the kind of guy who just makes you smile.

“Carlos,” he says to me as he shakes my hand.

I tell him my name and he senses my outofplaceness, and he asks me where I’m from.

“Long Beach,” I say.

“I mean originally,” he says back, with another of his smiles — this one bigger.

“New York. Actually I grew up in New Jersey.”

“I thought so. That’s a cool accent you’ve got. How’d you get out here?”

I shake my head. Not even I know the answer.

“Drugs?” he goes on.

Again I shake my head.

“Booze?”

I shake my head once more.

“Then what?”

“I couldn’t get work. I couldn’t pay for anything. I tried to kill myself.”

“What kind of work do you do?” He asks, not reacting at all to the last part of my statement.

“Computers.”

“So you can hack my phone and shit?”

“Maybe.”

We’re interrupted. This happens when a man in his thirties sits on my right. He’s taller than average and solidly built. He also has dirt on his hands and clothes, and fatigue on his face.

“You work today, John?” Carlos asks.

“Yeah,” John replies, with a heavy nod.

“Doing what?”

“Gutters.”

The pastor mentioned during our phone interview that some guys get to work outside the home, after they’ve reached a certain undefined level of trust. He also mentioned that he keeps half the money, which sounded kind of illegal when he first told me. But now, now it sounds kind of okay, especially as I still only have 3 dollars. Though when I multiply 5 dollars per hour by the maximum number of hours I likely could get over the course of a year and subtract likely expenses it doesn’t come to much. Sharecropper money — just enough to keep me going, just as

long as it was here. Which is when a frightening revelation hits me: I could be stuck here. I could be stuck here forever.

Involuntarily, I listen to the conversation all around me. Everyone's talking about work and the lack of it. Among those talking is a guy named Rick — a large bald man who's recently graduated from the "program," which is what they call what I have just entered. He's graduated, but he can't find a job. He actually sounds extra-stuck, as he has a serious girlfriend in town.

Prison.

I think back to what I thought when Manuel said that I couldn't leave here — that this place is a prison. It really is. It's just missing the walls and the gates. Which makes me think about Siberia. The prisons out there didn't have walls or gates, either. They didn't need them, and for the same reason this place doesn't need them: where would you go?

Some guests start to arrive: a few large and likely related families, all wearing suits and dresses. This includes a preteen boy carrying a guitar case, which he opens by the bench up front just as a heavyset woman sits beside an organ by the chapel entrance. Another pair of boys, both a little older than the guitarist, hustle through the pews to welcome us. They do this by shaking everyone's hand, while trying to pretend they're enjoying it.

I also pretend. I pretend that it really is a pleasure for them to meet me.

Next, the pastor arrives. He struts into the chapel wearing a cheap off-the-rack suit that doesn't quite fit him. I've never seen him before, but it's obvious who he is. He's about my age or maybe a little older. He's also about medium height and balding, with both glasses and a paunch. Though he's not fat. It seems natural on him.

With a sweeping gait, he steps behind the pulpit, and the congregation rises without being told. "Good evening," he says with a deep and booming rural voice. He's also smiling. It seems phony, but I'm not really sure it is.

He tells the organist to begin, and music starts, and everyone starts singing. They sing a song that sounds like it came from a 1930s tent-show revival — the kind Sinclair Lewis would've loved to mock. I would've mocked it, too — back when I was an atheist. Even now it's everything about religion I dislike: dogma mixed in with some ritual, and just a pinch of superstition, without even a hint of honest faith.

The song they're singing is simple and to the point, and repetitive. It's especially repetitive. There are three verses about how great Jesus is and everyone sings these three verses six times — as loud as they can and with as much fervor as they can — before they start singing another song about how great Jesus is.

I lose track of just how many songs they sing about how great Jesus is, especially as they all sound the same, but we eventually sit down and right away the pastor begins his sermon. Like the songs, the sermon's simple and to the point, and repetitive. It's especially repetitive. He tells us we must surrender ourselves to God. Surrender and follow the path He's chosen for us. We must do what He wants, and not what we want.

"You can't get right with yourselves," he pleads with lots of gesticulation, "until you get right with Him. *Until you listen to Him.* You're here today because *you weren't listening.*"

The sermon's actually not bad. It's better than I expected. I want to believe that God has some plan for me. Some plan that will lead me out of this, and that all I have to do is follow it. I want to believe it because I'm so desperate to believe it. Also driving this desire to believe is the pastor. He's a gifted orator. He sweeps you up into his words and into his passion. You can't help feeling pulled toward him, just a little. In this I'm not alone. I look around the room and see that everyone seems just like me, and it's not usual for me to seem like everyone else.

The pastor continues. He does by saying, “Your addictions are just an outgrowth of your disobedience to God. Get right with Him and they will fall. They will fall by the wayside.

Hallelujah!”

“Hallelujah!” many in the congregation cry out, with their right hands held high in the air, as if they wanted to ask a question.

I don’t cry this out or raise my hand. I don’t do anything, especially as I don’t have a substance problem. I don’t have any kind of addiction, unless you count impossible dreams. Knowing this makes me feel even more alone and more out-of-place. I’m out-of-place everywhere, but I really feel it here.

So I think of Rudi. I look for her, too — and I see her sitting in a nearby pew, spiked peroxide blonde hair and all. She’s even more out-of-place here than me, in spite of her addictions. This outofplaceness is choking her. It’s choking her even more than me.

The pastor suddenly roars. He’s become angry — out of nowhere. The day before, when I first discovered this was a Pentecostal church, I wondered if people here talked in tongues, like I’ve heard Pentecostals do. Instead, he’s shaking all over with fury, and he’s screaming as loud as he can. He screams: “The only path to salvation is through Him! Him! But you — you’re not listening! You’ve turned away from Him. The path you are following is *away* from Him, and it’s leading you nowhere but to Hell! *Straight to Hell!*”

“Don’t look at the next guy — I’m talking to you! *You!* And don’t sit there thinking you have choices in the matter, either! You don’t have any choices! You don’t have options! It’s either His way or no way!”

The pastor right now looks and sounds just like Sam Kinison, the dead comic — not just the volume but the accent, too. Only he’s not telling a joke. He’s telling a lie. He’s trying to frighten us into faith. Which I find repulsive. I find it so repulsive that I want to scream, too — at

him. I want to tell him that he's full of shit. I want to tell him that God gave us free will, and that He didn't give it to us just so we wouldn't use it — and He certainly wouldn't damn us because we did. He wouldn't damn us, period. He wouldn't even damn the pastor. A loving God couldn't even damn him.

I want to stand up. To stand up and run out — out of the chapel and out of the grounds and out of everywhere. But I don't. I just sit there. I sit there boiling while realizing that this is just day one of at least three hundred and sixty five. 365 days of listening to this shit, every single day — three times on Sundays.

The shouting ends. It ends just as suddenly as it started, and the pastor tells us that it's time for silent prayer. A handful of people react to this by rushing to the bench by the front of the nave. They're almost racing against each other to get a spot closer to God, or to the pastor, whichever comes first.

When they get there, they kneel, with not just their heads down but their entire torsos. Though others in the audience just lower their eyes and clutch their hands, and I do the same. I do this not because I'm going to pray, but because I want to be respectful, just as I promised the pastor when he agreed to take me in.

The music starts once more. But this time it's far more somber, even if it is just as repetitive, if not more so. Only one person sings: a woman, and her voice echoes. It echoes both off the walls and inside me. It's both beautiful and haunting, and so is the song. Gone is all the gratuitous adulation. In its place is a song about desperation — about desperately seeking faith and love. It mesmerizes me, and prayer is no longer an act — I'm doing it. I'm really doing it. I swear I am. I'm asking God — I'm begging Him for help, with tears coming out of my eyes. I want Him to lead me — to lead me somewhere, just as long as it's out of here.

Out of nowhere, a large hand grips my shoulder — firmly but kindly. I'm startled at first, but it feels good, in spite of myself, and I'm almost sad when he takes his hand away.

The music goes on. It does even after I'm prayed out, and I open my eyes and see her. I see Rudi in the pew across the way. Even she's praying. She's praying with her body shaking slightly, and streaks of black mascara running down her powder white cheeks. If only the pastor could grip her shoulder, too. But he doesn't even see her. I don't even really see her.

I wipe my eyes. I wipe them feeling there's hope, even if I don't know why I feel this. But I also feel weak. I feel like I'm not in control.

The men begin to rise to their feet. They also flock out of the nave, leaving much like how they came, like homing birds. A handful greet the pastor, and I do the same. I also introduce myself, and I can tell that he doesn't recall me, even though we just talked on the phone. Still, I'm feeling so emotional that I open up to him. I tell him that I'm struggling.

He says that I can talk to anyone I want about it here. But apparently not with him, as he's walking out the door. He does this while reciting some trite sentiment about staying strong.

I feel like I've been kicked in the stomach. I feel it both physically and emotionally. I feel like I've been played with for two long hours on a theological rollercoaster. But at least I no longer feel so weak. I feel like I want to vomit, all over him.

"It's time to do intake," says brother Ted from behind me. "Get your stuff."

I get my stuff. I get it from just outside the nave, and I follow Ted into a booth in the dining area.

"You don't got any contraband, do you?" he asks while staring at my things with lots of unenthusiasm.

I think about mentioning my pepper spray, but I don't. I'm not sure why. Maybe I feel I'll need it.

“The pastor on the phone,” I instead say, “he said something yesterday about not being allowed a phone for the first 30 days.”

“That’s right. Give me your phone.”

I reach into my backpack and pull out two phones: one’s an expired prepaid fliptop and the other’s a cheap Android with no plan at all, which I once used for developing apps but now only use for WiFi browsing. Neither of them do I need, especially here.

Ted takes both and hands them to a man around 60, who has both a dour expression and a big moustache.

“This is Chuck,” Ted says. “He’s an assistant, too. He also runs the Bible study class and is officially in charge of contraband.”

Chuck chuckles at this a bit. He does this while eying me warily. He looks as if he’s already decided that he doesn’t like me, which is fine, as I don’t like me, either.

“Remember, Chuck,” jokes Ted with a grin, “these are Collins’s phones, not yours.”

“I’ve got a Samsung,” Chuck growls under his breath, before walking off with my devices.

“Do you have an EBT card?” Ted asks me.

“No,” I reply, with lots of queasiness, as getting food stamps is not something I want. It’s also not something I ever thought I’d need. I’m also not too happy about being part of what seems a dubious scheme. It was actually the one requirement of coming here that made me question coming here.

“We’ll get you one soon enough — probably Monday. Did Pastor tell you what we’re gonna do with it?”

“Yeah.”

“All right. I’ll show you to your bed.”

“The pastor said that if I’m struggling I can talk to one of you.”

“Sure. Anytime.”

“I’m struggling. I’m struggling right now.”

“Struggling with what?”

“Everything. I don’t feel like I belong — here or anywhere. And I don’t feel like I can make it. Here or anywhere.”

“It’s gonna be all right. All of us — me, Manuel, Chuck — all of us were where you are right now.”

“It’s hard to believe.”

“Believe. That’s the whole point: to believe.”

“How, how am I ever gonna get out of here? Even if I make it through the year, how am I gonna leave afterward? How am I ever gonna get a job?”

“We’ll help you get a job. We’ll help you with everything.”

“You will?”

“Sure.”

Without waiting for a reply, Ted leads me to my quarters — out the back door of the chapel and up a small dark hill toward a barn. This triggers motion sensors, and tiny Christmas-tree-like lights flicker on, but they do little to illuminate the area.

We’ve now stopped. We’ve stopped in the threshold of a small barn, and Ted turns on the light from inside the door, and I see that the place is crammed with bunk beds, with barely any space for anything else. There’s also wooden scaffolding leading to the second floor.

“The only free beds are up there,” says Ted, while pointing up into the darkened netherspace. Then, after glancing at my emaciated frame, he adds, “You think you can make it?”

“I can do it,” I tell him, before struggling upward with my things. I’m struggling so much that I think I’m gonna fall at any moment.

“You sure you’re gonna be okay?” Ted asks, with just a hint of glee.

“I’m sure,” I mumble, as I slowly lift myself and my things onto the second floor, where I lie while trying to catch my breath.

“Your bed’s the top bunk on the left,” Ted calls out.

I nod even though he can’t see me, and I put my things on an empty bunk next to mine.

“Where do I get sheets and stuff,” I utter, while staring at the stripped bed.

“I’ll show you,” he utters back, and I slowly make my way back to the ground floor, and we exit the barn and go a little ways down the hill before turning left. There, a few steps away, sits a huge and bald heavysset man, who looks a little past comatose. This man is sitting in front of a pair of noisy washing machines.

Right away, I notice there are no dryers. Instead, clothes hang from everywhere.

“Paul will get you whatever you need,” Ted tells me before scurrying off.

Paul does. He not only gets me sheets, a pillow, and a blanket, but he also gets me a towel, as well as some clothes I need. He further shows me the signup sheet for laundry and promises to sign me up for late Saturday afternoon. He promises this with a high-pitched voice that belies his appearance.

Carrying my new things, I return to the barn, and on the second floor I see a thin and morose Hispanic guy who’s holding a large spinning fan. He’s also standing in front of a lower bunk across from mine, which is covered from top to bottom with an old Los Angeles Raiders blanket.

“How’s it going?” I say to him, without expressing any desire to know the answer.

“Farting,” he replies.

“What?”

“Someone in this barn farts. They fart all fucking night. And it stinks in here.”

“It happens.”

He doesn’t respond, and I make my bed, and then — having nothing better to do — I return to the chapel and to the nave. There a handful of young guys are talking about sex — mostly their lack of it. I recall seeing a few of them during service. An hour earlier they had their hands raised and their eyes closed while murmuring “Jesus,” and now, now all they can talk about is getting laid.

I notice someone else in the nave. He’s Hispanic and about my age. He’s also quiet and sitting in the first pew looking lost. He looks a lot like how I feel.

“I’m new, too,” he says, with just a bit of a smile. The kind of smile that hides lots of things, and none of them good.

“Yeah?” I say back, and we exchange names. His is Roberto.

“You came from the hospital,” he goes on.

“How’d you know?”

“I saw the white SUV. I came in it yesterday.”

“You were in the psych ward?”

“Yeah. Were you? I don’t recall seeing you there.”

“I was in Closed West.”

“I was in Open West.”

“Right next to each other.”

“Yeah.”

“I was in Open West originally,” I say to him.

“Yeah?” he says back.

“Afterward, I could see you guys in the courtyard through the fence.”

“Why did they transfer you?”

“I was a bad boy.”

“I bet.”

“So,” I whisper, out of earshot of everyone else, “what do you think about this place?”

“I don’t know,” he whispers back. “All I know is that a week ago I was drunk and lying in a parking lot down in Fontana. And now I’m not. What do you think about it?”

I don’t even know what to tell him, or myself. All I know is that I’m afraid, and I’m not even sure of what.

#

I’m lying on the floor.

I’m lying on the floor of my bedroom in Long Beach early in the morning, and I’m feeling all kinds of misery. I went to sleep thinking I’d never wake up again, and here I am again. Here I’ve failed again. My right ankle’s also throbbing for some reason, but this is nothing compared to realizing that the charcoals haven’t killed me.

I rise to my shaky feet wanting to explode. I want to explode just like Rudi would. But I don’t, because I’m not her. Instead, I just hop to the bureau, where I see that the coals are out.

Furiously, I grab the frying pan and hop to the bathroom, where I flush the coals down the toilet. I also notice that the entire apartment reeks of charcoal and lighter fluid. So I open all the windows and turn on all the overhead fans, and I go to bed, trying to sleep away everything. Not just the previous night, but everything.

This doesn’t work. I awake in the late morning and it’s still there — the reek, especially. I can’t even get rid of it by cleaning the place with ammonia. Desperate, I take a long hot shower with the bathroom door wide open, imagining the steam will tame the stink.

It doesn't.

It's now midday. I get out of the bathroom, and I don't even get dressed, even though I always get dressed, even when I have nothing to do. Today I just put on a pair of boxers and hop into bed.

I should be hungry, as I'm usually hungry. But I'm not. I'm not at all. I just grab my Android phone and watch a movie on YouTube called *All Nighter* that not even J. K. Simmons can save. It's all about this aging alpha-male trying to track down his daughter in LA for no reason at all, with the help of her beta-male ex-boyfriend. By the time the film ends, all I can think about is buying more charcoal.

It's still early, and I see that some idiot has posted the complete *Highway to Heaven* series on YouTube, and I start binge-watching. I do this not because the episodes are good, but because they remind me of a time when I thought they were good.

I also check my email. I check it in between videos, even though I've long given up hope of being saved by a miracle. So when none comes I'm not disappointed.

Mercifully, the sun starts to set. But this is all that has changed. I'm still watching *Highway to Heaven* episodes and I'm still not hungry. I just watch and watch until my eyes become weary and I fall asleep.

Morning comes. It does and I go back to watching videos and to not eating. I do this all day and into the next day. For three days I've barely gotten out of bed and I haven't eaten at all, and I wonder if I can starve myself to death before the end of the month.

I think I got this idea from Rudi. It didn't work for her, so it's hard to believe that I can make it work for me. But it's worth a try. Right?

Out of nowhere, I get some mail. I mean, some real email, from a real human. It's a cryptic message from an Amazon recruiter in Seattle. He says that they have a special project —

something to do with embedded systems. He says that it's a project that would benefit from my "expertise" — a project he can't discuss over email.

I'm skeptical, for many reasons. First, I can't imagine what would drive an Amazon recruiter to contact me unsolicited, especially as I have no experience in embedded systems. But, more importantly, I know I'd never get the job, no matter how perfect I am for it. I know this because I actually do have in-demand skills. I know how to program computer graphics, and animation, too. I'm even good at it. Right now, there are more than 100 jobs in the Los Angeles area matching my skills, and many of them pay six-figure salaries. But I will get none of them. I know this because I have gone on many interviews in the past months, and it's always the same. I'm always sitting in a room with a much younger than me hiring manager or engineer. I know I can do the work. They know it, too. I can see it on their faces. Yet I can also see on these very same faces that they will never hire me — whether it's because of my age, my unorthodox background, or something I can't even guess at. But the reason I'm most skeptical about this Amazon "opportunity" is that I have no money left and even less time to get some, and I know not even Amazon can move fast enough to change this. The whole thing seems like a big tease from God, so that He can later stick the knife into me that much farther.

Still, I have nothing better to do and less to lose, so I exchange messages with the recruiter and we arrange a phone interview for the following afternoon at 1:00 — with me not allowing even a bit of hope to seep into my head.

Instead, I continue watching videos. I watch and sleep and watch some more, and Thursday somehow arrives. It arrives and I'm still not eating and I'm still watching YouTube. But at least I have a little something to look forward to.

It's early still, so I watch another movie. I watch a movie about Attica, starring Samuel L. Jackson, who's in at least 50% of the movies Hollywood makes. Not that this is necessarily a bad thing.

The movie ends. It does and it's about a half-hour before the interview. So I boot up my computer and I pour myself a glass of water, so that my mouth won't be dry when I talk to the guy.

One o'clock finally comes. It does but there's no call or message from the recruiter. Nor is there one by 1:30, and I realize that he's either playing games with me or the interview just doesn't matter to him. Or both. Or perhaps he's just discovered his mistake in contacting me. It doesn't matter which, and I return to bed and to YouTube — this time watching the remake of *Sabrina* — the one with Harrison Ford. Which is kinda good, or at least better than I expected, and “better than I expected” is something.

The movie ends. It does and even though I see that the recruiter has called and emailed me with both an apology and an almost unlame excuse, I don't contact him back. I know when I'm licked, and I know no one can change this. Not even Amazon. Instead, just for laughs, I Google “how to hang yourself.”

#

The ambulance is speeding down Ft. Irwin Road.

There's actually a good reason why it's called Ft. Irwin Road. There's actually a Ft. Irwin at the end of it. But we're going in the opposite direction. We're going toward Barstow, and we're going there with the sirens blaring even though this isn't exactly an emergency. As for me, I'm in the back strapped to a gurney, with my one good dress shirt splattered with blood from the paramedics' IV.

“How old are you?” he asks.

“Fifty-one,” I tell him.

“He’s old!” the guy screams to his colleague driving the ambulance — for what reason I cannot imagine. But it doesn’t exactly cheer me up. Though things could be worse. A little worse. At least the cop didn’t handcuff me. He probably thought I was too weak to make a fuss, and he was probably right.

We’re now going up a hill, which isn’t surprising as Barstow is made up of hill after hill after hill. On top of this one sits the Barstow Community Hospital — the smallest hospital I’ve ever seen — where I am told I’ll spend the next 72 hours under observation.

The ambulance stops by the emergency room entrance, and the two paramedics take me and the gurney out of the ambulance, and they wheel me into the emergency room. They do this while trying to lift my spirits.

“You need to look on the bright side,” one of them says.

“The bright side?” I ask, while glancing at all the blood on my shirt.

He shrugs, but the other guy tells me: “Yeah — the bright side. You could be dead right now. Or had that stroke.”

“This is the bright side?” I tell him back, and he shrugs.

We continue moving. We move through a corridor, and I see the stares of nurses and other members of the hospital staff, and these stares only become more intense when the paramedics tell them why I’m here.

One of these nurses responds by directing my two guides to a room, and they wheel me there.

“Things can only get better,” one of them tells me, while sounding more pollyannaish than Pollyanna herself.

“Better?” I mumble.

“You never know,” the other one says. “Success might be just around the corner.”

We turn a corner. We do this and they wheel me into an examining room. They also transfer me from their gurney to the one that’s in the room.

“Good luck,” one of them says as they leave, as if that’s all I’ve been missing.

They’re soon replaced. They’re replaced by a big huge nurse, who asks me what happened.

Reluctantly, I tell him my story, and he recites the same kind of tripe the paramedics had been reciting. He does this while taking my vitals. He also lets me know that not that long ago he was a homeless crack addict in Las Vegas.

“If I can turn it around,” he tells me, “anyone can turn anything around. That doesn’t mean it’ll be easy. You’ll probably have to start from the bottom, if not below it. But it worked for me.”

I don’t say a thing.

“Take off your sunglasses,” he adds, sounding a bit annoyed.

I didn’t even know they were on. They’re broken anyway — something that happened to me on the way to the desert. So I take them off and I ask him to turn off the TV, which is playing *The Simpsons* just above me.

“You won’t be here long,” he says.

A doctor now enters the room. She enters and the nurse tells her what happened, and she asks me, “What drugs have you been taking?”

“I don’t take drugs,” I tell her.

“I mean, for your depression.”

“I haven’t been taking any drugs.”

“Who’s your psychiatrist?”

“I don’t have one.”

She seems shocked by this, and she and the nurse go into the corridor together. He then comes back, and he wheels me into the hallway, where he says to me: “You got three days here. After that it’s up to you.”

I don’t reply, and he wheels me into a small room across from the nurses station. The room’s empty apart from a gurney. I mean, it’s completely empty.

He tells me to get on the gurney. I do this, and another nurse comes in. She comes in carrying a gown and some plastic bags, and she tells me to change into the gown and empty my backpack into the bags.

“What about my grapes?” I ask.

“We’re gonna have to throw those out,” she replies.

“All right.”

I do what she says, and she puts my empty and dirty backpack into a second plastic bag, and takes both away. I’m now alone, and not knowing what else to do, I lie on the gurney and notice that a young woman in green scrubs is staring at me from a stool just outside the door. She keeps staring. She stares at me for hours. She stares until a guy takes her place, and then he stares. All they do is stare, though other members of the staff do occasionally come in to check my temperature and my blood pressure and my IV.

I’m so tired. I’m tired and I want to go to sleep, but this is impossible with all the light from the corridor. It’s also cold in the room and the gurney is hard and I want to go back to the desert. I want to go there and hide this time, and have that stroke the paramedics warn me about. But I can’t do any of this. I can’t do a thing.

Then, then I see her.

It's dark in the barn. I mean, it's totally dark, and it's loud, too — from the snores of all the men packed inside. I'm not even sure I can count them all.

Along with the sounds are smells, and not good ones. There is also oppressive heat, and though I'm exhausted I can't even begin to sleep. I just lie here. I lie here on the top bunk, waiting for the sun to rise, or for something better. Hopefully, something better.

Neither comes, nor does Rudi, no matter how hard I try to will her to come — and the snoring just gets louder and the smells just get worse and the heat just gets hotter.

Finally, seeing a bit of light pushing its way behind the night, I climb off the bunk as quietly as I can. I do this and almost fall. This happens when I hear the sound of a rooster crowing — something I thought was only apocryphal.

I've now reached the floor. I get there and dress, putting on the same clothes from the day before, and I climb down the scaffolding as quietly as I can, and I scamper out of the barn — almost thankful for the fresh air and the coolness of the morning.

I don't know what time it is, nor do I care. I just limp down the hill, setting off the motion detectors and the lights. I do this until I reach the chapel, which I enter through the dining room. There I see five men sitting at a table talking and drinking coffee. I also see an old pot sitting on top of an even older wooden stove.

"It's cowboy-style," one of them says to me when he sees me staring at the pot.

I don't get any. Not because it's cowboy-style. I don't even know what this means. I don't get any because I don't drink coffee. I don't smoke cigarettes, either — or do anything else unhealthy. I rarely even drink alcohol anymore, and the last time I smoked pot Bush was president. H. W. Bush.

Yet here I am.

Like the day before, the men in the kitchen stare at me with blank gazes, though now there's a tinge of dislike mixed in with it. I ignore this, and I enter the men's room across from them.

There's actually a women's bathroom next to it — a women's bathroom in a men's home — or labor camp, or whatever you want to call it. What's more, we can use this women's room whenever there aren't actual women around. But it seems strange to do so. Though I regret not doing so at once, because the men's room stinks. I can't even describe it. The smell is not shit or piss, but some artificial odor meant to mask the smells of both, while only making both worse. There's also no soap or towels, and the water just trickles out of the rusty washerless faucet, and it only trickles out cold. But it's more than all right for what I want to do right now. Which is to comb through my greying brown curls. I do this with my wet fingers, and I stare at myself in the dirty and cracked mirror. I look thin — really thin, and old. I especially look old. I look many days dead, and I don't feel much better.

Quickly, I finish up. I do this and exit, and I see that the men are still sitting there — still talking and still drinking their cowboy-style coffee. Though now they're ignoring me. Which is fine. I wish I could, too.

I'm a bit hungry, so I grab an apple from a big bowl in the center of the table and I take a big bite of it — and I limp out through the chapel's front door. There I see Lytle Creek Road — the one that leads out of the forest all those miles away. Seven all together. I asked someone the night before. It's seven miles to Fontana. But it might as well be a thousand.

Slowly, I move forward. I move to the edge of the driveway and get a better look at the road, and it really does look a thousand miles long. Still, I wonder what would happen if I took that one step onto it.

I don't know. I don't know what would happen, and that's the problem. So, I turn my head — toward the convenience store next door. The one Manuel was telling me about the day before. It's called The Scotland Store, and another person here told me that it's an odd combination of convenience store and bar. Even odder is why they would put a house full of recovering addicts next to it.

Though I quickly figure this out. It even makes sense, given the pastor's words the night before. He thinks addiction is just a choice, just like everything else, and just as long as you choose God, you won't choose anything else.

I choose to limp. I limp behind the chapel. I limp there because there's nowhere else to limp. Right away, I see some free weights and a rooster coop, where the rooster is still crowing despite it being long past sunrise. Which makes me think that perhaps I'm just assuming roosters don't do this past sunrise. Perhaps it's this assumption that is actually apocryphal.

Near the coop is a steep hill. For some reason I decide to climb it. I climb it despite my sore ankle. I climb it even though I feel like I'm gonna fall at any moment. Maybe that's why I keep doing it.

Eventually, I reach the top, and I see a ramshackle volleyball net and the beginnings of one of the many mountains surrounding us. It's high, the mountain. It's so high I wonder how far it reaches. I also wonder how far I can hike up it before leaving the property, and the so-called program. But the only hiking I do is down the hill. Actually, it's too steep to hike. I run down it.

At the bottom, I decide to work out a little. I put a 20-pound cylinder on a chest press bar while trying to remember the last time I lifted, or did any exercise besides walking.

I can't. I can't remember many things of late, like names and books and historical facts, or when I last exercised. But I guess this is the least of my problems. Right now all I care about is finding the other weight. The one for the opposite side of the bar. As I look for it, I see a man

in his early thirties walking toward me, with a fitness magazine in his hand. He's one of the men who was in the dining room ignoring me. He's tall and slender and intelligent looking. The night before he briefly introduced himself, in the back of the pews. He has a kind of southern twang and I think his name is Mark, or another of those apostle-sounding appellations.

He doesn't acknowledge me, and I do the same. I just continue looking for the weight. Finally, I find it, and I pick it up, but as I return to the bar, I see Mark removing the weight that I had just put on it, and placing it on a curling bar. So I think of saying something. I really do.

Instead, I just drop the weight. I drop it and wander off, and I keep wandering until I reach the other side of the chapel, by the barn. There I notice the washing machines, and I wander over to them and see that Paul unsurprisingly hasn't added my name to the laundry list. So I do it myself. At the same time, I hear a sound.

Spinning around, I see a big goat locked up in a tiny makeshift pen. He seems to be smiling at me, so I seem to smile back, while wondering what they could be doing with a goat, especially a male one. Perhaps they're just torturing him, like they're torturing the rest of us. Perhaps he's no different than the rest of us. He's certainly no different than me: stuck in someplace he was never meant to be, for no good reason at all.

Glancing around, I notice a box of Wheat Thins on top of one of the washing machines, and I feed the goat some of them. Though this is interrupted. It's interrupted by a cowbell, and I see people heading into the chapel. I see this and follow them.

#

I'm climbing out of bed.

I've done this many times during the past 5 days, but this is the first time I'm getting dressed. I'm doing this because for the first time in 5 days I'm almost hungry, and I have no food in the house.

This is what also leads me to leave my apartment. I do this and hop down the building stairs, trying to put as little pressure as possible onto my ankle. Still, each step brings pain. Though this is nothing compared to the queasiness I feel when I reach the bottom. I had no idea how weak I was. My head is lighter than air. I think it's gonna rise into the clouds.

Limping, I start to make my way to a Vons supermarket a mile away. I have to stop frequently and for short periods. I even sometimes sit on the ground. I sit there while watching all the homeless people. I watch them do nothing. They're just existing, and barely doing that, and I wonder if I'll be one of them soon — not just without a home but without purpose, too.

Finally, I reach the supermarket. I reach it and buy a cheap frozen pizza, and I head home. Though, just as I'm about to cross Alamitos Avenue, I'm stopped. I'm stopped by a strange little man who smiles at me and says, "I hope you will soon feel better." He says this with sincerity, and I thank him and I continue limping home.

It takes me a long time to get there, with lots of stops along the way. But I get there, and I walk up the building stairs, and surprisingly it hurts less walking up them than down.

"Hi, Colin!" Tiffani calls out. She's the building manager, and she calls this out to me from the ground floor as I walk to my door, oblivious to all that's happened to me and all that will happen. Though she will soon know something, one way or the other.

"Hi," I mutter, before rushing inside my unit. There I heat up the oven and return to the living room, where I glance at the eviction notice on the coffee table. Strange how I have a coffee table when I don't drink coffee.

Interestingly, they're not evicting me because I'm late with the rent. I haven't been late once in the 13 years I've lived here. I've never been late in making a payment for anything in my life. They're evicting me because they're renovating my unit.

They've been renovating the building in stages and for a long time. They've already thrown out a decorated Vietnam veteran with Parkinson's Disease — a man who literally had no place to go. They also threw out a couple who were about to give birth. The woman prematurely went into labor a few days before they were to leave and there were complications, so the man begged for an extra week. Not for a free extra week — he was going to pay for it. Still, they said no, and the irony is that they didn't even start renovating their unit for another six months.

So they had no qualms about throwing out a 13-year resident with the standard 60-days notice. Though the joke's on them, as I can't pay any days.

I smirk a little at this. I especially smirk at how Tiffani waited until I was out on my normal evening walk along the beach before putting the eviction notice on my door — on a Saturday no less. She couldn't even hand it to me and tell me the news personally. 13 years there didn't even warrant this.

Trying not to think about this or anything at all, I eat. I eat the cheap frozen pizza. It doesn't feel like my first meal in 5 days. It feels normal, and it tastes good. It tastes so good that I think I may not even try to kill myself that night.

Though I do it anyway. But it's another of my lamer attempts. No matter how hard I tie the sheet around my neck it won't work. Nor will it work by tying the other end onto the bedpost and yanking myself forward. I need to actually hang myself from something.

But where? I ask myself. I already tried the door, and in many different ways — with the same result.

An epiphany suddenly comes to me: I can do it somewhere else, and I even have an idea where.

#

It's late at night at the hospital.

But it's mostly no different than this afternoon. The light is still in my eyes and someone is still watching me, and it's cold and the gurney is hard. But there is one difference. One big difference. Rudi is with me.

She's been taking me on a ride — a ride through her life. It's one I've been on before, but I never tire of it. It's a ride in which I get to live through her. I become her. I become everything I'm not: strong and punk and unconquerable.

Though, just underneath these attributes, Rudi's not much different from me. She's just as frightened as me, and she's just as much alone. But this only makes the ride better, as I get to experience how this big tough punk girl from Irvington, New Jersey finds herself. I experience her first blush. Her first kiss. Her first tears. Her joys and triumphs are mine, and so is her pain and tragedies. Through her I finally get to live and to cry and to be happy.

I never want to get off this ride.

Suddenly, it's midday. My face is wet but everything else is the same: the same lights, the same stares, the same cold and the same hard.

"Do you want some lunch?" asks a nurses aide, who's got a tray of food in his hand.

I shake my head.

"You didn't eat breakfast," he goes on.

"I didn't," I affirm.

He nods and exits, and he puts the tray on the counter of the nurses station. He further joins the banter all around him while continuing to stare at me. This banter has been going on since I got here. They talk constantly. They talk about money and salaries and the newest drink at Starbucks. They talk about everything but us. Patients are just inanimate objects to them, like bedpans and thermometers. We're a function of their job and nothing more, just like computers were once for me.

I've learned a lot about nurses in the 20 hours I've been here. There's a hierarchy I never knew existed. At the bottom are the aides. They wear green scrubs and do menial work, like watching people like me. They can also take people's temperatures and blood pressure. Then, there are the LVNs. They are actually nurses, and wear a pinkish-blue scrub. At least I think that's the color. LVNs can do everything aides do and they can also take blood and give IVs. Finally, there are the RNs. They wear blue scrubs and can do everything LVNs do, and they can give medicine. They are the top dogs, and well paid for it.

Somehow I don't think any of this information is gonna help me.

Someone's passing by. A someone I see all the time. She's blonde and about my age. I don't know what she does, but I know she's not a nurse. I know this because she's not wearing scrubs. She's well dressed and everyone shows her nominal respect.

Someone else has now come to my door. She's a large woman in a white uniform, and she's smiling meekly at me.

"I'm Jessica," she says, as meekly as she smiles. "I'm the dietician here. I hear you're not eating."

"I'm not hungry," I tell her.

"We can make you anything you want."

"I don't want anything."

"You have to eat."

"Not really."

"What's wrong? I heard you wanted to kill yourself."

Reluctantly, I tell her my story, and surprisingly she's the first person who listens. I mean, she really listens. She also speaks no triteness afterward. She even cares. She cares even though it's not her job to care.

“Can, can I stop by tomorrow?” she asks after we finish our talk. “Maybe for lunch?”

“Sure,” I say.

She smiles again — a little stronger than before — and leaves. She does this and I return. I return to the light and to the stares and to the cold. But mostly I return to Rudi. I return to her and take that ride once more.

#

It’s time for breakfast, cowboy style.

A dozen men including me have lined up in front of the chapel kitchen with our plates and utensils. We do this and Sean — a stout bald man in his thirties — says from inside the kitchen, “Someone lead us in with a prayer.”

“God make us worthy for what we are about to receive,” utters Tony — the tall guy with bad acne and a chipped front tooth I met the day before on the chapel porch.

“Amen,” everyone but me utters back, and Sean starts serving us one-at-a-time inside the kitchen. The line moves fast, and it’s soon my turn. I enter the kitchen and look at what’s available, and I say to him: “Pancakes and sausage.”

“No eggs?” he replies, with not only surprise but also with a big spoonful of scrambled yellow mess in his hand.

“No eggs.”

He looks at me as if I had insulted him, but I don’t care. I just take my meal and take a seat at the dining room table, across from someone I recognize. His name’s Henry, and he’s old and feeble. He actually has a hunchback — something I thought only happened in fiction. I recognize Henry from the San Bernardino Community Hospital, where we spent many days and nights waiting together. He recognizes me, too, and he both nods and smiles.

I nod back, and I notice a bandage on his hand. “What happened?” I ask, while pointing to his wound.

“A black guy beat me up,” he mumbles.

For a moment I think about asking him what the man’s skin color had to do with him getting beaten up, but I quickly overcome this urge. I do so because this isn’t my first encounter with racism in what they call the Inland Empire, and it’s far from the worst. At the same time, I realize that there are 30 men here, and not one black guy. Which is strange, as there is no shortage of them in San Bernardino. What makes this even stranger is that Pentecostalism was actually founded by a black minister, and in many ways was founded in reaction to the racism of early 20th-century America.

I suddenly remember something. I remember that I met a black guy who was here, so I know they’ve had black guys. But I also know that he wasn’t a typical black guy, and that he’s not here now, and that there must be a reason why he’s not here now, or any other black guy.

“Pass the salt, please,” someone asks from the other end of the table.

I pass it, and I notice glasses in front of everyone, and I look around the kitchen cabinets for one of my own. But I can’t find a clean one. So I wash one from the mountain in the sink and fill it with water from one of the two coolers nearby. Now I’m like everyone else. Almost.

Quickly, I finish, and I put my things in the mountain behind me, while once again hoping that my chore isn’t cleaning this mountain. Then, while noticing that I still have time before Bible study, I go back to the barn for my toiletries, which I bring back to the dining room. This time I use the women’s bathroom. Which is much cleaner and smells better. It even has some watered down hand soap. Though there are also no towels and instead of only cold water, there is only hot. Which makes brushing my teeth unpleasant. But I do it anyway and shave, using the soap as shaving cream.

Afterward, I return the toiletries and return to the chapel — and I sit in the first pew of the nave while waiting for Bible study to begin. But I’m early. I’m way early, so I look at a nearby Bible and think of something, something not exactly from the Bible. I think of something Meister Eckhart once said: “In the prophet *Hosea* our Lord says: ‘I will lead the noble souls into the desert and will speak to their hearts,’ one to one, one from one, one in one, and in one one eternally.”

I’ve long loved this quote. It was actually one of the things that led me to the desert. So I look up the original source. *Hosea* is a short book, so it doesn’t take me long to read the whole thing. But I can’t find anything close to what Eckhart said, even though I’m certain I’ve looked this up before. So I reread the chapter, and read it again, but still I can’t find it, and I wonder if it’s possible they have a different Bible here.

The nave is now full. The only inmates not here are those with outside jobs. Also here is Chuck, who’s sitting on the bench by the pulpit and staring at me. He’s staring at me much the way he was glaring at me the night before.

“So,” he says to me, “how does a New York Jew end up in a Christian men’s home way out in the middle of a forest?”

“I give up,” I tell him. “How does he?”

“What did you do before?”

“I wrote software.”

“Me, I was a psychologist.”

“Really?”

“I even have a Master’s degree from Berkeley.”

“How did you end up here?”

“Heroin.”

He says this as if he were talking about the flu he once had, and he afterward starts Bible study. He starts it by saying, “Where’d we leave off yesterday?”

“We’re on Chapter 21,” someone from behind me replies.

“*Proverbs* 21. Someone start us off.”

We read the chapter aloud, with each reader reading a verse. Right away, I’m struck by how many people here are semi-literate at best. Some can barely pronounce the words, and most do so painfully slow. I’m also struck by how misogynistic some of the verses are. It seems Solomon, the supposed author of *Proverbs*, was no fan of women. Which makes me think of one woman in particular. I see her, too, not far away — and she’s none too pleased.

Solomon never met Rudi — that’s for sure. Or he would’ve taken back every word. *Every fucking one*. She’d also show him who was wise, and who wasn’t.

We finally get through the chapter, and Chuck says: “Any comments?”

A couple of inmates respond by rereading certain verses, before giving their unthoughtful interpretations of them. But I refuse to play along. Instead, I say: “I’ve got a question about verses 9 and 19. Nine says: ‘It is better to dwell in a corner of the housetop, than with a brawling woman in a wide house.’ And Nineteen says: ‘It is better to dwell in the wilderness, than with a contentious and an angry woman.’ My question is this: how is a woman supposed to read these verses and apply them to her life?”

Chuck thinks about this for a few moments. He thinks about it and utters, “I have no idea.”

“She would just replace ‘woman’ with ‘man,’” says Sean.

I nod, but I’m not buying it.

The interpretations continue. They continue until we’re all interpreted out, and we start reading a chapter from *Psalms*. In addition to reading a chapter in *Proverbs* every day, we’re also

reading through the entire Bible — one butchered verse after another. Which makes me wonder how much we'll get through in the year I'll be here. I also wonder if I'll get through the year.

Finally, we finish, and Chuck assigns everyone a chore. For those elderly and less fit, chores include doing dishes and cleaning the chapel and similar tasks. For example, Chuck assigns Henry some light gardening. The rest of us are assigned “watering,” including me.

“If you get tired,” he says to me, “just put in as little water in the bucket as you want.”

He says this to me, I assume, because I'm so frail. Though I don't want any favors, especially from him. But I nod anyway. I nod even though I have no idea what “watering” is. But it's gotta be better than washing the dishes. Right?

#

I'm limping. I'm limping down the pedestrian path that follows along the beach in Pacific Palisades. It's a beautiful afternoon and there are lots of beautiful people everywhere, and I seem to be the only one heading north.

I spent the previous night browsing the Internet, looking for the perfect last place. I first thought about going to the desert, much as I've thought about for years, but there were too many unknowns, and the images of Temescal Canyon Park were just breathtaking. You can even see the ocean from the top of the canyon. It's the perfect last place.

I've come prepared. I've got a rolled-up sheet stuffed inside my backpack and lots of determination. But I'm also tired. I've been walking for miles, all the way from the Santa Monica Metro station. My ankle aches and I haven't eaten in nearly a day. But I have lots of determination. I really believe I'm gonna do it.

Briefly, I look at the faces of the people I'm passing. They're all happy and obviously well-to-do and pay no attention to me. Though some do look at my shirt — the one I designed of

Rudi. One guy riding a bike even compliments it. It's gotten lots of compliments over the past year. No sales but lots of compliments.

I'm getting closer. I think. I'm not totally sure because it's difficult telling distance from a Google map. I thought I'd be there already. I thought I'd be there long ago. But I've got plenty of time. It's one thing I do have besides determination, and I know I'm getting closer.

I've now reached an underpass, and I think that this a good time to cross the Pacific Coast Highway. Though it's dark in the tunnel, and I kinda wonder if I'll get attacked. I further wonder if I would care. But no attack occurs. I make it to the other side and find myself in traffic-light hell. I'm waiting eons for the light to turn green. Literally.

It finally changes, and I continue on, but the sidewalk soon comes to an end. I also see a street sign that says I must walk on the other side of the highway.

While retracing my steps — including the long wait at traffic light hell — I come to see this little excursion as a metaphor for my life. I think I'm heading somewhere interesting. I think I'm following a different but plausible path. But it always leads to a dead end, and I always have to start again from the beginning, if not before it.

Eventually, I return to the underpass, and I cross it, and I limp north again. I limp closer. But there is still lots of limping to do.

The limping finally ends. It ends and I reach Temescal Canyon Road and I look up, and I see there's another thing Google Maps doesn't do well — or at all: indicate height. The road is way too steep and way too long and there's no way I'm gonna get up it in my state, no matter how much determination I have. So I convince myself that I could do what I had planned to do here in the comfort of my home — even though I have no idea how I will actually do it there. I then slither back to the Metro station.

It takes longer getting back, way longer, especially as this time I have to walk up a long set of steps leading from the beach to the park in Santa Monica. Though, like with the stairs in my building, my ankle hurts less walking up them than it did going down them hours earlier.

From the park, it's a short walk to the Metro station, where I see the sun beginning to set. It's then a long train ride home, across two separate lines, and when I arrive in Long Beach it's dark. I'm also almost hungry. More importantly, I need a bathroom. Badly. But there are no public restrooms in this part of the city apart from those on the beach, which close at dark. So I go to Vons, which is just a block away, and I go to the bathroom. I go there and it's locked, so I ask a nearby cashier to open it.

She looks at me. She also looks at my disheveled appearance and my stuffed backpack, and with a sneer she growls, "It's broken."

I've been in this Vons literally a thousand times, and that woman has served me dozens of times, but all of a sudden I'm garbage. I'm also pissed off and desperate, and I forget all about buying food and rush home as fast as my ankle will get me, which isn't very.

Though I make it. Barely. I do this and I'm still sorta hungry, and I'm not going back to Vons — not ever. Instead, I go in the opposite direction — toward another supermarket called Ralphs.

Quickly, I get there. Relatively quickly. I get there and no one treats me like shit, and I buy some food, and I limp home. I do this and realize that it's the first time I've been in this neighborhood at this time of night. I also realize that it's dark. It's real dark. But it's a good neighborhood, so my mind becomes focused on something else: nothing.

At Third Street, I turn right. I do this and continue limping. It's now not only dark but quiet. It's too quiet. It's like I'm the only person in a city of a half-million. But I'm not. Out of nowhere two guys jump in front of me from the road and force me to stop. How they got there

without me hearing them I can't figure out. All I know is that they're both a little taller than me and slender — though not as slender as I've become.

One of them growls, "What you got?"

Thirteen years I've lived in Long Beach and never once have I gotten mugged, or anything close to it. But never have I been so emaciated — nor have I ever had to limp my way from place to place. This is actually the first time I've been mugged since the last time I was drunk. That happened in Prague, when I was so drunk that I grabbed the mugger's knife. This caused him to run, and caused me to have scars on my fingers that still haven't gone away.

Instinctively, I turn from the two slender men. I do this and see another man strutting toward me. He's tall and well-built and I'm fucked.

I can actually see Rudi right now. I see her yawning. These schmucks would be nothing to her. She'd break them apart as easily as filing her nails. But I'm not her. So I do the only thing I can: I pull out my little red canister of pepper spray, which I bought years ago but have never used. I don't even know if it works. More importantly, I have no idea whether it will stop or even frighten anyone — let alone 3 determined muggers. Still, I point it at the big guy anyway.

The darkness suddenly works in my favor. One of the slender guys murmurs, "What's he got?"

Surprisingly, the big guy puts up his hands in surrender. He also shakes his head and rushes off. At the same time, I spin toward the other two — and surprisingly they run, too.

So do I — away from them. I run as fast as I can. Which is not very. I run down Third Street, with my heart pounding. I think I'm gonna collapse, but I don't. I've made it. I've survived, and I'm strangely happy about it.

#

Day two at the Barstow Community Hospital.

I'm still lying on the cold hard gurney in the bright light, and they're still staring at me around the clock. I'm also spending the day like I spent the first one, with Rudi. Again she takes me on a ride — on a different one than the day before — one I've also been on many times before. I actually like this one better. On this one, I live through her as she overcomes her tragedies and her tears and somehow starts again, even though this is the last thing she wants to do. She really wants what I want, but she can't get it any more than I can, and this gives me hope, even if I tell myself that I don't want this hope.

"Breakfast?" asks an aide, with a tray in his hands.

I shake my head. I do this and he leaves.

I'm still not eating. I haven't eaten since the grapes in the desert, and I'm still not hungry. I also still haven't seen a doctor since the one that admitted me. Or a psychologist. They just take my temperature and blood pressure around the clock while offering me food I don't want.

Having nothing better to do, I return to Rudi, and it's soon lunchtime, and Jessica comes to the door. She does this with a timid expression and a tray that has two dishes on top of it.

"I've brought lunch," she says.

"I'm not hungry," I say back.

"I brought my lunch, too. Do you mind if I eat here?"

"I don't mind."

She pulls up a chair. She further sits next to me, and we continue our talk from the day before while she eats. She eats as timidly as she talks.

"What if you had a job?" she asks.

"I told you nobody wants to hire me," I insist.

"But what if someone did?"

"What do you mean?"

“My church has this job program. It’s supposed to be really good.”

“What church?”

“LDS.”

“I’m not a member.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m pretty sure. I could call them.”

“I’d still need a place to live, and lots of things. I’ve got nothing. I’ve literally got nothing.”

“Why don’t we start with a job.”

I think about it. I do this and surprisingly say, “All right.”

“All right?” she utters.

“All right.”

She smiles, and I let just a little bit of hope to form, against my will.

#

I’m limping down the driveway of the men’s home.

I keep doing this and I reach the bottom. There I take a step onto Lytle Creek Road. This is normally grounds for dismissal from the program and the home, but I have permission to do this. I’m doing it because I’m heading across the street to the pastor’s house so I can do my watering chore.

“What exactly are we doing?” I ask Tony, who’s just ahead of me.

“Watering Pastor’s trees,” he tells me. “Actually, we’re watering the saplings that will one day be his trees.”

I follow Tony. I follow him as best as I can on my bum ankle. I follow him onto the pastor's property and through the mess that is the backyard of his house, where there is junk piled upon junk, which is piled upon even more junk. The house itself is big and beautiful and abuts the creek the town's named after. I wouldn't say that it's palatial, but it's not something Jesus could've afforded, either. Or any of his disciples.

"Here," Tony says, as he hands me an old bucket. "Just fill it up by the creek over there, and start watering."

"Which trees?" I ask.

He responds by walking me through the property, while pointing out a dozen saplings.

"How much water should I give each one?" is my next question.

"It doesn't matter," he tells me. "Water anyones you like for as much as you like — just as long as you water something. We're out here for 5 hours, and we have to look busy. If Ted or Chuck — or God forbid the pastor — catches you not working, you'll get a Monday. And you'll be that much further away from getting outside work."

"What's a 'Monday'?"

"We normally get Mondays off, but if you fuck up, you work on Monday. There's one guy here who's literally got Mondays for the next 6 months."

"What did he do?"

"He fucked up."

I nod. I do this and limp to the creek, while Tony gets his own bucket from a secret hiding spot. It's not quite ten yet and it's already hot out. I'm already sweating and I haven't done a thing. I actually haven't done much in months, and I wonder if my body will hold out.

I've now reached the creek, and I see that it's beautiful and cool and shaded by a whole bunch of fully grown trees. I also see Roberto and a few others filling their buckets.

“Having fun?” I ask.

“I’m living the dream,” murmurs a tall guy named Leo, with a bit of a grin. Which I return as I fill my bucket a little more than halfway. I then start walking back. I walk with Roberto. We walk toward the saplings with our buckets while chatting, and I learn that he was once a successful landscaper with his own company before alcohol got the best of him. He also has children and grandchildren and ex-wives, and I feel a little envious because I have none of these things. I have none of them even though I’m almost 5 years older than him.

I tell him about my background as well, and his face lights up.

“Oh, man,” he says, “I’ve got this great idea to make a fortune off Facebook, but I just don’t have the technical abilities. You wanna go 50-50 on it with me?”

“Sure,” I say, without enthusiasm. I say this while trying to pretend that my arm isn’t killing me from carrying the water and that my foot isn’t killing me from the walking.

“This is my idea,” he goes on, “you know those cover images they have on Facebook pages?”

“Yeah.”

“My idea is to let people put videos there instead. What do you think? Can you do that? We can write Zuckerberg about it and make a fortune.”

I think for a moment. Not about his idea, but how I’m gonna tell him what’s wrong with his idea without hurting his feelings and making him look stupid. I think about this, and I take a deep breath.

“They could easily put videos there if they wanted,” I say to him. “They probably don’t because of all the bandwidth they would use on mobile devices. Also, the videos wouldn’t automatically play on mobile, making them kinda useless there. And most people use Facebook on mobile.”

Roberto looks deflated. He's also looks at me skeptically, as if he's wondering if I'm trying to steal his idea.

"It's a good idea, though, right?" he asks.

"It's a good idea," I lie.

"I'll keep thinking of them. You never know."

"The problem is that good ideas are easy. Everyone has them — even me on occasion. But ideas don't matter. It doesn't even matter if you actually make something good out of your good idea if nobody knows about it. This means that, unless you have connections to lots of people — a platform to broadcast your creations — nobody will know about them and they will go nowhere. I'm talking from experience."

"You think too negatively."

"It comes from failure."

"You'll see. We're gonna do something big, you and me."

"All right," I tell him. I tell him this and we go our own ways. I limp to the nearest sapling and dump my water onto it, and I return to the creek, while noticing that it's gotten hotter out. It may not yet be 100 degrees, but it's close to it. So as I reach the water I think about taking a drink from it.

"I wonder if it's drinkable?" I say aloud, to no one in particular — before answering my own question: "All water is drinkable. Some only once."

Leo, who's just reached the creek, chuckles. He also says, "This is one of those 'only once' deals."

"Yeah?" I say back.

"The water is so polluted that we're probably getting cancer just from being near it."

"Cool."

We both chuckle at this, and after I put some more water in my bucket, I limp back to the trees. I do this and pass Tony and a guy they call Little Jose. They call him this even though he's well over 200 pounds. That's because Big Jose is even bigger. Little Jose is also 19, but he looks about 15. He's further strong. He's been hauling two full buckets of water as if they were nothing.

I nod at the two as I pass them, and I listen to them talk about getting laid, just like they were doing the night before.

The dumping and fetching of water continues, with time moving slower and with me realizing that I could be doing this for the next 364 days, and maybe longer. I'm tired and thirsty and aching, but I keep moving. I keep dumping and fetching water. I keep up with everyone else. All ten of us, who are watering the same 12 saplings that were well beyond watered a half hour ago.

"What time is it?" someone unseen calls out, with just a bit of desperation.

"It's almost eleven," says another unseen someone, with equal desperation.

This means that I haven't even been out here a full hour. Yet I'm ready to drop. Which makes me think of Rudi for some reason. I can see her, too. I see her relaxing under the shade of a tree. This work would be nothing to her. She'd laugh it off, and in the pastor's face, too — no matter how many days she had to do this. She would never break. She wouldn't even care about the Mondays. But I'm not her. So I return to the creek, and I see Roberto, Tony, and Jose horsing around — splashing water at each other as if they were 8 years old. Me, I just stand there and watch them.

"So you're a Jew?" Tony suddenly says to me, as the three take a break from their break. "What exactly does that mean?"

I hesitate. I do because I've had more than one awkward conversation about my background since finding myself in this place they call the Inland Empire.

"It's an ethnicity," I tell him. "Like you being Hispanic."

"I'm half Italian," he tells me back.

"All right — so it's like you being half-Italian."

"I guess as long as you've accepted Christ, it doesn't matter."

"That's just it — we haven't accepted Christ. We have our own religion."

"So what are you doing here if you're not a Christian?"

"The pastor said that he didn't care that I'm not a Christian. He said it wouldn't matter even if I were an atheist."

"Really?"

"The whole point of being an Evangelical is to spread the Word to others."

"Really?"

Somehow the conversation turns to Israel, and Tony and Jose ask me all about it. I've never been there, but I know a lot, and I tell them about it — and they're enraptured. I mean, their faces have lit up. They seem more enraptured by Israel than most Jews.

"I gotta go," Tony says to Jose.

"Me, too," replies Jose.

Our conversation is interrupted. It's interrupted by Roberto, who's dumped a full bucket of water onto Tony's head.

"You're fucking dead now!" Tony screams — and he fills his bucket.

Roberto laughs and runs off, chased by Tony.

I fill my bucket, too — again halfway. I fill it and walk off with Jose, and I notice his black gloves, and I let him know I've noticed.

“They’re MMA gloves,” he says.

“Yeah?” I say back.

He goes on to tell me how he’s fought professionally.

“I almost killed a guy,” he utters.

“Yeah?” I utter back.

“That’s why I don’t fight no more.”

“Because you’re too good?”

“Yeah. And I don’t want to hurt no one. It kinda goes against being a Christian.”

I nod. I do this and he continues telling me stories of his fighting prowess.

“Down in San Bernardino last year,” he says, “I was walking with my mom one day when some dick started mad-dogging us.”

“What’s ‘mad-dogging’?” I ask.

Jose shows me, by giving me a threatening look — the kind I guess a mad dog might give.

“I see,” I tell him.

“So,” he goes on, “I stop and say to him: ‘Why are you mad-dogging me, dude?’ He says, ‘It’s not you I’m mad-dogging — it’s the ugly bitch you’re with.’ I tell him, ‘That ugly bitch is my mom.’ And he says, ‘She’s still an ugly bitch.’ So, I beat his ass. I beat him unconscious. I don’t even know if he’s alive.”

“I see,” I say, while staring at the big crucifix around Jose’s neck.

“But I don’t do that shit no more,” he insists. “I’m trying to be a good Christian.”

“I guess you were raised Catholic.”

“Yeah. But now I’m a Christian.”

“Catholics *are* Christian.”

“They are?”

We dump our water. We dump it onto a couple of saplings and head back to the creek, where Tony and Roberto are still water fighting.

Again, I fill the bucket about halfway, and again I dump the water. This goes on and on, back and forth endlessly. My foot hurts so much that I wanna chop it off. I wanna chop it off and collapse into the creek. I don’t care how polluted it is.

Of course, I don’t do this. I just continue on, and I watch the others doing the same exact thing, and I realize that they remind me of something: robots. One of the things I learned during my 4 years in Prague is that the word “robot” actually comes from Czech. It comes from the word “*robota*,” which means “forced labor.” It was first used about 100 years ago by Karel Čapek, in a play about machines who ironically would eliminate the kind of drudgery we’re doing right now. In a sense, we are much like them — machines, only without any purpose.

I’m now filling my bucket only a quarter of the way, and I’m barely limping forward. In this state I see Roberto, Tony, and Jose. I see them sitting on what looks like the wooden foundation of a small building, and I join them, just as a cowbell rings in the distance.

“Lunchtime,” Tony says.

“What should I do with my bucket?” I ask him.

“Drop it,” he tells me.

I do this. I drop it and the four of us head back to the home. I’m kind of zombified at this point, so I drift behind them many steps back and only sort of listen to them. That is, until they start talking about a former inmate who recently stepped in front of a speeding car on Lytle Creek Road. He did this just to get out of here. Just to be somewhere else.

“Is he alive?” I ask.

“I think so,” Tony replies. “Nobody talks about him much.”

It's easy to see what happened to him. I can see it as easily as I can see Rudi walking alongside me. With the bend in the road by the home, it would be easy to do, especially considering how fast everyone drives around here. Just a couple steps into the road would be all it would take. Just a couple of steps.

Tony and Jose are now talking about someone else. A someone else who hated this place so much that one night he tried to burn it down.

"I guess he didn't succeed," I say.

"He got the kitchen pretty good," Tony says back.

"He could've killed everyone."

"Yup. That's why I don't think they'll let him back. But you never know — they've let me back 6 times already. And I'm pretty fucked."

We've returned to the chapel. We've returned there and everyone's eating a lunch consisting of two hot dogs each and heaps of potato salad. I don't like most things made from mayonnaise, including potato salad, and I really don't want hot dogs, either. But I'm hungry. I'm more hungry than I've been in a long time. Though I'm even more thirsty. So first I down multiple glasses of powdered fruit punch from one of the two coolers in the dining room, and then I step into the kitchen and ask for some hot dogs.

"No potato salad?" he asks, with lots of surprise.

"No potato salad," I tell him, without any surprise.

He gives me a dirty look, just like the one he gave me this morning. But I don't care. I ignore him and his look and take the hot dogs to the dining room table, where I drown them in condiments before bringing them over to the bench in the front of the nave. There I sit in the one free spot, next to Chuck, who ignores me.

I ignore him back. But I can't ignore Manny Jr., who has come up to me and is staring much like he was the day before, with his big doe eyes.

"Where you from?" he says.

"New Jersey," I say back.

"You came here all the way from New Jersey?"

"I came here from the hospital."

"Why were you in the hospital?"

"I . . ."

I don't know what to say, so I turn to Chuck, who says, "He was unhappy."

"Yeah," I utter.

Manny looks at me as if he doesn't understand. Which is okay, because I don't understand, either.

Quickly, I finish eating. I finish but I'm still hungry, and I'm hungry even after stuffing my face with stale crackers from one of the dining room cabinets.

The clock in the back of the nave says that it's 12:30. Actually, it's a few minutes after, and I look around the chapel, and I can't see Roberto or Tony or Jose. So I walk out the back door, and then around the chapel, following the sound of bad Christian rock. I see the three nearby. I see them lying on the weightlifting benches, with a small boombox not far away. I also see that Roberto is playing with a mangy old dog belonging to one of the aging inmates. They all look as tired as I feel, including the dog. Worse, the day isn't even half over, and the hottest sun is yet to come.

I'm lying on my bed in Long Beach. It's Saturday morning and it's July 1 and I'm 51 years old, and for the first time in my life I can't pay my rent on time. I actually can't pay it at all.

Doomsday has finally come. There's only one escape, but I can't seem to take it. This makes me think of Rudi and how she could never quite kill herself, either. Though with her it wasn't because of ineptitude. It was because someone always stopped her, which is something I sure don't have to worry about.

Again I try Googling how to hang myself. But this isn't so simple, because Google wants you to live, so you can keep clicking on ads. So all the links I see are about suicide prevention. The first one is for the National Suicide Prevention Hotline. Which is total garbage. I know this from experience. I contacted them once by chat, and within 5 minutes they were calling the cops to pick me up. They didn't even try to help me. Though the joke was on them — I used Tor to contact them, which kept me and my IP address masked. Though I have wondered where the cops went that day. Perhaps they're still looking for me somewhere.

I keep Googling. Finally, on the third page I find something interesting. I find out that I was hanging myself wrong — by applying pressure to the front of my neck instead of to one of the side arteries. The article I'm reading now assures me that — if I do it right — I'll pass out within a minute, and will be dead soon after. Part of me wants to try this right away. But the other part convinces this part that I have all day. So instead I limp to the beach. I limp there one final time.

It's miserable out. I mean, it's cold and cloudy, and the water is even more foul than usual. Which is really saying something. So I return home. I return there, and on my phone I stumble upon a forum for people who want to kill themselves. It's aptly called suicideforum.com. It's British, I think. At least most of the people there are British.

I don't expect much from it, but I have nothing to lose. So I post my story, and surprisingly people are supportive, and not just in a benign feckless way. There are some people out there who really want to help. One woman even offers me a place to crash. Too bad it's in London.

I talk with them for hours. Though I'm now even more depressed. I think this is because I realize that even people who care can't help me. Only I can help me, and I do this by rolling up my sheet.

#

Day three at Barstow Community Hospital. Three days of light and stares, and of lying on a cold hard gurney. Three days of not eating. Three days of doing nothing but taking rides with Rudi.

I'm supposed to get out today. But even if I do, I'll have nowhere to go. Apart from where I've already been, and I've kinda decided that, wherever I go, it won't be backward, or even sideward.

This morning my nurse is someone named Lily. She's young and blonde, and she's all right. She tells me that they've found me a spot at a hospital called Canyon Ridge in Chino, and I tell her that I'm not interested.

The hours go by. They do and Jessica comes to the door again, with her timid smile and a small slip of paper.

"I found out that they don't have an LDS Jobs around here," she says to me. "But there's one down the hill — a couple of hours from here. I got the number. I even called them. They said you should stop by."

"How?" I ask.

She shrugs — timidly, of course.

I had been becoming increasingly doubtful of her idea from the moment she told me about it. But now I have a lame excuse for not even trying. Still, I take the slip of paper she offers me, and I thank her, and I say goodbye. Then, I wait. I wait all morning and into the afternoon with nothing happening at all. I don't even see Rudi, or go on rides with her.

Finally, Lily comes to my door. She stops there and asks me if I want to take a shower — something I haven't done since before walking into the desert.

I nod. I also ask her if I can shave, too — and brush my teeth — things I also haven't done in days.

She says yes, and she finds an electric shaver, as well as a toothbrush and toothpaste — and she brings these things to my door. Which gets me off the gurney. I get off it and stand for the first time in about a day, since the last time I had to use the bathroom.

I feel dizzy. I feel real dizzy, and my ankle still hurts. But I make it to the bathroom by the nurses station, where I shave and brush my teeth with the door ajar, so that an aide can watch me from just outside it.

I have to look at myself in the mirror, and I look awful. I look even more awful than I feel. Why I bother shaving I don't know, but I do. I shave with a shaver that's barely sharp enough to cut a whisker. I also brush my teeth, while trying to figure out what I'll do when I get out.

What would Rudi do? I ask myself. I'm pretty sure she wouldn't go to another hospital. She'd probably just walk out of both the bathroom and the hospital, and keep walking until she passed out. That's what I want to do. I want to be just like her. But I'm not, so I instead exit the bathroom and say to the aide: "What about my shower?"

"I don't think that's gonna be possible today," he says back, while taking the shaver from me, along with the toothbrush and toothpaste.

“But the nurse just told me I could.”

“Maybe she didn’t know that we’re shorthanded today. You see, one of us would have to accompany you —”

“— Never mind.”

I turn around. I do this and see Lily coming, and I say to her: “Can I go now?”

“Go where?” she asks.

“I’ve been here 72 hours already.”

“I think the doctor wants to talk to you before you go.”

“What doctor?”

“Your doctor.”

“I have a doctor?”

“Let me see if he’s available.”

She scurries off, and I return to the hard cold gurney — and I once again wait. I wait and wait and wait. I only stop waiting when someone starts screaming. Someone down the hall. He screams for help. He’s really screaming. He’s either out of his mind or on drugs, or both.

Lots of people rush past my door. Nurses and aides and security guards. Even a young doctor. But the man keeps screaming. He screams even louder. He screams until they sedate him. Then everything returns to normal. It’s like nothing had happened. The nurses even go back to talking about money and the new beverage at Starbucks.

Finally, my doctor comes to see me. He’s an old man I haven’t seen before. He hasn’t even walked by my door. He wants to know if I’m still suicidal, and when he discovers I am, he tries to convince me otherwise. As tritely as possible.

“You’re way too young to give up,” he says.

“I’m 51,” I say back.

"I'm in my sixties."

"Can I go now?"

"You really need help."

"Can I go now?"

"Let me talk to the administrator."

He leaves, and I go back to waiting. I wait even longer than before. Finally, Lily stops by my door.

"I've got good news and bad news," she tells me. "The good news is that you can leave any time. Your hold is over."

"And the bad news?" I ask.

"We're not giving you your stuff back."

"What?"

"We're not gonna give you your things unless you agree to go to a hospital that can help you. We'll be liable if you leave and kill yourself."

"I'll sign a waiver."

"It doesn't matter."

"You can't keep my stuff."

"It sure looks like we can."

"But —"

"— It's the hospital administrator's order. She told me so herself."

"Let me speak to her."

"Let me see what I can do."

Again, I wait. I wait and wait some more. I wait until Lily returns. With my things.

"You can go," she says.

“Really?” I say back.

“Really.”

“Can I close the door while I dress?”

“You can do whatever you want. You’re a free man.”

She leaves, and I again stand up, and again I feel weak and again my ankle hurts. So though I plan to go to some undefinable somewhere, I don’t have much hope of getting there. Still, I close the door and dress. I further put the rest of my things in my dirty blue backpack and open the door — and I see that Lily is waiting for me in the threshold.

“You sure you don’t want to go to Canyon Ridge?” she asks.

“I’m not going to another hospital,” I tell her.

“But it’s different there. As I’m sure you’ve noticed, we’re not exactly equipped to handle psychological disorders. There isn’t even a psychiatrist on staff. I don’t even understand why they brought you here. They should’ve sent you to Arrowhead or someplace like that.”

“What’s Arrowhead?”

“It’s a lot worse than Canyon Ridge, that’s what it is. It’s down the hill in Colton, and it’s the worst of the worst. At Canyon Ridge they can really help you. Will you just think about it?”

I do think about it, and I shake my head. “No hospital can help me,” I insist. “Nothing can help me. I’m just like one of those old Indians.”

“Old Indians?”

“You know.”

“I don’t know.”

“In the old days, when Indians got old and no longer served a purpose, they just went off somewhere, never to be seen again. That’s what I’m gonna do.”

I walk out into the hallway. There a smile greets me — the coquettish smile of the well dressed blonde my age — the one who keeps passing my room. She tells me that she'd like to walk me out.

I know something's up. I know it because she hasn't even said hello before this — or even noticed my existence. But I play along, mostly because I'm both exhausted and curious. I even accept the ice cream she offers, and I even take a bite despite not being the least bit hungry after more than 3 days without food.

The two of us walk out of the emergency room, and we sit in the lobby. There we discuss the 110-degree weather and how she became the hospital administrator and why I have so much to live for. We do all this while I wait for the punchline.

It comes shortly, just like every punchline must. It comes when a huge Barstow cop barrels through the automatic doors, with his face glistening with sweat.

"He's all yours," my new friend calls out to the cop. She says this as she jumps to her feet and rushes off, no longer responsible for what happens to me.

#

I'm back in the pastor's backyard. Back watering the saplings that are already drowning and begging me to stop.

"How you doing?" Roberto asks me as we fill our buckets in the creek.

"Fine," I lie.

"You've really showed me something today."

"Bad posture?"

"I didn't think you'd make it an hour out here. None of us did."

"Yeah?" I say with a giggle.

“Yeah,” he says back, with his own giggle. “We were even thinking of starting a pool of when you’d keel over. But you didn’t keel over. You’re one tough Jew.”

“The day isn’t over. It actually has barely begun.”

“You’ll be fine. We’ll all be fine.”

He then puts a full water bucket on his head, and he starts to walk off like he’s some native woman from the cover of *National Geographic*.

“You’re gonna hurt your neck,” I tell him.

“I’ll be fine,” he tells me back.

Me, I finish filling my bucket. I fill it not quite halfway and follow Roberto, while passing the rest of the robots as they make their way to the creek to start their long afternoon of uselessness. They all look the same: tired and emotionless. All except for one. He’s Mexican and slender — even more slender than me — and he’s smiling. Though it isn’t a happy smile. It’s a crazy smile. I also notice something else about him: he’s got some strange marks on his face, by his temples, and they look man made.

I pass him, and he doesn’t seem to notice. He doesn’t seem to notice anything. He just keeps smiling and swaying toward the creek.

Me, I dump my water. I dump it toward the closest sapling and return to the creek. I do this over and over and over. I water the very same sapling again and again until I see Tony and Jose sitting once again on the wooden foundation and talking, and I join them and listen.

I learn Tony’s a dad, of a young girl. I also learn that he’s 27, and that he got thrown out of his mom’s place after he fought with his stepdad and nearly beat him to death. I also learn about his six previous stints here. Some of the times he’s left on his own, while other times he’s been thrown out for behavioural issues. The kind of behavioural issues that gets some people

arrested. He's also been to lots of homeless shelters, too. He's now telling Jose about how he recently got kicked out of a Salvation Army shelter.

Their conversation suddenly ebbs. It ebbs and I ask: "Watering these trees over and over — is this just a *Karate Kid* type of thing?"

"Wax on, wax off?" Tony asks back with a grin.

"Yeah."

"Pretty much."

"I actually went to high school with the girl from that movie," I tell him.

"Really?" he says. "She's kind of famous, right?"

"Yeah. The irony of that movie is that Ralph Macchio's character is supposed to be from Newark. When the film opens, he's leaving the bleakness of there and coming out here, where he meets Elisabeth Shue's character. But in reality she grew up maybe a mile or two from that opening scene. Life is full of irony."

"If you say so."

"I say so."

"Anyway, I doubt the pastor has seen *The Karate Kid*. Or any movie. He doesn't even like to go to restaurants. He doesn't like anything secular."

"I noticed there's no TV."

"We got a TV. It's locked away. We can only watch it on movie nights."

"When's that?"

"Monday and Tuesday nights."

"We actually got movies?"

"Christian movies."

"Sounds thrilling."

“Wait till you’ve seen all of them like ten times.”

The two get up, and they go back to work. I do, too, and the watering continues — over and over — and hour after hour. I can barely feel my body, and I really feel I will keel over.

But I don’t. I keep moving. Maybe I’m stronger than I think. I’m not as strong as Rudi, but maybe I’m stronger than me — the me I see even when I’m not standing in front of the mirror.

The day goes on, and it gets hotter, and I notice that the robots are disappearing. I don’t know where they’ve gone, but there’s now just a few of us left watering, and I’m not the only one who notices this. Ted comes by, walking an old pit bull, and he asks me where everyone is.

I shrug.

Then he asks me specifically about Tony.

Again, I shrug.

“What a fuck up that kid is,” he tells me.

I shrug a third time.

“How you doing?” he says.

“I’m fine,” I lie.

“You’re doing a great job, Collins. Just keep it up.”

This time I don’t shrug. This time I nod, and head back to the creek.

“You’ve only got a half hour to go,” he calls out. He also releases his dog, who right away runs into the creek and starts swimming in it, and drinking from it.

Maybe it is drinkable, I think. Maybe even more than once. But I don’t try it. I just continue feeding it to the trees. I water and water them and then water them some more. I’m becoming nothing more than a hose.

Finally, I see a fellow robot. I see Roberto. I see him digging through the pastor's dumpster.

"Dude, what are you doing?" I ask, with a bit of a grin.

"Old habits never die," he says, as he pulls out an old woolen cap. "Or they die real slowly."

"It's 3 o'clock!" calls out Jose, from not far away. "Chuck just waved us in!"

"What should I do with my bucket?" I ask him.

"I'll show you where me and Tony hide them."

"Why do we need to hide them?"

"Lots of thieves around here. My shit gets stolen all the time, and it really pisses me off."

"I thought everyone here was Christian."

"Some are more Christian than others."

We start heading back. We head back across the street to the men's home. There the three of us hide our buckets in a little shed by the side of the chapel and go inside the building, where I gulp down three large glasses of Kool-Aid. I do this and notice the empty bathrooms nearby and my own stink.

Knowing that the two bathrooms won't be free for long, I rush to the barn. I rush there as fast as I can and grab my towel and some clean clothes, or actually, some cleaner ones. I then take these things back to the chapel. Though both bathrooms are now full, so I have to wait. This is not a problem. It's not because if I've learned anything in the past month it's how to wait.

The women's bathroom becomes free, and I jump inside and undress. I also turn on the shower. The flow from it is much like that from the faucet. It barely moves. What's less, there's no shower head, and the water is ice cold.

I wait for it to warm up. I even flush the toilet in the hope of speeding this up. But it doesn't help. So I try playing with the knob. I turn it in every possible direction, and I'm able to get the water almost lukewarm.

Still, I'm freezing when I get under it. It's so cold that even though I'm desperate for a shower, I do it as quickly as possible. Just as quickly, I dry myself off with the towel. I do this and can't help notice my image in the mirror above the sink, and it ain't pretty. I'm an adjective that has yet to be invented. I'm more than emaciated but not quite rotting. I actually look like a painting I know well. I look like Hans Holbein's *The Dead Christ*.

I actually had a copy of this painting in my Long Beach bedroom. Years earlier, when I lived outside Boston and had disposable income, I bought it. I bought it from the only place in the world that had prints of it back then: the museum in Switzerland that housed the original.

I remember buying it. I remember that I had to buy it through a German website — a Swiss German website, no less. I further remember how surprised I was that I did it right. I also remember the reason why I bought it. I bought it after reading Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*. The painting played an important role in the book — and in Dostoevsky's life. One of his biographers wrote that Dostoevsky spent most of his honeymoon, day and night, staring at the painting, in the very same museum from which I bought the print. He believed the painting could "cause someone to lose their faith," and that's why I bought it. I did this even though I had no faith at the time.

I only got it recently — faith. I only got it when I had nothing left. When I was hanging from a precipice with nothing left to grab. At least nothing I could see. In many ways God for me is like Rudi. They're not here the way I am here, but I know they're here, and this knowing is all that matters.

I can't stop thinking of that painting. It used to hang by the side of my bed. It was the first thing I saw every morning when I woke. Though I hung it there for a different reason than why I bought it: to remind myself of my own mortality. To remind myself that I only had now.

But now it reminds me of something else. I once read that Holbein's model for Christ was a derelict. Usually back then artists — when painting Christ — would use kings or princes as models, or at least wealthy benefactors. But Holbein used a derelict. He used a derelict who'd been floating in the Rhine for days.

Still, this derelict looks a whole lot better than me.

#

I follow the instructions. I follow them perfectly.

With one end of the rolled-up sheet secured between the top edge of the bedroom door and the frame, I tie the other end of the sheet around my neck, making sure that the knot is tied on the back left side of it, so that pressure is applied to the carotid artery on the front right side. Then I lower myself onto the wooden chair.

Slowly, I inch downward. I'm moving so slowly that I'm barely moving. I've done this many times in the past few hours, with varying results — all but the one that I want. This time, though, I tell myself that I'm gonna succeed. I tell myself this because I have no choice. It's now the morning of July 2 and the walls have started closing in. It's only a matter of time when people start demanding money from me. Money I don't have.

The sheet quickly grips my neck like a vice, and I feel lightheaded. I can also hear a strange buzzing in my ears, as well as my own heartbeat. I've expected these things. I've done this many times. I've also expected the shaking of my arms. I just have to be brave. For the first time in my rotten life I have to be brave, and only for a few lousy seconds.

A few lousy seconds.

I can't do it. I just can't.

I rise from the chair. I rise knowing I've failed again. I've failed like I've failed dozens of times before — like I've failed at everything I've really wanted. But this is the worst.

Furiously, I rip the noose from the neck — and I collapse onto my bed, unable to even cry. I know that I can't kill myself — that I never could. Something has to do it for me.

#

Rudi's laughing at me.

She's been where I am sitting many times, but for me it's a first. For the first time I'm sitting in a police car. I'm sitting in the back seat with my hands uncuffed, on a seat that's even harder than the hospital gurney.

I see not only Rudi laughing, but I see the Barstow cop, too. I see him through the clear and cracked divider separating us, and I see that we're leaving the parking lot of the hospital. It was outside its door that I explained to him my situation. I explained it as honestly as I could. He listened, and he afterward made a call to someone a few steps from me, just out of earshot. Then he put me in his car.

"I'm supposed to take you to Arrowhead," he tells me, with a voice that expresses both firmness and kindness. "It's down the hill in Colton."

"Yeah.

"It's pretty shitty."

"Yeah."

"But I talked with my supervisor and he says, he says that if it's okay with you, it'd be okay with us if I instead dropped you off at the crisis center in Victorville."

"What's a crisis center?"

“I can tell you what it’s not. It’s not the psych ward at Arrowhead. There they’ll lock you up for another 3 days, at least. The crisis center is an outpatient facility. They’ve got doctors and nurses and social workers. I don’t know if they can help you, but I know they’ll try. Which I really can’t say about Arrowhead.”

I don’t say anything. I don’t know what to say.

“I’ve taken people down there before,” he continues — “to the crisis center. It’s not bad. Really. And I don’t see how they can make things any worse for you. I hear they can help people with all sorts of things. They might not solve all your problems, but it’d be a start.”

“Yeah?” I mumble, while trying to pretend that I don’t find the idea a little enticing.

“And you can leave anytime you want,” he adds. “I’ll just drop you off. There won’t be any holds on you.”

“Is there a desert in Victorville?” I ask.

“It’s pretty much like Barstow. Maybe even worse.”

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Take me there.”

He speeds onto Interstate 15 heading south. He does this while telling the dispatcher over the radio where he’s taking me. He also calls the crisis center to let them know we’re coming. While he does all this, I sit back against the hard seat and try to keep my face in the one spot where unhot air flows to the back. I also try something I haven’t tried in a while: I try to think positively.

#

I’m sitting outside. I’m sitting outside the chapel on a bench.

We've just finished dinner, and we're waiting to do what just about everybody in America does on a Friday night: we're waiting to go to church.

Waiting with us is a woman. Her name is Beth, and she's Rick's girlfriend — one of the reasons he's still tethered to this place even though he's "graduated." She's pleasant enough, I guess, but homely — homely in every way someone can be homely. She's fat and plain and uninteresting.

Just as I think this, I see Rudi. I see her frowning at me. She's frowning because even though she's a punk she knows from experience that there's something interesting about everyone — even someone like Beth, and that I just need to find it. But I'm not Rudi.

I look at the two together, Beth and Rick. There doesn't seem to be much passion between them, or any really. They seem at most comfortable with each other. But I guess that's enough for some. It was never enough for me. Or Rudi.

Again, Rudi frowns. She frowns this time because she knows I'm right, and she goes away — and I'm left looking at Beth. We're sitting on the same bench. Beth notices this as well, and with obvious dread she grabs her homely purse — one in the shape of a frog — and moves it from next to her left thigh, which was facing me, to next to her right, which is facing her lucky boyfriend.

I should be offended by this. I wasn't even in reach of her homely purse, nor have I done anything to make her fear me. What's more, even in my emaciated and rotting state I'm as Howdy Doody as I've ever been. So I really should be offended, especially with it coming from someone who pretends to be so Christian. But I'm not offended. I almost want to laugh, not just at her, but at the hypocrisy of this whole fucking place.

I actually do hear laughing. Lots of it. This has happened because Little Jose has come walking up to us, wearing the most ridiculous orange tie imaginable. It's as wide as a truck and

shiny, and it conflicts with his purple dress shirt in every which way. Did I mention it was orange? But he's obviously proud of it. Even after he hears the laughter.

"Dude," Tony tells him, "you look like you've just stepped out of *That '70s Show*."

The laughter continues, and Jose is a little upset by it. He's upset because he doesn't understand it.

"Who tied your tie?" Rick asks.

"I did," Beth says. "I tie everyone's tie."

Not mine. That's because I'm not wearing one. Most of us aren't. Still, I think about getting the one tie I do have. But I don't think about it all that hard. Instead, I turn to my left and talk to Leo — one of my watering buddies.

Leo looks intelligent, and he is. He tells me that he once studied oceanography in college, even though he didn't go to school anywhere near the ocean. He tells me that he really liked the subject. But he liked booze more. Later on, after one too many DUIs, he was given a choice: either go to jail or come here — and strangely he chose the latter.

Other than me, Leo's probably the most secular person here, so he's easy to talk to. I don't have to watch my words. He wants to get out of here, too. Not just out of the home, but out of the whole Inland Empire, as they call it. He wants to become a beautician in San Francisco.

"I don't think the pastor would approve of that profession," I tell him.

"I think not," he tells me back.

"Or the city."

"Definitely not."

"All right — everyone in the van!" Chuck calls out from the driveway.

We all start marching. We march to a big white vehicle, which fits 15 of us, including the driver. How the rest will get to the church I don't know.

Quickly, we back out of the driveway. We back out and head down Lytle Creek Road — reversing the path I took here the night before. Like then, everything looks both beautiful and repulsive, and I try to judge the distance from the home to the bottom of the hill. Of course, I know it's 7 miles. But that number doesn't mean much to me. I'm trying to judge if I could walk it, and I'm doubtful.

While I continue to stare out the window, the driver turns on the radio, and the sounds of bad Christian rock pour out into the van. I've heard this station many times today. Too many. It seems to cycle the same 15 songs, but this song in particular they play a lot.

"Thy will be done," croons some woman, over and over and over. She does this until I want to smash the radio into a million little pieces. Something tells me, though, that even then she'd keep repeating this verse.

We're now exiting the forest. We exit it and reach the bottom of the hill, and we pass the onramps to Interstate 15 in Fontana, going both South and North. I stare at these onramps. I stare at them until they're no longer in sight, and even afterward I think about them. I know that the only escape from here lies through them. But to where?

We keep driving. We drive through anonymous streets and neighborhoods, and enter Bloomington — another city I never knew existed. It's the type of city you wouldn't remember even if you lived there. It couldn't be more meh.

The neighborhood slowly becomes less urban, and we make a few turns down semi-residential streets — and we head down an alley. At the end of this stands a big whitish church: the Pentecostal Church of God.

We park there, in the back of the lot. We do this and all of us get out of the van and walk up to the cathedral-like building. It's early, so not only are we the first ones there but the doors are locked. So we sit in the blistering evening sun and wait, and wait some more.

Finally, an aging woman lets us inside. She does this not so we can sit in the cool nave, but so that we can carry a bunch of heavy fruit boxes from the hallway into the kitchen. But this doesn't take long, and the woman then unlocks the nave. Some of us enter it while a few others, me included, use the restroom.

"If you go to the bathroom during the service," Carlos whispers to me as we walk through the bathroom door, "someone will watch you. They will follow you in here and watch everything you do."

"Why?" I ask.

"To make sure you don't talk with anyone. That's why Jose got a shitload of Mondays a while back, and why he's still watering those fucking trees after being here 6 months."

"He talked with someone?"

"He was talking up a girl."

"I'm surprised they didn't shoot him."

"Not for a first offense."

Both of us laugh, and I find myself in a real bathroom for the first time in a month. I mean, it's cool and everything's clean and it all works, and there are even paper towels. It even smells good. I'm in heaven. I'm in fucking heaven. I'm sitting in one of the stalls and thinking this must be what Heaven is like. I like it so much that I think about staying here during the whole service.

Of course, I don't. I get out and wash up, and — while careful not to look at my decaying image in the mirror — I leave. I do this and enter the nave — a big auditorium that reminds me of the synagogue I went to as a child. It even has the same plush carpet and the same three sections of soft chairs.

Right away, I see that all my fellow inmates are sitting in the far right section near the front. So I take a seat next to Tony and we wait. We wait for people to arrive.

Not many do — a few handful, and they sit as far from us as possible. They're sitting almost outside the church. Though a couple of people do come up to us to say hello to those they know before taking their seats.

I feel myself at this moment starting to fade — a product of the day's activities and the comfort of the chair. I'm sinking in it. I'm sinking into oblivion.

Something finally happens. The same woman who played the organ the night before at the home walks up front. She further climbs a small set of stairs and sits behind a much fancier organ than the one we have. A man then follows her. He walks up these same steps and stands behind the pulpit, and he smiles. He smiles the kind of phony smile only politicians and actors who've played Tartuffe know how to smile.

He keeps smiling. He smiles as he talks about his marriage and his upcoming anniversary, and he smiles even more when he tells us how his life was saved by the church. By the church and Jesus, and not necessarily in that order. He's as dull as he is dimwitted and sterile, and I'm having trouble keeping my eyes open.

He's now asking us to stand, and we do. We also start singing the same kind of inane and repetitive songs we were singing the night before. It goes on and on and on. It goes on until Pastor John arrives in another cheap and ill-fitting suit and takes the man's place.

Unlike the service at the home, four men walk through the aisles, collecting offerings with dark velvet pouches. Among these four is Ted, who doesn't go anywhere near us. Nor do the other three men.

The sermon soon commences, and it sounds much like the one the night before, and my eyes once again become heavy. I also glance at Tony, and I see that he's already sleeping, and

snoring lightly. This makes me want to do the same. I'm almost asleep, and I only wake when the pastor switches into full Sam Kinison mode and starts screaming his head off.

"How many of you here are willing to give your lives to Jesus?" he shouts. "I mean, how many of you are willing to come up right here and now and give yourself up to Him? To commit your body and soul to Jesus Christ, amen?"

He's so full of fury that he's shaking, and his voice bounces off the walls. But no one comes up to him. Not one person. I can't figure out whether this is because no one wants to come up or whether it's because they've already done so. Maybe he's only talking to the one non-Christian in the audience.

But I ain't getting up. I ain't going nowhere.

The sermon finally ends. It ends and it's time again for silent prayer. Like the day before, many people rush up front, and like then I just sit there. I sit there with my head in my hands, listening to the singer sing the same hauntingly beautiful song she sang the night before.

It doesn't quite hit me like it did then, but I can still feel it. I can also feel the pastor's hand on my shoulder, which feels good. Interestingly, even though my eyes are closed, this is the one moment in the service when I'm not sleepy. It's the one moment in the service where there's any kind of meaning.

The service is now over, and we file out of the nave — with not one of the congregants coming anywhere near us. Like Beth, they seem a little afraid of us, or at least apprehensive.

Quickly, we all leave the church. We've been here already 3 hours and it's dark out. It's still hot, too.

A bunch of us start creeping toward the van, not really wanting to go there, but not having anywhere else to go. Standing by the vehicle is Ted, which is strange, as he didn't come with us in the van. Even stranger, he seems both mad and aloof.

I ignore this, and I get in the van, along with everyone else.

“Guys,” Ted says. “I need to speak to you. I need to speak to all of you. You can’t fall asleep during service. It’s unacceptable.”

I want to reply to this. I want to tell him that if they don’t want us to doze off at night, perhaps they shouldn’t have us toil 5 hours in the hot sun during the day. But, of course, I say nothing.

“There’s an easy solution,” Ted goes on. “If you’re feeling sleepy, sit on the edge of your seat and lean forward onto the pew in front of you. It’s that simple.”

It’s so simple that I wonder if he’s speaking from experience. I wonder this but I don’t ask it.

“Is that clear, Tony?” Ted asks.

“I wasn’t sleeping,” Tony insists.

“The hell you weren’t! You were fucking snoring! So don’t give me no bullshit!”

Tony doesn’t respond, and Ted then names everyone else he saw sleeping, to make sure it was clear to all of them as well. A few people stupidly argue, but most just keep quiet.

“You, too, Collins,” he growls.

I don’t say a thing, but that doesn’t mean that I’m not thinking a thing. I’m thinking I want out, and not just out of the van. I want to run. I want to run just like Rudi would. But I just don’t have her balls.

#

I’m lying on my bed in Long Beach. I’m doing this and thinking about taking one last trip. A trip to the desert.

It’s actually not the first time I’ve thought about this. It’s not even the first time this week I thought about it. I had been there once before — at the Kelso Dunes in the Mojave Desert, and

I thought it was one of the most beautiful places I had ever seen, and I've seen lots of beautiful places. Then, then there was that quote from Meister Eckhart. Maybe He's leading me out there, I say to myself. Even if He's not, it's the perfect place to have it out with Him.

Having nothing left to lose, I get out of bed and limp to my computer, and I turn it on. I check both buses and trains leaving for Barstow, and this is not the first time I've done this this week.

The train is cheaper and faster, and probably more comfortable. It would also be going right through the desert instead of following along the interstate, so it would probably be prettier, too. There's only one problem. There's only one train every day, and it arrives 10:00 at night. From experience, I know it's never a good idea to arrive at a city you don't know at night.

Still, I gaze at the web page. I do this and see that there's exactly one ticket available. I have to decide. I have to decide right now. So I look and see Rudi, and I see she's not happy. She's not happy at all with me. So I hesitate. I hesitate before remembering once again I have no other options, and I buy not only the last train ticket but I also pay for a room at a Motel 6 not far from the station, thinking that I could head into the desert the following morning.

I feel sudden relief. I feel the best I've felt since slipping into my fugue. I'm even a little hungry, and with only a few hours left before I need to leave for Union Station, I rush out of my apartment on my gimpy ankle and go down the street to Rite Aid to buy some rice and ice.

They're both overpriced, and I'm now left with ten dollars. Which is all I've got in the world, if I don't count the few hundred I have left on the credit cards, assuming Chase is stupid enough to approve any more purchases.

While the rice is cooking, I put lots of ice in the bathtub — in the same place I lit the coals a few weeks earlier. I put it there and place my foot in it.

It's way too cold. It's so cold that it stings. So instead I put a little ice in a Ziploc bag and apply it to my foot off and on, and I feel a little better. I also eat the rice. I eat it right out of the cooker. I eat it plain, much as I've been doing much of the year. I eat it and look around the apartment, trying to decide what I'm gonna take with me. I only have a little more than an hour to decide and I'm only going to take a small backpack with me, so it's an impossible task. So many things I'll have to leave behind for good. Things that have made me who I am: books and music and paintings, and all sorts of mementos — of Eastern Europe and of college and of childhood — most of which are sitting in the big black steamer trunk in my bedroom. Then there are clothes and computers and all kinds of gadgets. There are lots of memories, too. But these don't take up space, and they come with me whether I want them to or not.

Finally, I decide to pack on instinct, and I just go through my apartment and fill my backpack until it can't be filled no more. I take mostly clothes. I even take two T-shirts with Rudi's image, and for no reason at all I even take a dress shirt and tie. For this very same reason, I also take my baseball card collection and my college diploma.

My backpack is now full. Though I can still attach things to the outside. So I fill a metal Vans water bottle — one I got a year earlier for helping clean the beach but have never used — and clip it to the sack.

It's now almost time. I put some more ice on my ankle and I wait for something. I wait for some grand epiphany I know will never come. I wait until I can wait no more, and I hop toward the door.

There I try not to look back. I try hard, and this I actually succeed at. I just walk out the door. Then, for no reason at all, I lock it.

#

The police car enters Victorville — a sad little city about an hour south of Barstow on Interstate 15.

Victorville is a place, like Fontana and Bloomington, that I had never heard of a week earlier. Though I've passed it. You actually can't drive from LA to Las Vegas (or back) without passing it. But that doesn't mean you actually see it.

We're now driving down Bear Valley Road, and all I can see are dreary auto stores and cheap restaurants, and other clumps of mislaid concrete. It's like God has shat a million tons of glass and cement onto the desert and let it rot here.

With bad country rock playing on the police car's radio, I try to see through the mess and find the wilderness beyond it, where I hope to maybe escape. But I can only spot glimpses of desert, and it looks far off.

"There's an In & Out near this place," the cop tells me, after glancing at me.

"Yeah?" I utter. I used to love eating at In & Outs, but they don't mean much to me anymore.

We soon turn onto Hesperia Road, which looks much like Bear Valley Road and every other road here. We turn onto it and into a strip mall, where oddly sits the Victorville Crisis Center among the schlock.

The cop now exits the car, and he struts to my door. Which he opens, and in the oppressive heat the two of us strut toward the entrance of the crisis center together. Each step is exhausting. But there are not too many.

"It's up to you now," he says as he points to the front door of the center.

"I'm free to go?" I ask, with one eye on the wilderness in the distance.

"I'm not gonna stop you. But give it a chance. That's all I ask."

The cop then struts back to his car and drives off, and part of me wants to run. It wants to run in the opposite direction and never stop running. But I don't run. I don't know what to do.

So I again look for Rudi. I look and look, and I see her looking through the glass door. She looks curious. So am I, and, with a bit of hesitation, I open the door and walk inside, and I find myself in a small reception area, where sit a couple of depressing looking people. There are also two doors leading deeper inside the building, and between them a reception desk, where sits a not-so-bright-looking woman in her thirties, who has way too much makeup.

Like with Beth, Rudi frowns at me, wanting me to look beyond what I can see. But it's difficult.

The receptionist smiles at me, and she says, "Can I help you?"

"That's the question," I say back, before explaining to her my situation.

"How did you get here?" she asks.

"The Barstow cop drove me," I tell her. "He said he called you."

"Where is he?"

"He left."

"He shouldn't've done that."

I shrug, and say, "He did."

"What's your crisis?" she goes on.

"I just told you."

"Tell me again."

"I want to kill myself," I utter.

"Oh," she utters back. "Right now you want to kill yourself?"

"Yeah."

"Oh."

She thinks about it for a few seconds, and hands me a 5-page form to fill out.

Reluctantly, I take it. I do this while eying the door. Something tells me to take off, especially as the sun will only be out for a few more hours, and I know finding the desert in the dark would be much harder. But I don't do this. I take the form, along with a pen, and I sit down.

The form asks me all sorts of questions. It asks me about who I am, and whether I'm in pain, and whether I want to hurt myself or others. I fill it out as best I can, and I hand it back to the not-so-bright-looking woman with too much makeup, and I wait. I wait and wait and again think about running out.

"Colin?" says a middle-aged woman, while peeking her head into the reception area. This woman has a condescending little smile, and in her hand is my 5-page questionnaire.

"Yeah," I say.

"I'm the program director here. Would you care to follow me, please."

I nod, and my backpack and I follow her inside the door and down a short corridor.

"I hear you're not too happy," she continues.

"I guess you can call it that," I tell her.

"We're gonna have you speak to our therapist in just a moment. Can I get you something to eat?"

"No, thank you."

"You sure? We've got those cheese crackers. You know the kind: Ritz with cheese in the middle. We got peanut butter ones, too. I think we even got some Hot Pockets and burritos."

"I'm fine."

We've now stopped. We've stopped at the end of the hallway, and the woman points inside a small room, toward a small leather couch. She does this while saying, "If you can just wait here."

I really don't want to wait. I don't want to do anything, but I nod and step inside the room, and I sit on the couch.

"Perhaps we'll also have you speak to our nurse," she adds.

I say nothing and she leaves, and the waiting begins once more — and continues.

It's only broken when another woman comes to my door. She's a little older than the first — in her mid 60s, and little larger. But other than that she's the same woman.

"I'm the therapist," she tells me, along with her name, which I immediately forget. "Well, officially, I'm not a therapist yet. I'm still in training. But I'm the best we've got at the moment."

I nod. I'm not sure what else to do.

"Would you care to step into my office," she goes on.

I nod again, and my backpack and I follow her down the corridor, toward the same door I came through when I got here. We further enter an office, and she sits behind a desk while I sit in a chair next to it.

"No couch?" I ask.

"I'm afraid not," she replies. "I'm not that kind of therapist."

We then discuss my case. We discuss it for about five minutes, and she offers me two choices. "Your first option," she says, "is that you walk out the door. You can walk out right now and that will be the end of it. Whatever you do afterward is up to you."

"And my second option?" I ask.

"I can 5150 you."

"What does that mean?"

She shows me a one-page form, aptly labeled "5150," and she says, "It places you in a hospital for 72 hours, where they'll try to help you through your depression."

"I've just been through that."

“I’m talking about a hospital that can provide psychiatric care.”

“Like Arrowhead?”

“Not like Arrowhead. That’s the worst. I’d never send anybody there. Believe me, we have lots of experience with them, and all of it’s bad.”

“Then, where?”

“Canyon Ridge in Chino.”

“That’s where they wanted to send me earlier.”

“It’s a good place. I can vouch for it. Then, after you finish your stay there and have been stabilized, we’ll bring you back here. I will personally help you find a job, and a place to stay.”

“You can do that?”

“I sure can.”

“It’s hard to believe.”

“It might not be a great job at first, or a nice place to live, but it’ll be a start. I’m talking about a warehouse job, and a hole in the wall to stay. But it’ll be a start. So, what do you say?”

“Can I think about it?”

“You’ve got a minute.”

“I guess, I guess I could always kill myself afterward.”

“That’s right.”

“All right.”

The therapist starts to fill out the form, and I feel a little hopeful. I even feel a little hungry when I return to the small room with the small leather couch. So, while the woman arranges for me to leave, I have some of those Ritz crackers with cheese and peanut butter. I even have a Hot Pocket. I then go to a TV lounge behind the reception desk. They’ve got a big

TV and sofas, and lots of depressing people sitting there. I sit with them. I sit until a tall black woman comes for me.

“I’m the nurse,” she says.

I nod, and she leads me into a tiny room, where she takes my blood pressure and temperature. I also discuss my situation for at least the tenth time that day, though I can’t imagine why if I’m just about to leave.

Finally, we’re done and the two of us exit her office. There we see a twentyish woman sitting behind a desk in front of a phone, with a heavysset man a little older than her standing beside her.

“We couldn’t get him into Canyon Ridge,” she says to the nurse.

“Why not?” the nurse asks.

“They won’t take his insurance, not for adult care.”

“But the nurse at Barstow said that they already had a spot for me there,” I insist.

“Not anymore. So, I called San Bernardino Community, and they said they’d take him.”

“What’s San Bernardino Community?” I ask.

“A hospital,” she replies.

“Like Arrowhead?”

“It’s pretty much the same,” the man standing there mumbles.

“Pretty much the same?”

I suddenly realize something. I realize I’ve been baited and switched.

“I’m not going there,” I tell them.

“It’s too late,” the nurse tells me back. “We’ve already filled out the 5150.”

“The hell it’s too late.”

My backpack and I rush toward the exit.

“If you leave,” the nurse cries out, “we’ll have to call the cops.”

“Go right ahead!”

I rush into the reception area, and I also rush outside into the sweltering sunset. I rush toward the desert in the distance.

“Come back, Colin!” some woman screams from behind me.

I spin around, and I see all of them by the front door: the nurse, the therapist, the director — even the woman with way too much makeup. They are all calling for me to return. But I’m not listening.

#

“You thinking of walking yet?”

This question comes from Giuseppe — the big old man I saw when I first walked into the chapel two days earlier. He’s actually from Italy, but he’s been in America since childhood, so you would never know he was Italian unless you knew his name.

Giuseppe is a favorite whipping boy around here, mostly because he’s annoying and non-threatening, and doesn’t shower or wash his clothes. He’s also the one person here who doesn’t have a serious problem. He’s here because he’s old and his family wanted to get rid of him, and they have — all for the low, low price of his social security check. Because of this, and his age, he’s even excused from chores.

Strangely, Giuseppe still loves his family for some reason. He’s often talking about his many daughters and how beautiful they are, and how they’ll all be coming to see him real soon.

“Walking?” I utter from the first pew, while waiting for the Bible study to begin.

“Leaving the home,” Chuck interjects from his usual perch upfront. “That’s what we call it: walking. All of us have thought about it, and just about all of us have done it at some time. Some more than once. But we all come back. So, if you do think of walking, you might just want

to think about that as well. You might even want to think about staying, too, and you probably should.”

I’m actually not thinking about walking, or staying. I don’t want to do either.

Bible study starts, and it’s pretty much like the day before. We’re reading different verses, but they are all the same. With one big exception. This verse from *Psalms* 24: “Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in.”

I recognize this verse. I recognize it as the basis of the Bad Brains’ song “King of Glory.” They play it in a cult YouTube video filmed at CBGB in the early 1980s, which I’ve seen more times than I could ever count. “King of Glory” was one of many Gospel-themed reggae songs they played in between their punk classics.

I think about the song, and do so with a smile. I think about how beautiful it is, and how much better it is than the crappy songs we sing in service, and I think how much I want to hear it right now. I can even see Rudi gently swaying to it, much like the punks were doing that night — a night none of them could have ever forgotten.

I wonder what the pastor would make of Bad Brains, and all those punks grooving to the Bible. It would literally blow his mind, and this makes me smile even more.

Bible study ends. It ends and Chuck doles out the chores, which are mostly the same as yesterday. The only differences I can see are two: Manny takes three guys to help him minister to homeless people down the hill in San Bernardino, and Chuck assigns someone to clean Giuseppe’s bed and its surroundings, which everyone believes is the likely cause of a bedbug outbreak in his cabin.

I’m almost happy to be watering again.

We're dismissed, and I follow Tony. I follow him the best I can out of the chapel, and we get our buckets out of the shed. I also follow him across the street to the pastor's house. It's Saturday, but it doesn't feel like it. It feels just like yesterday, and what most days to come will likely feel like.

Tony's angry. I don't know if he's angry with me or with something else, but he suddenly stops, and while pointing in the direction of the trees, he barks: "You can water the trees without me."

I don't even respond to this. I just continue limping toward the creek, and I fill my bucket. It's leaking a bit, but not so much that it matters. Even if it were leaking more than just a bit it wouldn't matter. I then start watering, and I notice that there are more people watering today. Probably because there are less people working outside the home. One of these people is John. Not Pastor John but John the guy who was sitting next to me that first night of church, who seems to be scrutinizing what I'm doing.

"How many times are you watering that tree?" he demands.

"Does it matter?" I ask.

"Every tree is supposed to be watered exactly 4 times."

"Dude, there are like a dozen of us out here for 5 hours. How are we supposed to water each tree only 4 times?"

He doesn't have an answer to this, and I continue watering. Back and forth I go, and once again I'm hot and tired and bored, and aching all over. Still, I keep moving, back and forth as best I can. After one of these back and forths, I see lots of people slacking off by the creek. So, I slack off, too.

"Where's Roberto?" Tony asks. He's not asking me, but everyone.

"He's in the bathroom," says Little Jose. "He's got the runs."

Tony chuckles at this, and I notice that his temperament has changed completely from a half hour earlier.

“What about you?” he asks me.

“What about me?” I ask back.

“You got the runs?”

“No.”

“Don’t worry. You will.”

I ignore this and fill up my bucket.

“Are you fucking blind?” he calls out to me.

“What?” I utter.

“Your bucket’s leaking.”

“So?”

A bunch of them laugh at me, and Jose offers me one of his buckets.

“It’s not gonna make any difference,” I insist, but I take the bucket and toss mine onto the ground. I do this just as Roberto shows up.

“You okay?” I ask.

“I’m fine,” he replies. “Now I’ve got an excuse for going inside.”

Tony right then tosses his water at Roberto, and the two continue their water fight from the day before, with both of them getting soaked. Joining in as well is Jose, and he gets soaked, too.

Me, I just fill my bucket and start off.

“Don’t think you’re gonna go unscathed,” Tony says to me.

I ignore this. I ignore it and return to my fun. Time seems to be moving even slower than the day before. I don’t know whether it’s because it’s hotter or because the work seems more

tedious the second time through, but I'm almost looking forward to a day full of church. I'm also giving some thought to walking.

#

I am walking. I'm walking along 2nd Street in Long Beach toward the Metro station downtown, taking the exact opposite path I took when I first came to this city 13 years ago.

I'm walking and trying not to look back. I'm also trying to not look to my left, at the ocean. Which is to me now what punk rock was to me when I was younger: an escape. I could've lived anywhere, in any country, and I picked here, just because I love the ocean. I've loved it since I was living in Europe. There's just something about it that makes me feel just a little more alive than when I'm without it.

Long Beach has lots of ocean. It doesn't have the prettiest beaches or the cleanest water, but it has lots of ocean, and this ocean has always been a salvation, if only a temporary one. No matter how bad things were going, I could always find refuge there, at least for a few hours. But no longer. No longer will I feel its breeze or smell its odor. No longer will I be able to look out into its infiniteness. No longer will I ever see it.

It's a beautiful day today. It's the opposite of the previous one. The sun is out, but it is not hot. It's cool. It's perfect. It's the kind of day that used to bring me happiness. Slowly, I pass Alamitos Avenue. This is my last chance to look. To look at the water. But I don't look. I've passed looking back, or even sideways.

#

I hang a right. I hang it down Jasmine Street, in beautiful Victorville.

I figure the people from the crisis center have seen me do this, so I make another right, right into a shopping center. I also for the first time ever enter a Del Taco — thinking they'd never expect me to be sitting right across the street from them.

While I haven't gotten very far, it's far enough that I'm sweating and exhausted. So I think about buying a drink with the little money I have left. But I can't even see drinks on the menu, and no one's paying attention to me anyway, even though there's no one else here.

So I leave, and I walk toward a Vons a short distance away. I've actually remembered my promise to never enter one again, but I give myself a special one-time dispensation and step inside. I do this and look for the drink aisle.

"Hey!" an unseen woman barks.

Startled, I jump a bit and spin toward the woman — and I almost raise my hands in surrender, thinking she must be a cop.

But she's not a cop. She's just a security guard. "No backpacks in here!" she growls, while glaring at me as if I were Charles Manson. "You can leave it by the entrance."

I nod, but I don't leave nothing, especially myself. Instead, I rush out the doors. I do this and see a Subway next door. A sign on the window mentions an extra-large soft drink for a dollar, and this sign leads me inside.

There I get a lemonade. I get one with lots of ice, and I sit on a bench outside Vons — and I guzzle about half the drink, without it doing a thing for my thirst. It's now almost dark out, and I have no idea where I'm going, and I have less of an idea what I'll do when I get there. But I tell myself that it has to be better than where I've been or where I was about to go.

Eventually, I start walking. I walk in the direction of the desert. The problem is that I can't see much ahead of me and I'm tired and weak. I can also feel my heart starting to pound, which I think has something to do with all the sugar in the lemonade, which makes me realize a little too late what a mistake it was getting it. Fortunately, there's no more left. I'm just sucking ice.

I've now reached a dead end, and I turn in the only direction I can: left. I also continue walking. I walk down one of many street blocks here in the desert that are just way too long.

It finally comes to an end, and it's another dead end. This one forces me to make another left, toward Hesperia Road and where I started. Which causes me to curse. I curse myself and do it loudly. I also toss my near empty soda cup into a garbage can.

I've wasted so much time and energy, and I see that the trip is yet another metaphor for my life. I also see that I have two viable choices at the moment: I can either crawl back to the crisis center and give up, or I can continue trying to find the desert. Rudi would know what to go. But I'm not her. I can't even see her out here. So I just rush forward, away from the crisis center — telling myself that I won't stop until I reach the desert. I keep telling myself this. I tell it in spite of my fatigue and my ankle and my lightheadedness, and in spite of my heart, which is pounding even harder than before. It feels like it's gonna explode through my chest.

I come to yet another street corner. Ahead to my right is a field, covered in sand and tumbleweed, and I try to convince myself that this is desert. But it isn't. It's just a field. It even has a for sale sign posted on it. So I again move forward. I push myself, as hard as I can. But it's no use. I'm getting nowhere and I feel like I'm gonna have a heart attack. So I stop, at a bus stop, while waiting for my heart to return to something approaching normal.

If I were actually waiting for a bus right now, it would never come. But since I'm not, it comes right away. It comes and I stand up. Not to get on the bus, but to slither back to the crisis center. I'm not even sure I can make it back, even though it's only a few blocks away.

Slowly, I move. I move like I was in slow motion, stopping at every bus stop to rest. I think I'm gonna collapse at any moment. But I don't. I make it to the crisis center, and I reach for the door. Which is locked. So I ring the bell.

A buzzer sounds, and the door unlocks, and I enter.

“Did the cops bring you?” asks the director, with a big happy smile.

I shake my head. I shake it and say, “I give up. Do what you want with me.”

#

Sean was one of the three who went down the hill to minister this morning. So that meant he couldn’t cook lunch today. So that means all we have to eat is rancid bologna sandwiches, and only one each.

I’m starving, especially since I didn’t have much breakfast, which was scrambled eggs again and some kind of porridge. But I guess starving is better than not being hungry at all. Right?

I step outside. I do this and discover that it’s gotten a lot hotter since morning. Like the afternoon before, I also notice that many robots have slipped off somewhere. But I keep going. I keep watering the trees. Though, like the day before, I keep putting less and less water in my bucket. It’s now maybe a quarter full as I make my way from the creek.

This is when it happens. I’m covered in wetness. I also hear laughter, and I turn around and see Tony and his empty bucket, with Roberto and Jose nearby.

“I told you you wouldn’t go unscathed,” Tony says.

Instinctively, I rush toward him, and he runs off. But with my bad ankle I can’t follow, so I toss my water at him. Though somehow most of it lands on me. Now people are really laughing, and they’re also making all kinds of jokes at my expense.

It’s times like these that I really wish I were Rudi. First, she’d somehow get the best of Tony. But also she’d never look like such a fool. I’m such a fool that even I have to chuckle at myself. Rudi’s chuckling, too, from under a nearby tree. Not even she can hide it.

I ignore all this. I ignore it and fill my bucket again — this time halfway, and I go back to watering, with hours still to go.

They go slower and slower, and so do I. I'm ready to collapse. I'm ready to fall over and sink into the overwatered ground in front of me. Instead, I find myself once again at the foundation. There I sit next to Tony and Jose, who are taking another break. I also see that Tony's personality has swung back into the opposite direction. He's angry again and telling Jose that he's gonna walk soon. He's just waiting for the right time.

"Taco Bell said I could work there anytime I wanted," he tells Jose.

"Where will you live?" Jose asks, clearly trying to dissuade his only real friend in the home.

"My dad. Maybe."

I feel more depressed listening to them than when I was watering, so I think about going back to it. I think this just as the thin Mexican guy approaches us — the one with the crazy smile.

He hasn't said a thing since I've been here, or communicated with anyone in any way as far as I can tell. Nor has he changed his clothes or showered. Both Tony and Jose notice him, too. They notice him and hush as he passes, and I murmur: "What's up with that guy?"

"He's a fucking psycho," Jose murmurs back. "You see those marks by his eyes?"

"Yeah."

"They're gang marks. It means he's killed two people."

"That's good to know."

"Just stay away from him."

Another inmate crosses our path. Another who hasn't spoken since I've been here. This one is middle-aged and plump.

"And what's his story?" I whisper.

"His name's Pat," Tony tells me. "He was actually doing pretty good here. He was even working outside. A lot."

“What happened?”

“He was supposed to chaperone someone down the hill, and instead he went off and got drunk in a bar.”

“What did they do to him?”

“He’s been watering 5 months straight.”

This is when I decide to return to watering myself. Back and forth I go, and forth and back. It’s almost three, or so I hope, because I have to go to the bathroom. I have to go badly. But this does nothing to speed time, which just goes even slower.

Finally, it’s three and Chuck waves us in — and I chuck my bucket onto the ground and gimp as fast as I can out of the pastor’s backyard and across the street, and into the men’s bathroom. Which hardly has any toilet paper.

But it has just enough, and I almost feel human as I reach to flush the toilet. Which doesn’t flush. It doesn’t and it’s not a pretty sight. Or smell.

Sheepishly, I step out of the bathroom and see Carlos talking with Tony by the dining room table. “Hey,” I utter, with an embarrassed grin. “What do I do if the toilet won’t flush?”

“What day is it?” Carlos asks.

“Saturday.”

“That’s why it doesn’t flush.”

“What do you mean?”

“The tourists are using it.”

“Using what?”

“You see, there’s only so much water in the area, and when there are lots of tourists by the creek, like there always are on summer weekends, they use all of it. Pastor wants to build a water tank on the hill, but until then . . .”

“Until then what am I supposed to do about the toilet?”

“Just wait. The water will eventually come.”

“But it’s really bad.”

“You got the runs?” Tony says with a smile.

“I got the runs,” I say back without a smile.

“Let me see what I can do,” Carlos tells me, and he rises to his feet.

“I guess this means no showers,” I utter.

“You guess right.”

It’s almost time to do laundry, but I wonder if I can. So I go outside to the machines, where sits Paul, who’s sitting there just like he was two nights earlier, looking comatose. I’ve learned that he spends most of his time sitting here like that, while doing other people’s laundry for \$5 a load. That is, for those who have \$5, which is not me.

“Are they working?” I ask, while pointing at the noisy machines.

“They’re working,” he replies in that high-pitched voice of his. “But it’s taking a long, long time.”

“Time I have,” I tell him.

#

I step onto a Blue Line Metro train at Long Beach Boulevard.

I’ve done this countless times over the years, but this is different, because it will be my last.

The train is mostly empty, which is not unexpected on a beautiful Sunday afternoon. It’s also quiet as it meanders out of Long Beach and into Compton and South Central Los Angeles. It’s too quiet. I’ve been hoping for something to remember — even something bad — but there

just isn't. So I take another ride with Rudi. I do this while staring into the decay outside the windows. I need to think something good. I need to think it right now.

We've now arrived. We're at 7th Street Station in downtown Los Angeles, and I return to the train. I also exit it and go downstairs to the Red Line. I've done this countless times before, but this will be the first time that I'll be heading in the direction of Union Station.

It's only a couple of stops, and it quickly gets there and I get off. I get off the train and rise to ground level, and I follow the Amtrak signs. It's a long and convoluted path, but time I have. I have hours before my train.

Eventually, I find the gate, and I wait in the smallish lobby. There's not much here, besides a few tiny fast food places. There isn't even a ticket booth, or even a ticket machine. There are also no Amtrak people at all, and few travelers. Though there is a big fish tank here for some reason, and a few sad-looking fish inside it. I wonder if anyone even feeds them.

Having nothing better to do, I sit down. I sit and watch the fish move around and go nowhere. They are much like me. Which means that I've found yet another metaphor for my life.

#

I wake up. I wake and find myself in the small corner office of the crisis center. I'm lying on the small leather couch, which is too small to even support my small body.

The night before, when I came back after my attempted escape, it was too late to drive me to the hospital. So they say they'll be doing it later this morning at 11:00. It's now a little after 7:00, and until then there's not much to do. Actually, there's nothing to do. So I go to the bathroom. I go there and look at myself in the mirror from the head up. I'm a mess. I'm such a mess, and I want to stop being this way. I want to stop being any way. But I can't, and I know I can't. All I can do is clean myself up a bit, which is difficult with no shower. I wet down my graying curly brown hair and shave, and brush my teeth. I do all this and exit the bathroom.

“You shouldn’t be using that bathroom,” a woman down the hallway growls. “It’s not for clients. There’s another one by the TV lounge.”

I nod. I do this for no reason at all and walk around the square-shaped corridor and come to the lounge, where a half-dozen depressing people are watching a DVD of *The Fantastic Four*. I also watch, and quickly become as depressing as them.

Soon, they feed us breakfast. They feed us Hot Pockets and frozen burritos — the kind I used to buy from Vons, three for a dollar.

We’re now watching something else. We’re watching some kind of Dr. Seuss movie, made with 3D animation. I’ve actually made 3D animated films myself. Shorts. I even had one shown at the world’s most prestigious animation festival in Annecy, France. I thought at the time that this was the start of a big career. But it was all downhill from there.

There’s another guy in the TV lounge waiting with me for a ride. He’s old and worn, and he’s way more impatient to get somewhere than I am. Every twenty minutes he asks a receptionist where he can pick up a bus to take him where he wants to go, only to be told that there is no bus to where he wants to go. Still, he keeps asking. He keeps hoping for a different answer.

It’s now past 11:00. It’s way past 11:00, and still no one has shown up to drive us. So we keep waiting, and I glance at the woman sitting in the chair to my right. She’s a little older than me, and she’s here with her obviously troubled son, who looks about 30. She’s also reading some kind of Christian self-help book. I think she’s looking for answers in it, answers to questions she probably never thought she’d ever ask. She probably doesn’t even know how to ask them.

I look at the clock again, and it’s almost noon, and me and the old man get some news. We learn that the driver we’re waiting on has to take his son somewhere, and that he’ll be here afterward, within the hour.

More waiting ensues, and it's now past 1:00, and the driver is still not here. Worse, I can no longer take the depressing people in the lounge, including me. Nor can I take the lounge or the crisis center itself, and I get up and slip out into the waiting area and out the front door. I also think about going to the desert. I know I wouldn't have trouble finding it now.

But it's already approaching 100 degrees and I just don't have the energy, or the will. So, I just stand there. I stand on the edge of the lawn like I'm waiting for something.

"Colin," comes a soft female voice.

I turn around. I do this and see the woman with way too much makeup, who's holding open the front door for me. It's a new day — and a Saturday as well — but she still has too much makeup.

She nods inside the building, toward the only place there is to go.

I nod back, and I walk inside with her, and we sit in the waiting area together.

"He'll be here soon," she tells me.

I shrug.

"It's gonna be okay," she continues.

"How do you know?" I ask.

"Because I see lots of people like you."

"Not like me."

"You'd be surprised. And they always come through. You will, too."

I don't respond, and she returns to her desk, and I notice a couple of depressing people in the waiting area with me: a man and a woman. They're both in their twenties and attractive, and it only takes a few minutes of listening to them to know that they both have substance problems. They are nothing like me.

I talk to the guy a little. He's waiting for his parents to come and pick him up, and take him home. We're opposites, him and me. He can't understand why I want to kill myself, and I can't understand why he wants to spend his life in hospitals. That's what he wants. He wants to be doped up and taken care of, and those are the last two things I want. Actually, I don't want them at all.

I again look at the clock, and it's now a bit after two.

Finally, the driver shows up. He's apologetic, but he needn't be. I no more want to leave than I want to stay.

We soon leave — the driver, the old man, and me. We leave in a dark blue SUV, and it only takes a few blocks of driving before I see that I was only a short distance from the desert the night before. If I had just kept going another few blocks I would've been there, and I grin at this.

The old man gets off first. He gets off at some Christian drug rehab center outside Victorville. The place is barren and dusty and sad, but the old man is happy. He's happy to be going somewhere.

We wait while he does. We wait until someone lets the old man inside the complex. We then get onto Interstate 15 a short distance away, and we take the same road I took here, heading south. With each trip, I'm getting farther from where I wanted to go, and each time this is happening against my will. But knowing this doesn't help me at all.

It's a long drive down the hill to San Bernardino. A long steep one. It's like descending into a pit. Deeper we go, with the surrounding mountains rising above us, threatening to swallow us whole. The drive's not only deep but quiet. The driver and I are very much strangers — strangers in an awkward situation, with nothing really to say to each other. Our paths have crossed for this one flickering instant, and we know there will be no further instants, so why even bother?

Finally, we're here. We've reached San Bernardino, at the bottom of everything. We've reached both it and the hospital, which seems about twice the size of Barstow's. From the lot I can also see patches of what looks like desert not far away in the hills, and my mind wanders toward it.

While I do this, we park. We park in the lot and the driver accompanies me inside. He must do this, and we find ourselves in a big and packed waiting area. So I expect to wait awhile.

But we don't wait. My guide leads me to the reception desk, where sits a woman who clearly knows him, and knows what he is doing there with me. She takes my insurance card, and she makes a photocopy of it, and creates one of those white bracelets hospital patients always wear, which she doesn't hand me. Instead, she directs me to an admitting nurse, who eyes me warily. So I eye him back the same.

"What's the problem?" he asks, with a partial grin that looks a permanent feature of his face. He asks me this without an ounce of empathy or emotion.

I explain to him my situation, and he gives me an incredulous look. But in spite of this he admits me, and he takes my measurements. I weigh 129 pounds. The last time I checked my weight I was over 150, and even then I was thin.

It's time for the driver to say goodbye. He does this and leaves, and the nurse leads me deeper into the hospital. We soon pass through some swinging doors, and we find ourselves in a different waiting area. This waiting area is for those who have been admitted to the hospital but don't yet have a room, and this waiting area is much bigger than the other.

The nurse and I continue walking, and he brings me to a short and stout and thoroughly pissed-off looking security guard. He does this and walks off.

"Strip to your underwear," the guard barks. "And empty the contents of your backpack onto the floor." He also gives me a tray for my valuables, or what passes as my valuables.

I start stripping, and at the same time another nurse comes up to me and gives me a gown. He also takes my blood pressure and temperature — something that's been done dozens of times to me in the past week, for no obvious reason.

While all this is happening, the guard continues his barking. He barks like a dog. Not at me, but at just about everyone else. Everyone else who's not obeying his commands to the letter, which is just about everyone else.

"I told you to sit down," he growls at one guy. "What did I tell you about moving?" he yells at another. "Shut the fuck up!" he screams at a third.

He also goes through my stuff, and I'm sure he's gonna give me shit for my pepper spray, but he just logs it in. He logs it in as if it were no different than my keys. Then, he goes through my valuables, and he finds a black leather notebook, which he opens. He opens it and his eyes light up.

"Are these your baseball cards?" he asks.

"Yeah," I mumble.

"It's a pretty impressive collection."

I shrug.

"You've been collecting long?" he continues.

"They're from my childhood," I tell him, without telling him that they are the last things I have from my childhood.

"I'll make sure they're safe," he says, and I have no doubt that I'll never see them again. But I don't care. I just sign a document listing my valuables, and he puts them in one large envelope. He further puts the rest of my things in plastic bags.

"Sit down," he then orders, while pointing to the empty seat next to him.

I do what he says. I sit next to another waiting patient, who himself is waiting next to another. I do this just as two nurses aides walk by, wheeling a gurney with a crazed-looking woman strapped to it.

“Where you taking her?” the guard asks.

“Closed East,” one of the aides replies.

The security guard chuckles at this. He chuckles as if it were some big joke. But his lightened mood doesn’t last, as he notices that the seat next to the guy I’m sitting next to is now free.

“Move on down,” he barks.

So we move on down, closer to who knows what.

#

I’m hanging my wet clothes. I’m hanging them on a clothes line just like my mother’s family must’ve done back in Brooklyn.

This makes me think about them, and how they came to America to escape both poverty and tasks like this, and how disappointed they would be right now if they could see me.

I’m running out of clothes line. I’m running out even though there are lots of clothes lines here. They’re everywhere. They go from building to building and around them, too. They are also by the free weights. There are even clothes lines above the beds in the barn, though I really don’t see the point of those.

Most of these clothes lines are full right now. There is just one free patch available to the right of the farthest cabin up the hill, and I’m using every inch of it, while trying to keep my balance on the loose flooring. There is such little space here that I’m doubling up socks.

Fortunately, it’s warm and sunny out, even in the early evening. So I expect my clothes won’t take long to dry. At worst they’ll be ready in the morning. But I wonder how I will dry

them when it's not so warm and sunny out. I especially wonder what will happen when the winter rains come, even though I really don't want to think about the changing weather. This place is miserable enough when it's nice out. Still, this change is coming, whether I want it or not. It's not even August yet and there was a chill in the air this morning. A chill that's gotta get worse.

I finally finish my hanging. I do this and notice interesting smells coming from the chapel. I also notice that I'm hungry, so I scamper inside the chapel, and through the open kitchen door I see Chuck cooking.

"What are you making?" I ask, feeling myself drifting toward the smell.

"London broil," he says.

"London broil?" I say back with an uncontrolled smile. "I haven't had that since, since I was a kid."

Reflexively, I recall London broil and its taste, and all the meals my mother made that I've never had since. I also recall the innocence that came with them. An innocence that's so far from here.

"What's London broil?" asks one of the inmates, from right behind me. The question comes from a guy with a twang that makes him sound Southern, even though I know he's from San Bernardino.

"It, it's a kind of meat," says Mike — the tall and grumpy aging man with drooping jowls, who seems to rarely venture from his seat by the door in the second pew. "I don't much care for it myself."

"It's gonna be late," Chuck says. "I miscalculated how long it would take."

I nod, and I go outside. There I sit on the porch bench and glance at some inmates playing basketball. But I don't glance long. Instead, I turn my gaze toward the mountains and the trees in

front of me. They're everywhere and it's some sight. It's a fucking postcard. It's the kind of image you can't even Photoshop. It's so beautiful that it almost makes living here worth it.

Chuck steps outside, and we talk. We talk mostly about him. We talk about Berkeley in the early 1970s, and all the wild times he had. We also talk about his time in Chile.

Chuck and I don't like each other much, but we're pretty much the only educated people here, and having an intelligent conversation is no small thing, for either of us. It's an escape. It's an escape even more powerful than drugs, because it gives off hope.

Dinner is soon ready, and it's wonderful. I mean, it's perfect. It's the kind of meal you can inhale. Chuck is an even better cook than Ted, which is saying something, and not only am I full but I feel good. I feel good even though I still feel guilty about no longer being a vegetarian. I hope Rudi can one day forgive me for that. More importantly, I hope I can forgive me.

I feel so good right now that I don't even mind spending Saturday night in church. I even get a good seat, way before it's to start.

Guests begin to arrive. This includes a woman in her thirties, along with her husband and small children, which includes a way too cute baby girl, who's got a pink ribbon around her head. They look like a happy family, and not a phony happy, either.

The woman goes through the pews. She does this and warmly says hello to everyone, and she introduces herself to me as the pastor's daughter. She also says that she's happy to meet me, and she sounds sincere about it.

Soon, the pastor arrives. He arrives and walks up behind the pulpit, and his daughter joins him. She then leads the congregation in song. We stand and sing — or, I should say, everyone but me sings. We sing the same kind of trite and repetitive and outdated songs we've sang at the two previous services I've attended. For all I know they might be the same songs. It's torturous,

but like all torturous things, it eventually comes to an end, and we all sit down. We sit and the pastor asks if anyone would like to stand up and express thanks for something.

A handful of people do. They talk mostly about how they're thankful that they're no longer on drugs or booze, and that they're hopeful that they're on a better path. Among these people is Roberto, who seems to be getting more and more connected to the place every moment he's here.

Even I think about standing up and saying something. But I really don't have anything to be thankful about. Besides Rudi, and I don't think they'd understand her. The pastor certainly wouldn't. Though I wish I could be thankful about something else, too. I really wish it.

The pastor begins his sermon. He begins it by talking about his well spent youth. He talks about his high school years, and his metal shop teacher, and he talks about his first year at Bible college. He especially talks about how he never got enough to eat that year.

"That's why I always make sure you fellows have enough to eat," he tells us, with a big grin. "Things here may not always be perfect, but you always get plenty to eat."

Of course he leaves out the part about where the food's coming from, and who's paying for it. But I guess that's just an unnecessary detail. A detail that makes me grin.

He soon finishes his remembrances. He finishes them and we begin reading from the *First Book of Kings*. We're reading about the construction of Solomon's temple and the Holy of Holies in particular. The pastor is clearly enamored and even awed by the spectacle of it. Which I find kind of odd. I find it odd that a Christian minister would be so interested in what is essentially a synagogue. Even odder is that he knows more about it than the average Jew. He certainly knows more than me.

But the sermon really isn't about Solomon or his temple. It's about a craftsman named Hiram — a man Solomon has hired from afar and brought to Israel, to build some bronze pillars for the temple.

"Here was a simple man," the pastor says. "He was no king. He was no prophet. He was no different than you and me. And yet he did this one great thing with his life. He created something he and his family and his family's family could visit with pride for years afterward. He created something that justified his life. You, too, can be like Hiram. You can be just like him. You can create your own bronze pillars. You can be someone. All you have to do is follow the path that is right in front of you. You just have to follow it."

There's no screaming tonight. There are no threats of eternal damnation. He's inspiring even, and I want to believe him. Moreover, I want to believe in him.

The sermon ends. It ends and the service as well, and I walk up to the pastor and I shake his hand. I even smile.

He smiles back. He does this and says, "You're looking much better than the day before."

"Thank you," I tell him. I also tell him that I liked his sermon. I further mention that my last name means that I'm descended from the high priests — the only ones who were allowed in the Holy of Holies.

"And only on one day of the year," he exclaims, with his finger pointed and a big smile on his face.

Again, I'm impressed with him, and again I want to like him. Moreover, I want him to like me.

#

I'm walking up a ramp. I'm walking up a long ramp at Union Station, which is difficult with my ankle throbbing.

Still, I reach the top. I reach it and it's like stepping into the center of the sun. It feels like it's 30 degrees hotter than Long Beach even though it's six in the evening. It's humid, too, and I can hardly breathe. It's so bad that I think about returning to the lobby. But that would mean more walking — a lot more. So I just stand there. I stand and wait for the train with a few others, who are probably not going to Barstow. Not with the train going all the way to Chicago.

We wait some more in the heat, and some more people come, in some kind of a buggy. I'm in the way, so I have to move. I have to move further into the sun, where I wait some more.

The train's now late, even though this is the first stop. Lots more people are waiting in the heat, and they don't look happy. I'm sure neither do I. I am about to ride out into the unknown, and I'm not doing so exactly triumphantly.

Finally, the train comes. It comes but it's not clear where I should go. Nothing on my ticket indicates what car I'm supposed to sit in. Others seem to have the same problem. There's chaos and only a trio of conductors, who are swamped by this chaos.

Eventually, it's my turn in front of one of them, and I show him the ticket on my phone.

"Next car," he growls, while barely looking at my device. So I limp to the next car, and I wait in the line. It moves fast, and I reach the front of it and show the conductor my ticket.

"Do you have a boarding pass?" she asks.

"Should I have one?" I ask back. She then asks me where I'm going, and I tell her, and she points to the next conductor. So I limp to this one, and I finally find myself in the right spot. He hands me a boarding pass and I board the train. I further climb a set of stairs to the second floor, and I find my seat. I find it all the way at the end of the compartment.

It's dark up here. It's dark but cool, and the seat's comfortable. Though there's no WiFi, so there's nothing to do. Nothing to do but wait.

Soon, a woman and her three small children sit next to me, and the conductor comes around and checks our tickets and IDs. He's rude and impatient but I don't care. I don't even care when the train starts to pull out of the station.

#

I'm lying on a gurney in a room. It's a room in the hospital, but it's not exactly a hospital room.

I'm not even really in this room. I'm in the doorway of the room, by a blanket machine, whose sole purpose is to keep blankets warm.

This room is big. It's about twice the size of a typical hospital room, but there are five of us cramped inside, along with a bored-looking aide and a television set. We're all waiting — the patients, that is. We're waiting for beds to open up in one of the hospital's three psychiatric wards.

"It should be soon," the aide tells us whenever someone asks how much longer they'll have to wait — a question that is not infrequent.

I now realize that this place reminds me of another place. It reminds me of a place E. E. Cummings once described in a book. That place was an even more enormous room in France, where the authorities interned misfit soldiers like Cummings after World War I. But I think this place is somehow worse. So I look for Rudi. I look for her, but she doesn't come. This place probably reminds her of another place, too — a place she probably doesn't want to be reminded of. Still, I think of what she'd do if she were here. She wouldn't put up with this. She'd figure a way out. I'm sure I could, too. But then where would I go?

That's why I'm not her. I'm always worrying about the consequences of my actions while she just does. She does and I never do.

Much time has passed since I've been here. I'm pretty sure it must be nighttime. But I can't be too sure because there are no windows or clocks. I can't be sure of anything, other than that this room is better than where they were keeping me a short time earlier.

I didn't sit long next to that short, stout, and thoroughly pissed off security guard. They soon sent me to a little room nearby that had three sofa beds inside. There were 5 people crammed inside this room as well, with me and someone else sitting in chairs. But what made the place really bad was its smell. It smelled worse than a zoo. It was so bad that I had to breathe through my mouth. But I didn't stay there long, either. After some aide took my EKG, I was sent here.

A nurse has just entered. She has entered the enormous room and walks up to me, and she says that they think I have a serious problem with my heart.

"What kind of problem?" I ask.

"The doctors aren't sure. They want to run some tests. But they might have to admit you to one of the medical wings."

For now, they just move me. They move me to the back of the room, and some poor slob takes my place in the doorway. Then, they take some blood and hook me up to a heart monitor that's on the wall. But not much else changes. I'm still waiting. I'm also tired and weary and falling asleep.

The next thing I know I'm awake. I'm awake and I think it must be morning, despite everything being the same as before. The same people who were waiting for a bed are still waiting, and they don't look pleased about it. One of these is an old man in the bed next to mine, whose name I've learned is Henry, and who looks as if he's been beaten up.

Time moves. But it moves slowly.

Finally, something changes. A fresh aide replaces the unfresh one, and a couple of women join her. In the darkness of the room I can't see the color of their scrubs so I can't tell whether they are nurses or aides, and it really doesn't matter. They don't do anything different than the last aide. They don't do anything but take our vital signs and feed us and tell us that we'll be getting a room soon. They also watch us. We can't even go to the bathroom without them.

The morning continues to drag. There's nothing to do but lie here and watch *Law and Order* reruns on the television. Maybe they've forgotten us. Maybe we'll lie in this enormous room forever.

Again, a nurse has come for me, and she tells me that the doctors still don't know what's wrong with my heart, but they still think it's serious. They want to admit me to a medical wing as soon as possible.

"There's nothing wrong with my heart," I insist.

"That's not what they think," she insists back.

"The idiot who took the EKG, he must've screwed it up."

"Would you bet your life on it?"

"Yeah."

Still, they wheel me out of the room. But not to take me to a medical wing, because there are no free beds there, either. Instead, they take me to another part of the waiting area reserved for non-crazy patients. Here it's kinda private, with curtains separating me from the other people, and it's much better than the enormous room. It even has a window. They also treat people a little better here. Here I'm not just some random psycho but an almost normal medical patient. But there is still someone watching me at all time. For now it's a nurse, who's pleasant enough, but I can tell that watching me was not the reason she went to nursing school.

“Where, where am I?” comes the groggy voice of an elderly man from the other side of the curtains.

No one answers him, so he asks the question progressively louder. He asks it until he’s screaming, and he screams until he gets an answer. Though it’s an answer he doesn’t like.

“What the hell am I doing in a hospital?” he screeches at some nurse.

“You weren’t responding at home,” the nurse tells him. “Your wife called —”

“— My wife? Why the hell did she call you? I told her to never call you! I’m gonna put that fool away!”

The screeching goes on and on, and I soon want to go back to the enormous room. But I can’t. I can’t go anywhere.

They eventually take more of my vital signs, and some more blood, and they run some more tests. They even take a sonogram of my heart. But still no one will tell me anything. Much like in Barstow, I haven’t even seen a doctor.

Finally, something’s happening. They’re taking me somewhere, to a room to run some tests. There I finally see a doctor, but he’s not my doctor. He’s just there to oversee the tests. He’s also old and he eyes me warily while asking me all kinds of questions about what’s been happening to me, and I tell him.

“I’ve never heard of someone trying to kill himself that way,” he says with widened eyes, after I tell him about my trip to the desert.

“Now you have,” I say back.

He looks at me as if I’m insane, and perhaps I am.

It’s time now for the test. They give me what they call a stress test. Which means that they give me a drug to speed up my heart, as if I had been exercising strenuously, and then see if I keel over.

My heart starts pounding. It pounds much like it did a few nights earlier on the streets of Victorville, but to everyone's disappointment, including my own, I don't keel over. The doctor says that my heart seems fine. Still, they want to do more tests, and they still say that they want to admit me to one of the medical wings as soon as possible.

I now go to another place. In this other place they put me in a long cylindrical tube and slowly rotate me like a rotisserie chicken. They do this while an x-ray camera takes images of my heart from many angles. The process is slow and uncomfortable. It's uncomfortable because I'm not allowed to move at all, and I become even more uncomfortable when the technician tells me that she'll have to redo the test a few hours later.

In the meantime, I return. I return to my bed and to my curtains. I return just in time to hear the old man screaming at his wife, who's in tears.

This isn't the only drama here. Behind another curtain is another man, and this one is trying to figure out from his wife why she ODeD on pills. But she's not telling him much. Maybe she doesn't know herself.

Me, I just lie here and listen. I listen to the misery that's encircled me, and I'm almost looking forward to another chicken session. Which comes and goes, and they again return me back to the bed, where again I wait to be admitted.

Now there's someone else watching me: an aide. He seems like a decent guy, and we talk. We talk the way normal human beings talk. He tells me that he plans on becoming an actual nurse, but that it will cost him \$120,000 to go to nursing school, which is more than three times what I paid to go to one of the most expensive universities in America during the mid-1980s. This will put him in debt for a long time, if not forever, and he seems to want to know what I think about it. But I don't know what to tell him.

Eventually, another aide comes to relieve him. He's also a decent guy, and we talk awhile, and even laugh a little, and this makes time pass.

Finally, with the sun beginning to set outside the window, a doctor comes. He comes and tells me what I already know — that there's nothing wrong with my heart. Also, since I'm no longer a medical patient but just another random psycho, he tells me that they're returning me to the other random psychos. However, as the enormous room is full, I have to return to the smelly little room.

Slowly, I walk there. I walk with the aide watching every step I take, and I feel used. Though I can't explain exactly why I feel this. They've wasted an entire day, and I feel more like a Petri dish than a human. I'm also somehow further behind in line than when I got here.

I step inside the smelly little room. I step inside it and the aide stays outside, and he watches me from a chair. He's also cooler toward me. He's doing this, I think, because the situation has changed. I think he even regrets becoming friendly with me, because now he has to treat me not like a patient, but like a random psycho.

At least this time I get one of the sofa beds. I lie on it in the stench, and I try to ignore both the smells and the snoring, I also try to will myself dead.

But I don't do this long, as there's a commotion outside the door. I can just see it. I can see a huge man screaming his head off, with his thick arms flailing about.

"I've been here for days!" he howls. "Fucking days!"

A bunch of security guards and nurses aides try to calm him, but he pushes them away.

"I just want some fucking help!" he goes on. "Do you people understand me? I just want some fucking help. I don't wanna be sitting here forever."

He starts crying, this big huge man. He cries and they grab him. They also sedate him, and it's over. The commotion is over, and it's like it never happened.

Now there's a girl outside the door. She's sitting in a chair wearing a gown like mine. She looks like she's been crying, too. She also looks about 15, though I know she must be older or she wouldn't be here. I also notice that she's pregnant, and that she looks as if she's falling apart.

I close my eyes to this. I close them but I can still see her. I can still see her crying.

"Hey," a voice whispers.

I open my eyes. I do this and see the smiling face of the aide in the doorway.

"What?" I utter.

"There's a free bed in that other waiting room," he utters back. "Whaddya say?"

"All right," is what I say.

#

It's Sunday at the men's Christian home.

I wake up early in the hope of taking a shower. It's so early that it's still dark out, and I set off the motion sensors and the lights as I stumble from the barn down the hill to the chapel. Then I go inside it.

There I see that the only people around are Sean and his assistant, who are working in the kitchen, and I enter the men's room. I also find that not only is there water, but it's almost warm. So after shaving and brushing my teeth, I take an almost normal shower. I further dress, putting on my one dress shirt: the blue button-down oxford, which isn't exactly wrinkle-free after hanging on a clothes line the day before. But it's at least mostly blood free.

I look almost okay. I look almost parishioner-like as I go and get the few clothes that are still hanging outside. It's then I discover that I'm missing a pair of socks, or maybe even two. But I convince myself that I've either miscounted or misplaced them, and either way it's no Greek tragedy.

With nothing else to do until breakfast, I go outside in the rising sun. It's a beautiful warm morning and I go over to the free weights and lie on the chest press bench. I do this and think about doing some lifting, but instead I just gaze into the sky, through the dozens of tree branches cascading toward the heavens. It's an even more magnificent sight than what I was gazing at the night before. It's like I'm looking right up into God, and this makes me think of another Eckhart quote: "The eye with which I see God is the same eye with which God sees me."

The view is literally hypnotizing, and I wonder how many others have gazed into it and have been just as hypnotized. This gazing continues until the cowbell rings, and I reluctantly get off the bench and stumble into the chapel. Again, the menu doesn't appeal to me, but I'm hungry. So I instead eat some apples and a grapefruit, and a month-old blueberry bagel, and I wait for the full day of fun and games to commence.

I also notice something. I notice that many of the inmates are wearing ties. Not everyone, so I'm certain that it's not mandatory. But more people are wearing them than normal. So I put my one tie on, too — just to be respectful, I tell myself.

This garners some strange looks. Some guys smile, while others just don't understand. Me perhaps included.

It's still early, so I wait in the nave. There I pick up a Bible, and I again look for that "I will lead the noble souls into the desert" quote in *Hosea* that Eckhart talked about. But I still can't find it. I've now read the book many times over and I still can't see it or anything like it, and I wonder if I just imagined it. Which would be funny and ironic, and not necessarily in that order.

It's finally time. It's time to go to church, and we all get into the van and head down the hill. We also pass the Interstate 15 onramp, and I look at it carefully once again, while trying to imagine it leading somewhere. Somewhere that makes sense.

I can't. So I turn forward and listen to the terrible Christian rock playing on the radio.

Thy Will Be Done. Thy Will Be Done. Thy Will Be Done.

Trying to ignore this, from my seat in the back of the van I watch. I watch us steadily move through the nothingness of Fontana and Bloomington. Eventually, we get to the church, and we go inside. There are a few more people here than on Friday night, including many children, but not much else is different.

I right then remember what Ted had said about falling asleep. I also remember what he said to do about it. But I have my own plan. This time I sit up front in the first pew of the middle section — in the lion's den, knowing here there's no net. Here I have to stay awake.

A man for some reason struts over to us, and he shakes our hands. He's tall and aging, with closely cropped gray hair. He not only shakes my hand, but he also smiles at me and strikes up a friendly conversation. He tells me all about his wild youth, which included drugs and motorcycles and more drugs and more motorcycles. He did it all, he says, until he found the church, or it found him.

I like him. I like him a little, until he starts talking to me about the oncoming rapture. He brings it up casually, like someone might bring up that there's a rain storm coming.

I try to keep quiet. I really do. But I just can't help myself, and I tell him there's nothing in the Bible that even vaguely matches the plot of *Left Behind*. Not even the one with Nicholas Cage.

He insists otherwise. He insists that I should read *First Thessalonians*, and I insist back that I have read it, and that it says nothing about God destroying the world, and even less about Him leaving people's clothes behind after He sucks the faithful up into the skies. Besides, I add, *Thessalonians* are just letters Paul wrote. They are not the word of God. I tell him to tell me where Jesus Himself or any prophet talks about a rapture.

The man quickly changes the subject. He somehow changes it to how Jews are responsible for the Crucifixion.

Again, I should be quiet. But I'm not quiet. I dispute his assertion, by telling him that Israel back then — just like today — had no capital punishment. Only the Romans could put Jesus to death.

“‘Crucify Him!’ the Jews screamed!” the old man screams at me, with his arms and body flailing, and his face turning red. “‘Crucify Him!’”

I no longer bite. I want to, but I don't. I just do what I should've done before: I smile and stay quiet, and he eventually goes away.

The pastor then arrives, and the service begins.

Officially, it's a Bible study and not a service, but it seems an awful lot like a service to me. I certainly can't tell the difference. Like Friday's service, four men — including Mr. Rapture — collect offerings in dark velvet bags.

Not surprisingly, no one in my section gives money. But then Mr. Rapture walks over to the side section, where sit many of the inmates who work outside the home, and a few of them give a few dollars. Though they don't look too happy about it.

We now begin reading the Bible. We read from the same chapters in *First Book of Kings* we read from the night before. We read about Hiram. Though the pastor somehow segues from this to homosexuality. I'm not really sure how. But he's now sounding very much like the caricature every religion hater would expect him to be.

“Homosexuality is not only a sin,” he tells us, “but it's a sin no different than that of abusing drugs or alcohol. And if the latter sinner can be saved, so can the former. They can be saved in the very same way. What's more, they want to be saved. *They want to be saved.* They

hate their lives. You don't have to believe me, just look up the facts. The rate of suicide among homosexuals is skyhigh."

His "facts" are probably true. I can believe that there is a high rate of suicide among gays. But I also know that it's almost surely not because they hate who they are, but because of people like the pastor, who for some reason can't accept what He Himself has created, and take out this unacceptedness on His creations instead.

In a matter of seconds, any like I had for the pastor the night before fades away. I want to puke. That's what Rudi would do. She'd puke right on the fancy plush carpet, if not on the pastor himself. She'd also tell him off. She'd stand up and tell him off, and she'd do it way better than I could ever do.

But I'm not Rudi. So instead I turn to Leo, who sitting just behind me. I kinda think Leo is gay, and not just because he wants to move to San Francisco and become a beautician. I've known many gay people, and Leo seems similar to many of them in many respects. He's introspective and kind and sensitive to other people's feelings. Then, then there's that he wants to become a beautician in San Francisco.

Leo seems to understand why I'm glancing at him. He even grins a bit, and rolls his eyes — and I grin back. I do this and return my attention to the pastor, and I find that he has segued once again. Now he's talking about big government. He's railing against it, of course, and he's saying that it's the foundation of all evil today. He's sounding more like Rush Limbaugh than a man of God. It's pure politics, which I guess is okay because this is a Bible study and not a church service.

He segues once again. This time he segues to Israel. He talks about how great the country is, and how great the Jewish people are, and how we, Jews and Christians, are brethren and will

always be brethren. He also talks about how the world outside of America is abandoning Israel, abandoning it when she needs it the most, and I can't help nodding my head in agreement.

"I never thought I'd live to see the day when Europe would again turn its back on the Jews," he says, and I can tell he means it. I can even tell that he's a Judeophile. He loves Jews. He's more of a Judeophile than many Jews I know. The pastor is both a homophobe and a Judeophile wrapped into one. He's so maddening. It's so impossible to hate him for long. Whenever he does or says something terrible, he turns around and does the opposite.

Which man is he really? The bigoted caricature or a true man of faith? I really don't know. Maybe he doesn't either.

The sermon continues, and I glance to my right, and I notice that the psycho Mexican is sitting next to me. Though he doesn't look so psycho now. He looks just like the rest of us — another poor slob stuck in church clutching a Bible. Which makes me wonder if he really did kill two people. I also wonder if it really matters.

Now it's time for something completely different. Sorta. A choir takes the stage, and now I know why some of us are wearing ties. These people are all onstage, along with some parishioners, and they are singing. They are singing the same kind of songs we always sing: loud, repetitive, and inane. The only thing I wonder is what the point is.

Quickly, they finish. They finish and return to their seats, and the service — or the Bible study — ends, and everyone leaves the church. Then, in the parking lot, the pastor greets everyone, and I soon reach him. I reach him and shake his hand.

"Good job!" he says to me with a big smile, and I wonder if he's referring to me not dozing off. Which was actually pretty easy to do when I didn't have to haul water in the sun for 5 hours beforehand.

Feeling pretty good about myself, I get into the van. I get in and sit in the same seat in the back, and we return to the home. There's no lunch waiting for us, nor will there be any dinner, so we make do with what we can find in the cabinets — crackers and things like crackers, and there is still plenty of fruit and month-old bagels as well. None of us will go hungry, thanks to the pastor.

There's actually not much to do but eat. Not until the next service. Which means waiting for the pastor, who's having lunch with his family somewhere. Others have somehow gotten to eat lunch out as well. They return with large In & Out cups — cups that couldn't be more noticeable if they came with their own lights.

I used to love eating at In & Out. It's the friendliest fast food restaurant there could ever be, and they have the best grilled cheese sandwiches I've ever eaten, and there's something cool about having to order it off a secret menu — even if it's a secret that every single person on the west coast knows. Back when I lived in Long Beach, every month or so I'd walk 6 miles to the nearest one. But now I don't think I'd cross the street for one. Even if I were allowed to cross the street. I'm not sure why I feel this way. All I know is that I'm not the least bit envious of those who went. I think I even pity them for some unknown reason.

While continuing to wait for the pastor, I stumble onto something. I stumble onto a copy of the *Los Angeles Times* in the dining room. Or at least a small piece of it. I don't even care that it's almost a week old. It's a connection to the outside world, no matter how tenuous. Though I quickly learn that not much has changed in this outside world. Trump is still president, and the A's still suck. Though Carlos — a fellow fan of the Green & Gold — still has faith in them. I guess this is what separates Carlos and me. We both have faith, but mine isn't blind.

The pastor now arrives. He arrives and the second service of the day begins, or the first if you consider the one in the morning just a Bible study. At once, he starts his sermon. He starts it

and I can tell right away that he hasn't prepared this one. I can tell this because many years earlier I did some standup comedy, and I can easily tell when a speaker is prepared or just winging it — and the pastor is just winging it. He's too unsure of his words, and where they're going.

"All of you," he says, "all of you have had some bad things happen to you. Some of you have had some terrible things happen to you. We've all had bad things happen to us. Misfortune. Tragedy. Failure. The difference between those who fail in life and those who succeed, is how we deal with these bad things. If you blame them on other people or on other things, I can tell you right now, I can tell you *right now* you will never get anywhere in life. You will stay right here where you are now. You will never rise from the bottom, and make no mistake about it — this is the bottom, and this is where you will rot. You will rot here. I promise you that. *I promise you*. Understand this if you understand anything I ever tell you: no one or no thing put you here. *You* put you here. No one else is to blame for the bad things that have happened to you. No one but you. *You*. And only you can right them. It's up to *you* to change where you are and who you are and what you are. Only *you* can change *you*!"

I feel his words. I literally feel them. I feel them because there is so much truth in them, even coming from such a vile homophobe.

I look around the room, and I see that I'm not the only one feeling this. No one is dozing right now. No one is snoring. Everyone is at full attention. Even Rudi feels it. I can see her. I see her in the first pew nodding her head.

The service ends. It ends quietly and I step outside onto the porch to get some air. I need it.

John comes outside, too. Not Pastor John, but the John who's usually working outside the home. He's been pretty cool toward me, and still is. Though he does acknowledge me with a nod, and I nod back.

"Pretty good sermon," I say.

"Yeah," he says back. "To be honest, I usually don't care much for these things, but that was pretty good."

"Yeah."

The service has kind of drained me for some reason, and I really don't want to go to a third one. I really don't. But to a third one I go with everyone else in the van.

We return to the church, and I return to the front pew in the middle section, and the third service begins, or second if you consider the first just a Bible study. They even collect offerings again, though this time not even the inmates in the side section give anything.

The pastor soon starts the sermon. It's like the one the night before at the home. It might even be exactly like the one the night before. I actually wouldn't have minded hearing this afternoon's sermon again, but this particular rerun I could stand to miss. Or even sit to miss. Or even lay down to miss.

I can feel my eyelids getting heavy. They're getting heavier with each word out of the pastor's mouth, and I have to will myself awake. We're now approaching 8 full hours of church today, and I don't even think Jesus could stand that much. Or sit that much. Or even lay down that much.

The choir returns. It returns to the stage, and it does the same exact songs it did this morning. It does this and returns, and now it's really time for something different.

They're giving out small gifts, to those who are new and to those who have had birthdays this week. This includes me. I get one of those elastic balls they used to sell in gumball machines for a quarter when I was a kid, and I can't wait to see what I'll get for my birthday in November.

The festivities continue. Now they are giving Mike a plaque. They are giving him this for having graduated the program a few weeks earlier. I didn't even know he graduated. I've never seen him do anything but sit in the second pew and grouse, and I wonder if that's what will come of me when I graduate. That I'll just sit there and wait for that same exact outcome that led me to the desert, and that I'll do lots of grouching in the meantime.

The service continues, and time goes by, as Sam would sing. It goes by as slowly in the church as it does in the pastor's backyard watering his saplings, and I realize that there's not much difference between the two.

#

The train moves deeper into the desert, taking the sun along with it. I can barely see the mountains in the near distance, or the slight glimmer of light that's behind them.

We're now approaching Victorville, and an hour beyond that will be Barstow.

Slowly, we come to a stop. We stop and I can see almost nothing out the window. I can see the lights of some buildings, but not the buildings themselves, so they have no more meaning than the stars in the sky.

We don't stay here long. The train starts and we inch forward. I should be scared, but I'm strangely excited. It's completely black outside and I can't see a thing and I'm excited. The whole world has become void and I like it. I almost wish I could step into it right now and disappear.

We keep moving and I keep getting more excited. They've just announced Barstow. They've announced that we'll be there in 15 minutes. The family that had been sitting next to me

has already moved to different seats, so I have no problem getting my things together and stepping into and down the aisle. I further walk down the stairs, and I use the bathroom. I also get a drink of water out of a dispenser, and I wait. I wait along with a conductor and a heavyset middle-aged woman.

“I guess most people get off at Vegas,” I say to the conductor.

“The train doesn’t go to Vegas,” she tells me.

“Why?”

“I don’t know. It goes to Kingman. It has always gone to Kingman.”

Slowly, the train comes to a stop. It does this and me and the woman step out onto the empty and dark platform, and we walk off. She enters a waiting car and I walk around to the front of the station and to the utter emptiness of 1st Avenue.

Strangely, I’m not sure which way to go even though I know it should be obvious. So I take out my Android phone, along with the map on it. Even with this, I’m still confused about which direction is Main Street, so I just start walking, telling myself that when I get to the first intersection I’ll know for sure.

There’s barely any light and even less sidewalk, but I don’t care. I don’t even care about my gimpy ankle. I don’t even really care where I’m going.

I’ve now reached the intersection. I’ve reached it and a street sign says that it’s Crooks Avenue. Which, according to my phone, means I’m going the wrong way. Though I haven’t even walked a quarter of a mile, so I shrug it off and turn around and go in the opposite direction. I soon walk past the train station and go around a bend and over a bridge, and I can see Main Street just ahead. I can also see a Del Taco. It says that it’s the very first Del Taco. But as I’ve never eaten at a Del Taco, this doesn’t mean much to me, and I continue on to Main Street.

I'm now there, and the first thing I see to my left is a couple of lowrent prostitutes, and what I guess is their pimp. Which I ignore. I ignore all of them, and they me, and I walk through the main business district of the city, which is completely closed even though it's not even 11:00. There's not even a bar open.

I actually looked up the motel on a Google map when I made the reservation, and it didn't look far from the train station, but it's difficult to tell distance from a Google Map. I should know this by now, but I guess I don't, and it doesn't take me long to realize that it's going to be a long walk to the motel. A really long walk. I have to get to 1700 Main Street and I'm still in the hundreds. The low hundreds.

My ankle hurts and I've become tired in the searing night heat. Also, my Vans water bottle is almost empty of metallic-tasting water. Still, I continue forward. Which in Barstow means going over one big hill after another. Even worse, the street seems endless and the blocks seem to get longer. I further notice, even in the blackness of night, how depressing Barstow is. It's just rundown motels and auto supply stores and rotting cement, and the few people I encounter on the sidewalk look either loaded or on their way to or from it.

I keep pushing forward. I push through my exhaustion and the pain in my ankle, and I move over some more big hills. Up and down I go. Slowly. But I'm getting there.

Finally, I reach Motel 6. It's just past midnight, and the woman behind the desk is friendly, and she looks up my reservation. But she doesn't find it. "Are you sure you want this Motel 6?" she asks.

"I'm pretty sure," I tell her.

"Because there's another Motel 6 on Main Street. The other side of Main Street."

"The other side?"

“Yeah. This is East Main Street. The other Motel 6 is on West Main Street. I’ll call them.”

She calls them, but there’s no reservation for me there, either. Then, the manager appears.

“You sure you didn’t reserve the Route 66 Motel?” he says to me. “People confuse us all the time.”

I get out my phone, and I look at my reservation — and strangely it is for the Route 66 Motel, even though I was sure I reserved Motel 6.

Quickly, I apologize, while shaking my head in disbelief.

“It’s no problem,” he tells me. “It’s just up the street to the right. You can’t miss it.”

“I passed it,” I tell him back, and I walk out. I further start back up Main Street. Though something tells me that I need to check my reservation again. I don’t know what this something is, but I stop under a street light and check my phone again, and I discover that my reservation really isn’t at the Route 66 Motel. It’s at a place called Motel 66, and it’s not at 1700 East Main Street, but at 1700 West Main Street. Which means I will have to walk all the way back to the beginning of Main Street by the prostitutes and then walk about the same distance I walked here in the opposite direction.

I don’t know if I can do it, and I think about getting another room nearby — and certainly would if I hadn’t already paid for this room and if I didn’t have such little money left on my credit cards. Though before I start walking, I call. I call Motel 66 on my flip phone just to make sure that they have my reservation.

It rings and rings and rings. A woman eventually answers, but the connection is bad. It’s so bad that it reminds me of phone quality in Prague when I first moved there, right after the fall of communism. I can barely hear the woman. Still, I try to explain to her my situation. I do this but can’t understand her reply at all.

“Excuse me?” I shout into the phone.

“We’re closed,” I think I hear her say.

Then, then she hangs up.

#

It’s my third day of captivity in the waiting area of the San Bernardino Community Hospital. Three full days of waiting in a waiting area.

I’ve given up even the nominal hope I had when I came. I’ve also stopped eating. I’m just lying here rotting. Amazingly, I haven’t even been waiting here the longest. Henry, the banged-up old man next to me, has been here for more than 4 days.

Interestingly, he doesn’t seem to care. As long as he has a cool place to stay and plenty to eat, he’s happy. Sure, he complains a little, but I think that’s just so he himself knows he’s still alive.

The day drags. It drags just like it did the day before. That day was Monday. I think. All I did that day was watch TV. Reality and game shows. I watched them all day long, from morning into night. The TV is right in front of me, so there’s no way to escape it. It’s punishing me. It’s punishing me for all my sins.

The only thing that breaks the monotony is when someone goes berserk, like the big guy did on Sunday night. I think that was Sunday night. Yeah, it was Sunday night.

Going berserk here happens about twice a day. This morning it was a guy in the front of the room — a guy screaming about black people and how he hates them all, and every other word out of his mouth was the N-word. You’d think this would be a big deal, especially here in liberal Southern California. But I guess it’s commonplace in the Inland Empire, as they call it, because no one seems to care.

They finally take Henry. They take him somewhere, and he doesn't seem to care where. He just lies there on the gurney with a blank expression as they wheel him out.

I wanna scream. I wanna scream right now. But I'm sure no one would hear me, including me.

The shift has just changed. It's changed, and a nurse I have yet seen takes over. I mean, she completely takes over. She's about my age and as Irish as anyone could be, with short red hair and pale skin and lots of freckles. Her name is Cathy, and when she walks into the room everyone notices her.

She gives everyone a big hello — patients and staff. She's loud in every way someone can be loud, and she's got this infectious excitement that rubs off on you, whether you want it to or not. She focuses on me for some reason — me and my gloom, and after I tell her my story and how I've been waiting here for 3 days, she marches out of the room to get some answers. I'm a few steps beyond doubtful about her chances, but she soon returns and tells me that I'll be getting a bed tonight. I don't really believe her, but I sit up a little bit against my will.

We continue talking, even though this really isn't her job. Her job is to watch me and make sure that I don't kill myself while on hospital property. But she spends hours talking to me anyway, trying to lift my spirits, and I'm having a hard time keeping them down. She also tells me all about herself, and her wild mother, who converted to Judaism in middle age and who now goes to Israel all the time. Cathy herself travels a lot, and never to a beach or something like a beach. It's always to go mountain climbing or hiking or rafting or something else no fiftysomething person normally does on their vacations. She also shows me pictures of it all, and in not one of them is she not smiling.

I quickly discover that she's also smart and well educated. We talk about books and movies and current events, and time no longer drags. I even eat a little dinner, even though I try

to tell myself that I don't want to eat dinner. I do all this while thinking how this woman is just magic. She's like my own personal Buddha. She somehow makes me feel good about myself. She makes me want to hope. She even suggests that I write a book about everything that's happened to me.

Night has come. It has come and still no one has come for me, and my doubts start to rise again.

"You're getting a room tonight," Cathy promises. "They have a free bed. I've checked. It's a done deal."

I nod. I do this unconvincingly and we watch more reality and game shows. Lots more. It's getting late, and I'm certain I'll be waiting a 4th day at the very least, and I start to regret having eaten.

A nurse now enters the enormous room. She enters and walks up to me, and she tells me that I've got two choices: I could either go to Closed West, which is an involuntary wing that is pretty much under lockdown at all times, or, if I'm willing to admit myself voluntarily, I can go to Open West, where patients have far more freedom of movement. They have fewer rules, too.

"You'd be a lot more comfortable in Open West," Cathy says.

I nod and say okay — and the nurse says that my room will be ready in half an hour. Maybe an hour.

An hour passes, and I still don't have a room, and I'm becoming antsy.

"You're getting a room," Cathy says peremptorily.

It happens. I've actually got a room. More importantly, I've got someplace to go — someplace that can't possibly be worse than the place I'm in right now. Though I'm still doubting everything even as Cathy wheels me out of the enormous room in a wheelchair.

She wheels me to Open West herself, which is only a short distance away. There, while we wait for the admitting nurse, she shows me red lines painted on the floor.

“Those are the demarcation lines,” she says. “Don’t cross them. Ever. That’s pretty much the only rule here. At least the only important one.”

We continue to wait, and I notice something: a smell. The whole place has a peculiar and pervasive smell, something between sterile and putrid.

The admittance nurse comes, and Cathy says goodbye, for now.

“It’s rare that I work in the waiting area,” she tells me. “Usually I’m either here or in Closed West. So, you’ll be seeing me a lot, especially as I rarely take a day off. Or even a shift.”

I say goodbye to her, and I thank her, and I walk into the nurses office, where stands a guy my age. He looks like a prison guard — or even a prisoner. He looks mean and rotten, and he does what’s called intake. This includes a brief interview before stripsearching me. The man’s gruff and unpleasant, but I don’t care. I’ve seen the worst, and I certainly don’t have anything up my ass for him to find.

He afterward gives me the white bracelet that was made for me 3 days earlier, and he hands me off. He hands me to another nurse, who gives me a towel and some other things I’ll need in the morning, like underwear and socks, and she shows me the glass-enclosed nurses station. Which she tells me is the only place in the ward with a clock.

“If you need anything,” she says, “just knock on the door over there.”

I nod, and she leads me down the hall to a room. The door of this room is inched open, and she creaks it open a little more, and I can see three beds — one of which is empty. I can also hear snoring coming from the others.

“We run bed checks every 15 minutes,” she says. “So leave the door open a little.”

Again, I nod, and she leaves, and I enter the room. I also sit on the free bed. I do this while wondering what's gonna happen next. I'm not even sure I should be thankful that I have a bed. I'm actually scared. I'm scared and thinking of that old adage: "Be careful what you wish for . . ."

#

I wake up in the barn. I do this and realize today's Monday.

Which means it's a day off. But it's not really a day off. I still have to attend Bible study, and I still can't go anywhere. So I'm not sure what I'll do with my day off.

First, I eat breakfast. I walk into the kitchen, and after glancing at what's available, I ask Sean for some French toast and sausage.

"No eggs?" he growls.

"No eggs," I tell him, without even a hint of a growl.

"Are you afraid they're not kosher?"

I look into his eyes as he says this. Over the years, I've heard lots of Jewish cracks. I've even made more than a few myself. They can be harmless, and even humorous, or hateful, depending on their context and how they are said. So I look into Sean's eyes. I look into them and see blind hate.

So I think of making a remark back. Perhaps I'll make a crack about his obvious Irishness. Or perhaps I'll just let him know how stupid his comment was by showing him the *fucking sausages* on my plate. But I'm better than that. Perhaps I'm not much better, but I'm at least a little better.

Angrily, I eat and just as angrily I wash up, and I further angrily walk into the nave. I walk in and see Giuseppe sitting in the first pew, with a big happy smile on his face.

"She's coming," he says to me.

“Who’s coming?” I ask.

“My daughter! She’s coming tomorrow!”

“She’s not coming, Giuseppe,” Mike growls from behind him. “You’ve been saying that for weeks!”

“She’s coming!” Giuseppe insists, and he starts cursing Mike in Italian, with lots of hand gestures — and he adds, “She says she’s coming and she’s coming!”

Bible study starts, and it’s the same. It’s the same as always. It’s like sitting through a prison remedial reading class, and even worse than listening to people butcher the Bible is listening to their banal interpretations of it. Though I suddenly hear something that surprises me. I hear *Psalms* 137: “If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning.”

I realize that this is the basis of Matisyahu’s song “Jerusalem” — something I didn’t know before this moment. I’m not sure that this information helps me in any way, but it’s good to know that I can still be surprised.

The Bible study goes on. It does until it comes to an end. Which is when Tony asks for permission to speak. Chuck grants it, and Tony stands up and says that his father is in the hospital with serious kidney problems, and he asks if we could all pray for him.

We all stand, and we encircle Tony and silently pray for his father. Even I do this.

Bible study now officially ends. It ends, but this doesn’t mean I’m free to do all that nothing I had planned, as Chuck announces with glee that it’s time for me to get my EBT card.

“Welcome to the wonderful world of welfare,” he exclaims.

Also needing cards — actually, needing new ones because they had either lost theirs or had them stolen — are Roberto, Tony, Leo, and a guy named Felipe, who’s happy because he’s the guy with 6 months of Mondays to perform. So this means that he really is getting a day off.

Right away, all of us get into the van. So does Paul, who will be watching us, and so does the same guy who always drives us to church. I don't even know this guy's name, and the only time I ever see him is when he's driving.

We're now starting down the hill, with me feeling all kinds of depressed. I'm depressed because the last thing I want to do is sign up for food stamps. I'm so depressed that my mind races for a means of escape, even though I know there is none.

The van soon reaches the bottom of the hill. It does this and roars past the onramps to Interstate 15 that I can't help gazing at. It further continues along Sierra Road toward downtown Fontana, where there is a glut of strip malls and cheap Mexican restaurants. Into one of the former we turn, and we drive up to the Transitional Assistance Office, which everyone here just calls TAD, and which everyone everywhere else would just call the local county welfare office.

"This is the place," Roberto says, while pointing out the window.

"What place?" I ask.

"This is where they found me. I was lying drunk right over there. I don't even know how I got here or why."

The driver drops us off in front of the building and drives off somewhere, and after we pass the big hapless security guard standing outside the building, we enter. We enter and see there's a line of 6 people waiting by the reception desk, and everyone but Paul gets behind them.

"What am I supposed to do?" I ask Paul.

"Do?" he asks back.

"How do I get one of these cards?"

"You've never been to a TAD office before?"

"I've never been to a TAD office before."

"Just ask for an application to Cal Fresh."

The line moves fast. It does because while there are only two receptionists, only one of them speaks Spanish, and none of the people ahead of us speak English.

Soon, it's my turn in front of the unilingual receptionist.

"What's your case number?" the woman growls in a dull monotone, without looking at me.

"I don't have a case number," I tell her. "I've never been here before."

"What about your Social Security number?"

I give it to her and she looks it up. She further calls over her supervisor, who leads me a short distance away to a kiosk, where he puts me and my information into their system.

"Just fill this out," he then tells me, as he hands me an application with a number stamped on it. He also gives me a large pen covered in some kind of strange tape, and he adds, "Then listen for your number."

I take the things — and Paul and I find the others in the back of the waiting area. It's a bleak place, with lots of single mothers and their children, and many others who seem to be here in flesh only, and only barely. There I fill out the application, with the help of Paul, who has to tell me the address of the home, along with its phone number and zip code. He even has to tell me how to spell "Lytle Creek."

We afterward wait. We wait and wait and finally some woman calls my number. I respond by going to her booth a short distance away, and she takes my application. She takes it and says, "A social worker will call your name soon, and then you'll have an interview with him or her."

I nod and return to the others, and I tell them what she has just told me.

"Did someone explain to you how this all works?" Paul asks.

"How what works?" I ask back.

“Once a month we’ll use your card to buy groceries.”

“Yeah. Pastor John mentioned that.”

“But we’ll leave \$20 on it so you can buy snacks at the 99 cent store on Sundays.”

“He mentioned that, too.”

“Hey,” Tony utters, “how come we didn’t go there yesterday?”

“There was some kind of a mixup,” Felipe says.

“Anyway,” Paul continues, “when you meet with the social worker, don’t tell him that.”

“Don’t tell him what?” I ask.

“Don’t tell him that we’re gonna drain your card. Tell him that you’ll be buying your own food.”

“You mean, I should lie.”

“Yeah.”

I suddenly realize something. I realize I’m just about to break the law. Actually, I’m gonna break at least two laws. The first law I’m gonna break is using an EBT card improperly. I know this because otherwise they wouldn’t be telling me to lie about it. The second law I’m gonna break will be lying to a state official about not breaking the first law. Though I’m not sure if I’ll be breaking this law or Pastor John and his home, but somebody is gonna be breaking it.

I knew the scheme was dubious from the moment the pastor told me about it over the phone during our interview. I knew it was dubious, but now I know it’s also a crime, and I almost chuckle at this. I do so because yesterday at Bible study the pastor spent considerable time railing against big government, and today, today he’s helping steal from it.

I wait some more, and a guy wearing a short-sleeved shirt and a tie walks into the waiting area from way in the front. He does this and calls out my name.

I stand up and walk over to him, and he leads me deep inside the offices to his cubicle. There we sit and he asks me for my ID. He also confirms the information on my application.

“You’re not working and you’ve got less than \$100?” he asks.

“Yes,” I tell him.

“And you’re living at a men’s home in Lytle Creek?”

“Yes.”

“And you’ll be buying and preparing your own food?”

Here’s the moment of truth. Literally. I could tell him the truth. I could. Only I don’t know what’ll happen if I do. A lie is easier and safer, so I tell him yes.

He tells me back that I’ll get a card shortly — that very day. He also tells me that I will get \$194 per month. I will also be getting a prorated amount for the last few days of July, and he further tells me that it’ll get renewed the first of every month. So the next renewal will be on September 1.

The interview ends, and I return to the others while I wait for my card. These others are now sitting up front, but they are not all in the process of getting their cards. Both Leo and Felipe will have to come back for some reason, and Roberto is having difficulty, too, because he has to transfer his account from Los Angeles County to here.

I continue to wait. I wait and wait and a woman finally calls my name, and I go to her booth a short distance away. She also checks my ID. She does this before giving me an EBT card, and now it’s official: I’m a welfare recipient.

Tony gets his card, too — and he wants to make sure it works.

“Can I buy a candy bar at the store across the lot?” he asks Paul while pointing the way.

“Take Felipe with you,” Paul says, and the two leave, with Felipe being Tony’s watcher in spite of all the Mondays Felipe has accumulated for being irresponsible.

Me, I wait again. This time I wait for Roberto to get his card. He gets it just after Tony and Felipe return, and now all four of us go to the convenience store so Roberto and I can test our cards.

I really don't want to go. I really want to throw the card into the street and walk away. But I don't do this, of course. Though when we get to the store I have no idea what to buy.

"Just pick something!" Tony yells at me. "It's not like you're paying for it."

That's the problem.

#

I'm pushing myself. I'm pushing myself through the midnight heat of Barstow.

There's nobody in the streets, and hardly any cars, and the hills seem to be getting steeper. Worse, there likely isn't even a room waiting for me at the end of all this.

Still, I keep moving. I'm actually moving faster than before, and I'm not sure why. Why do I care if I have a room tonight if I'm gonna die tomorrow?

I have no answer, but I've reached the end of East Main Street. There I finish the rest of the metallic-tasting water. I also notice something: even the prostitutes have gone home to bed. The pimp, too. Right now, I'm tired and thirsty and only halfway to a maybe room, and my ankle throbs. Still, I move forward. Faster and faster I go. I'm almost running. I further tell myself something. I tell myself that I won't be refused at the motel no matter what — even if this means sleeping outside on the grounds. Just as importantly, I try to convince myself that I will actually follow through on this likely hollow threat.

I keep pushing myself, through the heat and my thirst and the pain in my foot, which feels like it could break off at any moment. I can also feel my heart pounding against my ribs, desperately trying to get out. Still, I don't seem to be getting any closer. The numbers on the buildings barely advance.

I'm now starting to hear sounds. Loud mechanical grinding sounds. Actually, it sounds more like some really bad atonal music. I'm approaching it, and I'm starting to think that I'm stuck in some strange *Twilight Zone* episode. Only the show would've ended by now, and there's no end in sight. Nor is the motel, and it's already past 1:00.

Still, I don't quit. I don't quit even as I pass the other Motel 6. I know it can't be much farther. It just can't.

It isn't. I've finally found it, for real this time. But there are no lights on at all, especially in the office. But I walk up to it anyway, and I ring the buzzer, and I hope.

"Hello," comes a groggy female voice.

"Hi," I utter, which is difficult with my throat so dry. "I have a reservation."

"We have no more rooms."

"But I have a reservation, and I've paid for it already."

"I told you there are no rooms."

"Please. I've got nowhere else to go."

She hesitates. She does this while I impatiently wait.

"There is one possibility," she finally says. "But it has no TV."

"I'll take it," I call out.

"It's got lots of other problems, too."

"I'll take it!"

"I'll be there in a minute."

She's there in less than a minute — an aging woman in a bathrobe. She comes to the door and lets me into the office. There I show her my reservation and my receipt, and she shakes her head.

"I told them I had no rooms," she insists.

Still, she gives me a key, and directions to the room — and I almost kiss her.

“There’s a problem with the lock, too,” she adds. “You have to fidget with the key.”

I nod, realizing that this will be the least of my problems this night, and I’m right. It takes only a little fidgeting to get the lock open, and I stumble inside the room, which is at least 200° F. But I don’t care. I just jack up the air conditioner. I also suck in some water from the faucet in the kitchenette, and I fill my water bottle before placing it in the freezer. Which is when I discover that the ice maker is yet another of those things not working, so there is nothing to cool my ankle. Instead, I fill some freezer bags I brought with me. I fill them with water and put them next to the water bottle.

I further collapse. I collapse onto the bed while listening to the atonal music from outside, which sounds as if it’s coming from right behind the motel. I do all this while knowing that, as bad as today has been, it could still be the best of the rest.

#

It’s early in the morning, and I’m lying on a bed in a psychiatric ward. Never could I imagine that I’d end up here. Or down here, really, because this is as low as a punk can get.

My two roommates are still sleeping. At the moment, I can’t infer much about them. One’s Hispanic and the other’s black, and they’re both big men about my age — or maybe a little younger. They’re also both snoring loudly — just as they’ve been doing most of the night. I wonder what kind of people they are, and whether I can get along with them, and whether it matters at all.

The Hispanic guy wakes first. He rises to his waist and smiles at me, and he introduces himself as Frisco. He further tells me that he’s Cuban and a proud and unrepentant drug addict, who hasn’t the slightest aspiration to be anything more or less.

Frisco's voice wakes my other roommate. This roommate gets out of bed and stretches, and I see that he's at least 6'5" and probably close to 300 pounds. He also has a gentle smile that belies all this.

"Hi," I tell him.

"Hello," he tells me back, with one of those undefinable foreign accents. He then adds that his name is Kofi.

"Like Kofi Annan?" I ask.

Kofi's face lights up, and he says to me "You are only the second person I have met here who has made that association."

"Who's Kofi Annan?" asks Frisco.

"He was Secretary General of the UN," I tell him. "And the first one from Africa. Unless you want to count Boutros Boutros-Ghali."

"That is right," Kofi says, with a look of surprise.

"Are you from the same country?" I ask him.

"Yes. We are both from Ghana."

Kofi and I hit it off right away. He's educated, with an MBA from Purdue, and he's also travelled a lot. So we have lots in common — and not just good things. He also can't find work. Though unlike me he has a wife, and his lack of work has caused great friction with her, which is why this isn't the first time he's been in this psychiatric ward.

The two of us continue talking — about all the places we've been, and Frisco interrupts. He interrupts by saying that he was once a member of Special Forces.

"Yeah?" I say back, trying hard not to sound incredulous.

"I fought in Cuba."

"The Bay of Pigs?" I ask, even though I know he's way too young for that.

“No,” he tells me. “Later. I was there much later, when we were fighting to overthrow Castro.”

I nod. I do this because I don’t know what else to do. Kofi follows my lead and he nods, too — but he looks even more incredulous than I must look.

“After that, I was fighting in Iran,” Frisco goes on.

“Don’t you mean Iraq?” I tell him. I tell him this not to show him up, but so that the next time he lies about his past he’ll sound a little more believable.

“No, it was in Iran,” he insists. “We were trying to overthrow the Ayatollah.”

Kofi and I glance at each other. We do this with knowing glances, as if we were sharing a private joke. Which is kinda true.

Frisco soon leaves. He leaves to go visiting and Kofi returns to bed — a product of the medications they’ve been giving him to make him “better.” Me, I want to take a shower before breakfast, so I grab the towel the nurse gave me the night before, as well as the fresh underwear and socks. I grab these things and walk into the bathroom and see that there’s no shower stall. The shower is right next to the toilet.

I’m perplexed as to how the floor won’t be soaking wet all day long, even with the drain in the middle of the floor. But I shower anyway, and afterward I get sorta dressed — and it’s almost time for breakfast. Which is held in a little cafeteria down the hall to the right, where I wait with Kofi.

An aide eventually comes to the room. He comes in wheeling a heavy cart full of breakfast trays, and he begins reading the names attached to the trays as he passes them out. He soon calls my name and I take my tray out into a tiny but cool concrete courtyard, where I sit with a handful of patients who seem an odd combination of catatonic and crazed.

Ignoring this, I start eating, and I notice that, while they've given me a plastic fork, there's no plastic knife — even though they've also given me a thick hunk of ham to eat. No one else has a knife either, so I assume it's because they think it can be used as a weapon.

"Are you gonna eat that?" some guy says to me when he sees that I'm not eating my oatmeal.

It's kinda like that famous scene in *Diner*, only I don't make a fuss about it like Steve Guttenberg did. I just hand him the oatmeal and finish my meal as quickly as possible. I further return the tray to the cart, and I ask a large nurse standing nearby what happens next, if anything.

"Dr. Moltani comes at nine," she says. "He's the psychiatrist for this wing, and he sees everyone in his office for about 10 minutes. You'll be in there with a social worker and your nurse for the day, which just happens to be me today."

"And what happens during this meeting?" I ask.

"We'll come up with a treatment plan for you."

"A treatment plan?"

"Medication."

"I don't need medication. I don't have that kind of depression. It's not like my mind is all messed up. My life is messed up."

"Situational depression you're talking about."

"Yeah."

"As opposed to clinical depression."

"Yeah."

"Still, medication can help."

"No, it can't. It can't get me a job. It can't pay my bills."

"How do you know medication can't help if you haven't tried it?"

I try to come up with an answer to this, but I can't. So I just return to my room and notice that the bathroom floor is miraculously dry.

Kofi returns, and he lies on his bed, and we talk some more. We talk about Ghana, and he tells me how beautiful it is and how wonderful the food is there. He also tells me how he'd like to return there one day. We talk about lots of things. We talk until it's time to see the psychiatrist.

We visit him as a collection of three rooms, so Frisco, Kofi, and I all go together. Dr. Moltani's office is just down the hall from our room, and we wait outside it in a long line, with me at the very end of it.

Blind acceptance is a sign of stupid fools who stand in line.

I'm thinking of the lyrics of a certain Sex Pistols song, and this makes me think of Rudi. I can't see her, but I know she wouldn't wait like this. But I'm not her.

The line moves fast. One after the other those in front of me go in and out of the office. Soon, only I'm waiting, and then it's my turn. I walk into a small room with the large nurse, and we sit next to each other beside a table. Also sitting there is a man and a woman. The woman is in her thirties with black hair and an equally black shirt. The nurse tells me that she's a social worker and she tells me her name, but I forget it right away.

The nurse also introduces me to Dr. Moltani, who's like an Indian version of Mr. Burns from *The Simpsons* — only more decrepit. He looks depressed, too. He looks far more depressed than any of us. So it's kind of like the pot treating the kettle.

The doctor starts off by asking me why I'm in the hospital, and I retell my story yet again. I've told it so many times that I've become sick of my own voice.

"Don't you have any family you can ask for help?" asks the social worker.

"No," I tell her.

“You have no family at all?”

“I have no family at all.”

“Everybody has some family.”

“Everybody but me.”

I realize right away what I’m saying sounds false and hyperbolic, and it is kind of false and hyperbolic. I do have cousins. I even have a sister. But I haven’t had any personal contact with any of them in more than a decade, and I was never close to any of them ever.

“What about friends?” the social worker asks.

“I don’t have any of those, either,” I tell her.

This also sounds false and hyperbolic. But it’s actually not, and even I have to wonder how I could’ve lived more than 50 years and not have made any close friends. I know it can’t be the entire world at fault. I know that the fault lies in me and in me alone. I just don’t know what the fault is. All I know is that it’s what prevents me from connecting to other people, and that this is at the root of all my problems.

I’ve learned much in the last few years as my life fell apart. I’ve especially learned that everything worth having in life depends on making connections with others and developing relationships with them. Career, love, friends — none of these things can happen without this magical ability I somehow don’t possess. This is the primary reason why I am alone and broke, and I have no idea how to fix it — and I doubt any of these idiots know, either.

“I want to start you off with some Remeron,” the doctor says, without the slightest bit of emotion. “And then maybe some Celexa.”

“What are those?” I ask.

“They’re antidepressants.”

“They’re not gonna help me.”

“How are you sleeping?”

“Not great.”

“I’m going to prescribe a sleeping pill for you as well.”

“I don’t want pills.”

“Do you want to hurt yourself or others at this moment?”

“I want to kill myself.”

“And others? Do you blame anyone for your situation?”

“I blame me.”

“Do you have any history of mental illness or drug abuse in your family?”

“My grandmother. She killed herself.”

I actually only found that out recently — in an email from a distant cousin I never knew existed. My father never mentioned his mother once. I guess I now know why.

My grandmother had a much better reason for killing herself than I have. Her first son — the pride of his family — was a navigator in the RAF during World War II, and he got killed during the Battle of Britain. The irony was that he was the only person in the history of my family who was tall, and because of his height he was unable to climb out of the cockpit when his plane got hit.

My grandmother, I’m told, could never get over my uncle’s death. First she became an alcoholic, and then she finished the job. She finished it long before I was born.

I could also mention to the doctor my other grandmother. I have no reason to believe she killed herself, but she was always talking about dying. That’s all I remember of her. I remember her always begging God to take her, and I could never understand why. Until now.

But I don't mention this other grandmother to the doctor. I just mention that her husband was a drug addict and that's how he died. However, none of my grandparents seem to interest the doctor. But the same can't be said of the social worker.

"Why can't you contact your family?" she says.

"I don't have a family," I tell her, while trying hard not to get annoyed. "I don't have anyone close. Anyone I can ask for help."

"What about your appetite?" the doctor asks.

"It's fine," I say.

"Do you have any questions for me?"

"No."

"Is there's someone in your family we can contact?" says the social worker. She says this and I snap.

"How many times do I have to tell you I don't have a fucking family?" I holler.

"Calm down," the nurse says to me.

"She keeps asking me the same fucking question," I say back to her, "like she's trying to trip me up."

"I'm just trying to help," the social worker responds, with a little condescending grin.

"I think that is enough for today," speaks the doctor, as if nothing had just happened.

"Why don't we see how you are feeling tomorrow."

The meeting ends. It ends and the nurse walks me into the hallway.

"You need to relax," she tells me. "Look at this as a nice long vacation."

I don't reply. I just return to my room, where Frisco and Kofi are talking.

"I told them I wanted to kill the guy," Frisco says with a big smile.

"Who?" I ask.

“The guy my wife is living with. It’s not her fault. She’s too stupid to know better, but not him. I told the doctor I’m gonna kill him when I get out. And I am.”

“My wife,” Kofi mumbles, “she was also fucking.”

“Fucking women,” Frisco tells him, and he nods.

I say nothing. I say this because misogyny just ain’t my thing. Rudi cured me of any last remnants of it, and for that I’m thankful. I’m not thankful for much, but I’m thankful for that.

The two continue their quasi-rant, but it doesn’t last long, and we start off toward the cafeteria for snack time, which happens thrice a day — a short time after each meal. I suppose they think that food will keep us calm.

Slowly, we make our way into the hallway and down it, and I again notice the smell — that sterile and putrid smell. It’s everywhere here. It’s in the rooms and in the corridors. It’s in the sheets and in the blankets. It’s even in the patients. I can smell it on me, and it makes me want to gag.

We continue down the hallway, and a number of guys greet us. Actually, they greet Frisco.

“They’re letting me out today,” says a tall bearded man in his forties.

“Where you going afterward?” Frisco asks.

“Arrowhead.”

“That’s where I’m planning to go, as soon as they toss me from here. Maybe we can go together.”

“I just need to make a pitstop for you-know-what.”

“I know what,” Frisco says, with another of his big smiles. “Count me in. My disability check should’ve come in by now.”

I listen to them, and I discover that they simply go from one hospital to another, and I doubt they're the only people here that do this. It's like an endless mill.

We now pass another tall guy. This one is around thirty and is arguing with the large nurse.

"But I don't wanna leave," he pleads.

"The doctor said that you can leave, Daniel," she tells him, while talking to him as if he were 5 years old.

"But I don't want to!"

She ignores this. She ignores it and heads down the hall.

"But I don't want to leave!" he screams.

We now pass the pregnant girl. The pregnant girl I saw in the waiting area who looks 15. Frisco notices me staring at her, and he smiles. He also says, "You gonna tap that?"

"I don't think so," I say back.

"I would."

We reach the cafeteria. We reach it and they're passing out milk and jello and Saltines. I want nothing, so I'm about to leave. But I notice a few books on one of the tables. They're mostly junk, but there are a few Bibles, too. Actually, they're half-Bibles — only the New Testament. I also notice something else nearby them: a woman. She's in her fifties and wearing a pair of dark blue Jordache jeans — the kind that were last in style back in 1978, and she calls herself a therapist.

"Can I help you?" she asks me, while asking me this like she was asking a 5 year old.

"Do you have any Old Testaments?" I ask back.

"I'm afraid not."

"Why not?"

“Because most of the inspirational reading is in the new one.”

“But there are more stories in the old one. Besides, I’ve already read the new one.”

“Sorry.”

Kofi, too, has read the new one — I know this from talking with him, but he takes one anyway. He takes it and we return to our room, where he starts reading. He reads the book like it’s an amazing revelation to him.

Me, I just lie there. I lie here doing nothing. I do this until lunch.

Again, the two of us return to the cafeteria. We return there and I have a dry piece of chicken and I get my first pill. The nurse even checks my mouth with a miniature flashlight to make sure that I’ve actually swallowed it.

Once more, Kofi and I return to our room, this time with Frisco, who tells us he’s being booted.

“Out of the hospital?” Kofi asks with some surprise.

“No,” Frisco tells him. “To Closed East.”

Kofi shakes his head, with a look of incomprehension.

“What’s Closed East?” I ask.

“That’s where they send the psychos,” Frisco tells me, with genuine excitement. “I guess they really believed me when I said I was gonna kill my wife’s boyfriend.”

“Okay, Frisco,” the large nurse says from the threshold of the room. “Strip your bed.”

“Okay,” he says back, and he strips his bed. He does this and takes the linen and all his things with him out the room. “I’ll be seeing you guys around,” he tells Kofi and me, and he leaves with the nurse.

Kofi looks stunned, and he turns to me. But all I can do is shrug. I also lie down, while starting to feel the effects of the drug they gave me. Kofi's feeling the effects of his medication, too, and he goes to sleep.

I might as well be asleep right now, as I don't move. I just lie here vegging out, and I wonder if this is what life will be like from now on: just doing nothing but nothing. I do this nothing for hours. I don't even think of Rudi, or talk to Kofi when he wakes from his near continuous doze. He's more interested in reading his Bible anyway. He reads it whenever he can. He even reads it when he goes to the bathroom, and he reads it when he leaves for dinner.

Me, I don't even bother going to dinner. I don't want to do anything. I don't even want to lie here. The medication has removed all desire from me.

Eventually, Kofi returns, and we talk a little, mostly about nothing. The medication has stripped all intelligence from our conversation. All we can talk about now is food and sleep, as if those were the only things left in the world.

A nurse interrupts us. She does this by saying to Kofi: "I was talking to Pastor John earlier on the phone. He says he'd take you back if you're interested."

Kofi barely acknowledges her, or her question.

"Kofi?" she says.

"I don't know," he tells her. "A friend of mine is trying to set up a job interview for me."

"That's terrific. But if it doesn't work out . . ."

"I don't know."

The woman leaves, and I think about asking Kofi who Pastor John is, but I don't. I don't do anything but fall asleep. I sleep for eons.

"Mr. Colin!" a voice yells, with a thick Jamaican accent. It's like Bob Marley is yelling at me.

I kind of wake up, and I see an angry-looking aide by the door.

“You Colin?” he barks.

“Yeah,” I mumble, through my drowsiness and lethargy.

“Get your ass up. The doctor wants to see you. He wants to see you right now.”

“I saw him this morning.”

“The medical doctor.”

“What?”

“I said get up. Now!”

“All right!” I holler, and he gives me a dirty look, but I really don’t give a fuck.

Slowly, I crawl out of bed. I do this and slither down the hall, and I find the doctor waiting for me in a room no bigger than a closet, and a small one at that. I further step inside it. I also sit across from the old man, who’s looking at some charts as well as a computer screen. He’s looking at anything but me.

“Did you know you were anemic?” he asks, while continuing to not look at me.

“I didn’t,” I tell him. “Maybe it has something to do with my suicide attempts.”

“You tried to kill yourself?”

“Many times.”

“Tell me about it.”

I tell him about it. He’s especially interested in the charcoals.

“I’m surprised you didn’t suffer kidney failure,” he tells me.

I shrug.

“We will give you some iron tablets for your anemia,” he goes on. “But we think that there may be something seriously wrong with you besides that.”

“What?” I ask.

“We don’t know yet. We’ll be running some tests. For now, you can go.”

I do what he tells me. I leave and start toward my room. Though I’m stopped. I’m stopped in the corridor by a plump and angry-looking nurse I’ve never seen before.

“What?” I utter.

“I heard you want to kill yourself.” he says.

“So?”

“Why?”

With lots of reluctance, I tell him my story — the condensed version.

“Ever hear of Anne Frank?” he growls.

“What?” I growl back.

“You should read her book. Talk about courageous.”

I don’t know how to respond to this. I can’t decide if he’s making a reference to my ethnicity or if he’s just a moron. So I just return to my room and to my bed and to my lethargy. I just lie there. I lie there through snack time. I lie there into the night. This is when another nurse comes. She comes pushing a medical tray, and she tells me with great enthusiasm that it’s time for my medicine.

“I’ve already had it,” I mumble.

“You get some more,” she says with a big smile, and I’m so lethargic that I can’t even moan about it.

#

We return to the men’s home. We return there after the driver picks us up at the welfare office with our shiny new food stamp cards.

We’re late for lunch and no one has thought of saving us any, so like the day before there’s nothing to eat but crackers and cracker-like things.

Instead, I return to the barn. I return there to relax on my day off. Tony's already there and he's talking with Jose. He's telling him that he's walking tomorrow. Tomorrow morning. I'm not sure I believe him. I'm not even sure he believes himself.

I pretend not to hear any of this. I do this and climb to the second floor and then onto my bunk. I further take a deep sigh that I'm not sure has any meaning whatsoever. I also start thinking of Rudi, which I know has lots of meaning. I think of her and I smile, and she takes me on one of her rides, and this gives me just a little hope.

"Hey, Colin!" shouts Sean, from downstairs by the door.

"What?" I shout back, with lots of aggravation.

"I need to see your EBT card."

"Why?"

"So I can see how much money is on it."

Sighing again, I climb downstairs and go to the chapel. There I give Sean the card, and he takes it along with all the other new ones and calls some 1-800 number that tells him the balance of each card, which he writes down on a sheet of paper along with the card's renewal date. He does all this and hands us the cards back.

I think then about returning to bed and to Rudi, but instead I go into the backyard with Roberto and Tony, and we do some weightlifting — something we had talked about doing more than once over the past few days, even though I don't think any of us actually expected to be doing it.

Roberto is stronger than he looks, and he knows his way around a gym. He even confides in me that he once boxed.

"Don't tell anyone," he whispers.

"Why?" I whisper back.

“Because I don’t want to prove it.”

I nod, and I do some stomach crunches on the chest press bench, even though my stomach is flatter than it has ever been. I also again gaze into the heavens through the trees.

“What do you guys usually do on Mondays?” I ask Tony.

“This,” he says, after sitting beside a picnic table.

“Nothing?”

“Ain’t it great? Oh, between two and three we can’t go into the chapel.”

“Why not?”

“They have Sunday school for kids in there.”

“But it’s Monday.”

“So it’s Monday school. You know what I mean.”

“Why aren’t we allowed in there?”

“They don’t want us anywhere near their kids.”

“What do they think we’re gonna do to them?”

“If you haven’t noticed, there isn’t exactly a high level of trust around here.”

“I’ve noticed.”

I join Tony at the picnic table while Roberto continues working out. A few others come by, and they all sit with us. This includes Felipe and Carlos, and also Leo, who’s carrying some kind of kit.

Felipe turns on the nearby boombox, and he right away turns it from the ubiquitous Christian rock station to a pop one. The music still sucks, but at least it doesn’t suck quite as much.

“You know we can’t listen to that,” Tony says to him.

“I know,” Felipe says back, and he switches it back, but he’s not happy about it. Neither am I when I hear that voice again.

Thy will be done. Thy will be done. Thy will be done.

At this moment I feel like using my head as a hammer against the picnic table, just to make the voice stop bouncing around in it.

“Can we just turn it off?” Carlos asks. Actually, he’s begging — and not because he’s not religious, because he is. Perhaps he’s begging even because he is religious — to preserve his faith, as well as his mind.

“I second the motion,” I add, and Felipe turns off the radio.

“What the fuck?” Roberto growls by the clothes line.

We turn to him, and we see him checking some laundry, and Carlos asks him what’s wrong.

“All my underwear’s gone,” Roberto tells us.

“You should never leave your underwear outside,” Carlos says — not just to Roberto, but to all of us. “Or your socks.”

“Why not?”

“People will steal them. That’s why there’s a clothes line above everyone’s bed.”

“I thought we were all Christians,” I say.

“Some are more Christian than others,” Carlos replies.

“So I’ve heard.”

Leo starts cutting Carlos’s hair. He does this using tools from his kit: a comb and some clippers. Leo says that he’ll cut anybody’s hair on Mondays, and do it for free. But Carlos pays him anyway. He pays him because he respects Leo. Carlos respects everybody. That’s one of the

reasons why everyone in the home respects him. We respect him more than anyone here, including the pastor.

A rag session suddenly starts. I don't know how it starts, but I know why it does. We have nothing to do but to rag on each other, and it's kind of fun — even when everyone is making fun of me. We're all laughing and acting as if we were normal guys shooting the proverbial shit, even if we're anything but normal. Which becomes apparent when little Manny Jr. comes running up to us.

"You're not supposed to be out here," Tony tells him.

"Why?" Manny asks.

"You have school. Get inside."

"Why?"

"I have no idea."

A few more boys come and play with Manny. Just as the cowbell rings.

"School's starting," Tony says.

"Why?" Manny asks, with a big smile.

"I'll give you a why — now get."

The boys scurry inside the chapel, and I wonder just what kind of horseshit they're being fed right now. I also wonder if the pastor is screaming at them — and if he's telling them just how damned they'll be if they don't grow up just like him.

Little Jose now comes by, and he's carrying a pair of ugly oversized ties. They're ties not even clowns would wear. Not even blind ones.

"Look at what I just got," he says to everyone with a big smile, while showing off his booty. "What do you guys think?"

No one says anything, which I guess is kinda saying a lot.

Jose starts fumbling with one of the ties. He fumbles with it as if he's trying to tie it.

"You want me to show you how to make a windsor knot?" I ask him. I ask him this only because I'm so bored.

"I can't do it," he insists. "I've tried like a million times. I've had people show me. I've even watched videos on YouTube."

"They have videos for that?"

"Yup."

"It's real easy. It's a lot easier than carrying those water buckets. I'll show you."

I show him. I do this by looping one end of the tie over the other and then threading this other end through the loop. As I do, I notice that everyone at the picnic table is staring at us intently, and I realize that Jose isn't the only one here who can't tie a tie.

"That *is* easy," Jose says with some surprise when I finish. "Why is it that nobody ever showed me like that?"

"Maybe they don't want you tying your own tie."

He looks at me with an expression of incomprehension.

"Now you do it," I tell him.

I undo the tie and give it to him, and after a couple of misfires, he's tying his own tie — and he's happy. I mean, he's like really happy. He truly believes that he's accomplished something.

Felipe now tries to tie a tie, and he, too, can soon tie a tie, and I realize that I've served some small purpose by continuing to live. Even if it's a very small one.

#

Nu pogodi.

It's funny what you think about when you think time's running out. With the sun just starting to rise outside my motel room in Barstow, I'm lying in bed thinking about a Russian cartoon I sometimes watched when I lived in Eastern Europe.

People have described the show as a Russian *Tom & Jerry*, but to me it's more like *The Road Runner*. It's all about this wolf who chases this hare. At the end of each episode, after he has once again failed miserably in his pursuit, the wolf says to his would-be prey the only words he ever says: "*Nu pogodi, zayits.*"

Just you wait, hare.

I realize just now that he really wasn't saying this for the hare's benefit. I mean, after the first few episodes he must've realized that the hare was not intimidated by him at all. Yet he keeps saying this. He says it at the end of every fucking show. I now realize that he says it for himself. He does this because if he can't convince himself that he'll one day succeed, there's no point in him existing. Self-deception is his only option.

I'm just like the wolf. I want to be like Rudi, but I'm just like the wolf. For years I've kept telling myself that one day I would succeed, just as long as I kept trying. But I think I always knew I'd end up like this. I wonder if the wolf, too, will one day also realize the folly of his self-deception, and do just what I'm about to do. At least then the show would finally end differently.

I see the sun's up. So I get out of bed, with my ankle hurting as much as it did the night before, despite having put bags of freezing water against it throughout the night. I've actually soaked the bed more than I've helped my foot.

While barely applying pressure to this foot, I hop into the shower, which is one of the few things in the room that's almost kinda working. The shower head is kinda broken and the water isn't super hot and the plaster on the walls is shedding, but it's still kinda working.

I then dress and dress quickly. I don't know why I'm in such a hurry, but I am. I further pack and refill my one little water bottle, which I know probably won't last more than a block. But maybe that'll be sufficient.

Now I'm using my phone. I'm using it to see if there's any WiFi around, and I see that the motel has a connection. So I try it, and it works. Sorta. It's sorta working like everything else in the room, and it's slow, too. Really slow.

Still, I do a search, for a local bus, and I find one. But I eventually give up waiting for the Victor Valley Transit Authority's website to load. I give up and leave the motel room, and I return the key to the manager, and I again thank her for letting me stay.

I'm expecting in reply some kind of a surprise — an extra charge or even a citation for trespassing, but there isn't anything like that. She just smiles and wishes me well, and I think she means it.

"Is there a bus nearby?" I ask her. "A local one?"

"Yeah," she says. "But it doesn't run often."

"How much is it?"

"I don't know. Maybe a dollar or so."

I nod and exit. It's only 8:00 a.m., but it already feels like 100 degrees outside. It's also humid. It's far more humid than it should be here in the desert.

Right away, I see the bus stop across the street, but I walk past it. I walk back down Main Street the way I came, toward what I'm not sure.

Barstow is dead. I mean, it's really dead. It's as dead in the morning as it was in the middle of night. There is almost no one walking in the streets and I don't even see many cars passing along what many signs say is historic Route 66.

As expected, I pretty much finish all my metallic-tasting water way before I reach the end of the west side of Main Street. So I walk into a convenience store, and think about buying a drink. But everything's way overpriced and I only have \$10, and I just can't convince myself that it's worth it.

Instead, I continue on, in the swelter and emptiness, with my foot throbbing with each step. But I manage to reach 1st Avenue. I reach it and the pathway to the Rainbow Basin.

I've kinda decided that's where I'm heading. It's about 7 miles out of town and the only place I could find on the Internet anywhere near Barstow that looked interesting. But I don't make a left in its direction. I keep going down Main Street — down the eastern side of it — down what is considered downtown. I don't know why I'm doing this, or where I'm going. I'm just doing it, up and down the endless hills. I'm looking for something maybe.

I now pass a billboard. It's a big huge billboard for Barstow Community Hospital, and I wonder why a hospital would need to advertise. As I wonder, I cross a street, and I see an old blind woman seemingly stuck by a street light on the other side. She doesn't seem to know where to go, and I realize that I'm not much different than her.

"Do you need any help?" I ask.

"Could you lead me across the road?" she asks back.

"Yes," I tell her, and she takes my arm, and I walk her across the same street I just walked across.

"Thank you," she tells me afterward, and she hands me a tiny slip of paper and goes her way. The paper's got handwriting on it, and lots of crosses, and it says: "If you need help, please call . . ."

Normally, I would just throw something like this away. But this isn't normally, so I put the paper in my wallet and continue, still not knowing to where I'm continuing.

I soon find myself at a church. It's not one of those fancy churches. It looks like it was once a warehouse or something like it. It looks condemned. It looks like the kind of place Jesus would hang out in.

I don't know why, but I walk up to the door. I do this and discover it's closed. There's also no one around, inside or out. So I just sit by the door. I sit there and wait for I don't know what, just like how I waited outside a synagogue in Long Beach a few months earlier.

The temperature continues to rise, and I rise, too. I also see a homeless man making his way toward me. I limp past him, and I return down Main Street. Hill after hill I pass, while getting more tired and thirsty with each one. I really want to collapse. But I just don't have the will.

Eventually, I find myself approaching the Motel 6 from the night before, and I keep going. I also go past a Vons and head down a really steep hill — the steepest yet. I'm pretty sure there is a Greyhound Station and McDonald's nearby. At least I've seen it on maps, and maybe that's where I'm heading. Only I don't know to which of the two I'm heading.

Again I find myself at a street corner, and I cross the road, and I pass a beggar sitting on the curb beside a Carl's Jr. restaurant. He's holding up a handwritten cardboard sign asking for help. In the past, I would have seen someone like this as being lazy, but considering how hot it is, I realize what he's doing has to be way harder than working. Which makes me wonder if this is the only job he can get.

Exhausted and long past thirsty, I reach the bottom of the hill, and I see the McDonald's, which is in the shape of a train car for some reason. I also see the Greyhound station next to it and the onramp to Interstate 15 across the street from it. Lots of cars from the highway are exiting and parking by the McDonald's, and I somehow see this as a sign to go inside.

There I learn that there are actually a few restaurants inside the building, and many little food stands, too. But I go to the McDonald's. I go there despite rarely going there since returning from Europe twenty years earlier.

When I lived in Prague, I ate at McDonald's a lot — a lot more than I would care to admit. I ate there not because the food was so great. It was just as blah as it is here. McDonald's food actually looks and smells and tastes exactly the same no matter where in the world you eat it. Still, I often went there in Prague. I did because I felt a certain comfort and safety there, and some faint connection to a misspent youth. They also had the cleanest bathrooms in the city. Most of all, I knew exactly what to expect there.

I'm feeling that way again, here in Barstow. What's more, they're offering an endless soda for \$1, as if they knew exactly what I needed.

I give the woman at the counter my last \$10, and she gives me a large cup, my change, and directions on how to connect to their WiFi. Which are the only things I might ever need again.

Over and over that morning, and well into the afternoon, I fill that cup. I fill it and refill it and drench myself with every drink they have besides Coke. I can't stand Coke. I never even liked it as a kid back when they still used real sugar instead of that corn syrup they poison us with today.

There are lots of other drink options here. I fill my cup with lemonade and Fanta and ice tea, and even some vile Strawberry drink. I do this while surfing the web. As expected, I have no new email of any consequence. Nothing is going to save me. Then, I see it. I see it across the street. I see a Travelodge.

#

I awake. I awake in a fog.

My body may be in the psychiatric ward, but my mind is in a deep dark fog, and my mind is the only thing of consequence I have remaining.

I don't get out of bed. I don't shower. I don't go to breakfast. I don't pass go. I don't do anything but lie here in a stupor. I lie here and want to die. I've never wanted it more than I do right now. It's all I can think about. I can't even think of Rudi anymore. I can't even escape for a few lousy moments.

An aide comes to the door, and he tells me that Dr. Moltani is waiting for me. But I'm not going. I'm not going anywhere.

The aide leaves. But he is quickly replaced by the large nurse. "Let's go," she demands, from the threshold of my room, while clapping her hands.

"I'm not going anywhere," I tell her.

"You have to see the doctor."

"I don't. He fucking poisoned me."

"Colin —"

"— Leave me alone!"

She leaves, and I go back to vegetating. I don't even want to breathe, and I'm not so sure I am.

Again, the nurse is at my door. She has returned and she's insisting that I see the monster who's done all this to me. "It'll just be for a few minutes," she insists. "I promise. Then you can go right back to bed."

"No," I tell her. "Just leave me alone."

"I'm not gonna leave until you see the doctor. It's for your own good."

I don't say a thing. But she doesn't go anywhere. She just keeps nagging.

“Leave me the fuck alone!” I scream, and I realize that I’ve become the kind of deranged lunatic that belongs in a place like this.

“After you see the doctor,” she barks.

Full of rage, I crawl out of bed, and I stammer toward the door and through it.

“Why can’t you leave me alone?” I cry out. “Why can’t you just let me die? I just want to die.”

I’ve now become my grandmother, I realize. I sound just like here.

The nurse says nothing. She just follows me into Dr. Moltani’s office, where he’s sitting with the nameless social worker — the one with the black hair and the black shirt.

“How are you feeling today?” the doctor asks.

“Like shit,” I tell him. “You poisoned me.”

“What do you mean?”

“You doped me up!”

“The pills I prescribed shouldn’t have done that.”

“They’ve made me even more depressed than before. I want to die. I want to fucking die!”

“Maybe we’ll try the Celexa.”

“No!”

“How’s your appetite?”

“He hasn’t been eating,” the nurse interjects.

“Why not?” the doctor asks.

“Because I’m not hungry!” I yell.

“We can get you any food you’d like,” he says, while showing concern for the first time.

Though I’m not certain that the concern is over my well-being.

“I just want to die,” I tell him softly. “Just let me die.”

“Have you given any thought to where you’ll go after you leave here?” the social worker asks.

I just ignore her.

“Maybe we can talk about it later when you’re feeling better,” she goes on.

“I think I’ll prescribe you the Celexa for today,” the doctor continues.

“I’m not taking any more dope,” I utter.

“Celexa isn’t dope. I can prove you this. I will have the nurse print out some information about it. You can read all about it for yourself.”

I don’t say a thing.

“In the meantime,” he goes on, “we can hold off medication for today. You’ll just get a sleeping —”

“— No sleeping pill,” I growl.

“What about the iron tablet?”

“Fine.”

“Do you have any questions for me?”

“No.”

The meeting ends, and I return to my room and to my vegetative state, where I stay during lunch. I’m not sure I’ll ever get up. Then someone comes to the door. Someone familiar. Someone named Cathy.

“What’s happened to you?” she asks, with an expression of shock. “You look worse than when you got here.”

“I know,” I tell her. I also tell her what’s happened to me.

“By law,” she says, “you have the right to refuse any medication.”

“I do?” I ask.

“Even when you’re here involuntarily. They’d have to get a court order to make you take something you don’t want to take.”

“No one told me that.”

“I’m telling you. Actually, something similar happened to me years ago. I had surgery and I was feeling really depressed afterward. So they gave me something like Remeron — and the same exact thing happened to me: I didn’t want to do anything. So I made them switch my medication. They switched it to Wellbutrin. Ask them to switch your medication to Wellbutrin.”

I shrug. I also go back to sleep. That’s all I do well into the afternoon. Kofi, who I’ve discovered is taking Celexa, does the same. A fine pair we make.

Another patient soon joins us. He comes to our room and takes Frisco’s bed. He’s short and fat and homely, and none-too-friendly. He says nothing to either of us. He just unpacks and lies down on his bed and reads some Dan Brown paperback.

We’re one fine trio.

The large nurse now joins us. She comes to the room with a big stack of printed pages about Celexa, which she hands me to read. Which is difficult with me being so drowsy. Before long I’m asleep.

The next thing I know I’m awake. I’m awake, and I see that the sun has started to descend outside the window. I’m guessing it’s after-dinner snack time, as neither of my roommates around. I also notice something: I feel almost okay.

I get out of bed and go out of the room, and I wander down the hallway. I also reach the red line on the floor and I turn right toward the cafeteria, and I almost walk right into the social worker.

“I was looking for you,” she says.

“You’ve found me,” I say back.

“Have you got a few minutes to talk?”

“I’ve got lots of minutes.”

We go into the doctor’s closet together. We go there and she says to me: “We need to find you a place to go when you leave here. Do you have any suggestions?”

I shake my head.

“Without income, you don’t have a lot of options. With people in your situation, I usually suggest a homeless shelter or —”

“— That is not an option,” I insist.

“Why not?”

“I’m done going backward or downward, or whatever it is I keep doing. If I go from here to anywhere, it has to be some place better than here. I’m not gonna let you just toss me into a hole somewhere.”

“There’s also Pastor John’s. But I wouldn’t recommend it for you.”

“Why not?”

“It’s a Christian men’s home.”

“What exactly does that mean?”

“All I know is that the place is up in Devore somewhere. They call it a home, but if you ask me, it’s more like a labor camp. It’s very strict, too, I hear. And it’s very, very Christian. I don’t think it’s for you.”

I suddenly remember what the therapist at the Victorville Crisis Center told me, about finding me a job and a home, and I tell the social worker about it.

“I’ve never heard of them doing anything like that,” the social worker says.

“The woman there told me this before I came here,” I say back. “That’s why I agreed to come here. She said that they would even pick me up.”

“Who was this woman?”

“I don’t remember her name. All I remember is that she’s a therapist, or training to be one.”

“I’ll give them a call tomorrow morning,” she tells me. “But if that doesn’t work out, should I make arrangements for you to go to a homeless shelter?”

“What did I just tell you?” I tell her back.

“You have to go somewhere.”

“Just call them.”

The meeting ends, and I return to my room, and I start reading all the paperwork the large nurse left about Celexa. I read every single page, and every single word.

“It’s time for your medicine,” says a nurse as she pushes her cart into the room.

“That time has passed,” I tell her.

#

Carlos is wheeling in a TV. After a long day of doing nothing, he’s wheeling an old TV into the nave so we can do more nothing.

Still, this is a big deal for everyone. They’re all excited. Even I’m a little excited, especially as it sure beats going to church. There’s only one problem: we can’t agree on what to watch. There are a dozen DVDs to choose from, and surprisingly they’re not all super-duper Christian movies, but we can’t agree on one.

The closest we can come to a consensus is for *Noah* — the one with Russell Crowe. I’ve never seen it, but I was under the impression that fundamentalist Christians didn’t much care for

it — something about it not following scripture. I also read that some weren't particularly thrilled that it was made by an agnostic Jew.

Carlos says that he's seen the film six times, and he's not the only one there. Still, he puts the DVD on and goes off somewhere, and we sit through a slew of bad trailers. There's one for a Mark Wahlberg *Transformers* film and another for a *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* feature, and I can't figure out which one's worse. They're not only bad, but they're also tedious and ponderous and lots of other ouses.

Finally, *Noah* is about to start. But Chuck walks in and says that we should watch a Jesus movie instead. So, we replace the DVD with a Jesus one. Which Carlos notices when he returns.

"We were watching *Noah*," he cries out.

"We're watching Jesus," Chuck cries back.

Most people are with Carlos, and none are with Chuck. Me, I don't really care, so I say nothing. Jesus, Noah — it's all the same.

Even though Chuck is nominally in charge, we switch the movie back to *Noah*, and again I have to sit through those inane trailers. They seem even longer the second time through.

Again, the movie starts. It starts but there is barely any sound, even after we jack up the volume all the way. Which reminds me of something that happened at the hospital, and I briefly think about suggesting that we turn on the captions. But I quickly remember how poorly most people here read.

"So much for seeing a movie," Tony says.

Again we take out the *Noah* DVD.

"I thought we were watching a movie," says Felipe when he enters the nave.

"There's hardly any sound," Tony tells him.

"Use the pastor's mike."

“What a great idea,” Carlos says, and he hooks up the microphone from the pulpit to the front of the television.

“No way is that gonna work,” Chuck says.

“Yes way,” Carlos says back, and Carlos is right — it works, and works well. Faced with a movie night without movies, and a bunch of losers and addicts have suddenly become MacGyver. The only problem is that we have to watch those trailers for a third time, and I realize that this is even worse torture than sitting through 8 hours of church. Way worse.

The movie finally comes on, and we watch it, and it’s not really all that sacrilegious. Sure, it doesn’t follow the Bible story pretty much at all, but it’s not sacrilegious. It’s just mediocre and boring. It’s so boring that the only real entertainment we get is from a mouse, who keeps popping her head out from under the TV.

Most of us jump when this happens, including me, and then we laugh at ourselves as well as each other. I actually come to see the mouse as being much like the pastor. Like the mouse, the pastor pops his head in now and then, and he scares us — but not for long.

The movie finally ends, and we have time to watch another. So we watch *The Blind Side*, which is a movie I have seen, and yet another movie I’m surprised they have. This film makes up for the mediocrity of *Noah*, and as it ends I’m feeling almost good. So are the other inmates. I can see it on their faces. We feel so good that we want to watch yet another movie, even though it’s past our bedtime. So we put on the Jesus film. We put it on thinking that if we get caught, there’s no way we’re gonna get into trouble for watching a Jesus film.

The only problem is that the film is not all that good. It’s got one of those direct-to-DVD vibes. It’s the kind of Jesus film with a Jesus who looks way too beautiful and anything but Jewish. Even worse, every thing about it, from the acting to its production values, is subpar. It’s

so subpar that I'm wishing I could see another Jesus film — a Jesus film I really love: *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Which is a film I loved even when I was an atheist.

A former business partner of mine in Prague turned me on to it, and he was even more of an atheist than me. I've seen it a dozen times and even owned the soundtrack. It's actually what got me to read the New Testament, and I'm pretty sure I'm not the only one.

What I'm not sure is why I love the movie so much, especially as it has more than a few corny moments. Maybe it's because Jesus comes across so human in it. More human than any other biblical character put on film. He's everything this other Jesus isn't. This Jesus we're now watching. Still, the film is kinda watchable. Not even these filmmakers can ruin a story that no one has been able to ruin in 2,000 years. They try though. They do this by using the Bible as a script almost verbatim, which means I know most of Jesus' lines before He says them, and I can't help blurting out most of them before He does.

"You've seen this before?" asks Carlos, who's sitting next to me in the first pew.

"I've read the Bible," I tell him.

"Even the New Testament?" counters Sean.

"Even the New Testament," I counter back. "It's actually the old one I've never really read in full."

Sean's skeptical, so he starts quizzing me. "What was Matthew's profession before he meets Jesus?" he asks.

"A tax collector," I answer.

"Who did Jesus resurrect from the dead?"

"Lazarus."

"How many days dead was he?"

"Three."

“How many disciples did Jesus have?”

“Twelve.”

“Not at first.”

“You didn’t ask me ‘at first.’ You asked me how many. He had twelve disciples.”

“All right. How many years did Jesus minister?”

“Three.”

This shuts Sean up. Though the only reason I know the answer is because it’s mentioned in a song from *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Though I don’t mention this.

“You really know your Bible,” Carlos says to me.

“Not bad for a Jew,” I say back to him.

“That’s right,” he tells me with one of his smiles, before putting his big arm around me.

“Not bad for a Jew.”

#

I press the big red button on my Android phone. I press it and just like that I have a paid reservation at Travelodge tonight.

I really thought Chase would refuse the charge. I really did. But they didn’t and I have a place to stay the night. So I finish my drink and fill the large cup one last time. This time I fill it with ice and water, and I walk across the street.

It’s somehow even hotter than before. It’s so hot that it feels as if the road is melting, and me along with it. Which makes me hurry, and I quickly reach the motel. I reach it and I have no problems getting my room. The woman behind the desk gives me a key, and I walk outside by the pool and pass the ice machine before heading upstairs and toward my room.

The key, though, doesn't work. It's one of those credit-card-like ones, so I assume I'm either putting it in or taking it out wrong. Or both. So I try every which way I can, but I still can't get it to work. So I return to the desk and she explains to me how it works.

"Put the key in," she says, "wait for the light, take out the key, and then open the door right away. I mean, right away."

I nod, and I return to the room. I further do what she told me, and it works — and the room, unlike the one the night before is cool. It's also much nicer than the one the night before and somehow cheaper, too. Only the TV doesn't work.

I think about letting it slide, as I don't really watch TV, but I call room service anyway. The same woman downstairs answers the phone, and when she can't help me over the phone, she comes to my room and fixes it herself. It's really true what Margaret Thatcher said. If you want something done, you get a woman. But I already know this. I know it from Rudi.

It's early in the afternoon — a little after two o'clock, and I start planning the rest of the day. I also get some ice from the machine downstairs and some rest, while applying the ice to my ankle. Right now I feel almost okay. I feel so okay that I go down to the pool, and I wade my feet in water that seems ready to boil. There's only one other person there — a guy who barely notices me. Which is fine, as I barely notice me, either.

It doesn't take long before it gets too hot, even in the water. So I return to the room. I do this without putting on my socks and shoes, and I regret it at once. Even with my wet feet, they burn in the swelter that is Barstow in early July. I have to skip the entire way back to my room.

There I decide that I need to decide what to have for dinner. I haven't eaten all day. I haven't eaten in more than a day, and even after all the walking I've done, I'm still not hungry at all. Still, I figure I deserve a last meal. Even murderers get one.

I think about what I want. I think about it awhile, and I somehow choose nachos. I'm not sure why as I rarely eat nachos. Maybe it's because I saw some in one of the little food stands near the McDonald's.

Using my Android phone, I search for "best nachos Barstow." I search this, but I don't find much, especially as I don't want a sit-down dinner. I see that there's another Del Taco nearby and that Carl Jr's down the road has nachos, too.

I choose the latter. I choose it because it's the closest.

With the sun starting to think about setting, I leave the room. It's still hot. It's early evening but not much has changed. But it's only a short hop to the restaurant, where I see the same guy begging by the curb. He's been there all day in the roaring heat. Like I said, not much has changed.

I enter the restaurant, and I'm just about to order the nachos. But they've got a jalapeno cheeseburger that looks too good to pass up, so I order it instead. I order it and a cup of water and I wait in a booth for the food to come. I wait and wait, and I figure that they must be making it from scratch.

Finally it comes, and it looks nothing like its picture. It's about half the size of what it looked like in the photo and it's all squished up — and the meat looks dry and overcooked. Even worse, the cheese isn't even melted. It kind of reminds me of the famous scene from *Falling Down* when Michael Douglas shoots up the fast food place. But I don't do this. Not even close. I don't even complain. I just eat my burger and go home. I mean, I go to the motel.

It's still early, but there's nothing to do but watch TV. Though the motel does have HBO. Actually, they have many HBO channels — more than I knew existed — and I watch *Speed*. I watch it and recall when the film first came out. I was living in Prague, and I thought it was

incredible. I was literally on the edge of my seat. But now, now it's just meh. Everything is just meh.

But not for long.

#

I'm feeling good. I'm feeling so good that when I wake up in the ward not only do I take a shower in the stall-less bathroom but I also eat breakfast.

I'm not the only one in a good mood. Kofi is feeling good, too. He's got a job interview that afternoon, and if it goes well, he'll be out of here.

"I really do hope it works out," he tells me, while shaking his head doubtfully. "I really do not want to go back to Pastor John's."

"What is this Pastor John's like?" I ask.

"It is actually not bad. But, but it is not good, either. I really hope this job works out."

"You'll do fine," I tell him. "Just don't forget to breathe now and then, and stay relaxed. And make sure you have a glass of water nearby."

"Why?" he asks.

"When you're nervous, your mouth gets dry. So drink plenty of water during the interview."

"Wow," Cathy says to me from the doorway, "you look so much better today. And you've showered, too."

"I took your advice," I tell her. "I refused my medication."

"And what did they say?"

"They said okay. At least, for yesterday. But I'm not taking it today, either."

"Like I told you before, they could get a court order."

"Let 'em."

It soon comes time to see Dr. Moltani. Unlike the day before, I'm in control. I'm in control of myself and my mind as we line up outside the doctor's office.

"Did you read those papers I gave you?" asks the large nurse from outside the office door.

"Yup," I say. "And I'm not taking it."

"Why not?"

"It can cause drowsiness and make depression worse, and it can be addictive. It's got lots of bad side effects."

"They're not going to let you get away without taking medication. I'm telling you that right now."

"There was a drug Cathy was mentioning."

"You can tell it to the doctor."

In a bit of a huff, she brings in the first patient, and I wait outside with Kofi and the others. Like usual, I'm last. I'm also sitting on the floor. I'm sitting there and looking up at Kofi, who looks even more of a giant than normal. He also looks a bit worried. I think he's worried about me.

People go in and out of the office. Like usual, the line moves fast, and soon it's Kofi's turn, and now it's just me and one other person waiting.

Kofi then exits, and that one other person enters. Kofi, though, stays with me in the hallway, and we talk. We talk mostly about his interview, and time moves fast. It moves so fast that I barely notice when the door to Dr. Moltani's office opens again.

The large nurse then steps out of the office. She steps out and eyes Kofi warily. "What are you doing here?" she asks him, before glancing at me. "Protecting him?"

"Maybe," Kofi says.

“Colin doesn’t need your protection.”

“Don’t be so sure,” I interject. But I also tell Kofi I’ll be all right, and he reluctantly goes back to our room. Me, I go into the office. I go in there with the large nurse and the doctor asks me how I’m doing.

“Better,” I tell him.

“I want to prescribe you some Celexa,” he says.

“No,” I tell him, and I tell him why.

“If you don’t take the medication I prescribe for you, then you will have to leave.”

“Fine with me. I don’t want to be here.”

“I talked with the crisis center in Victorville this morning,” the social worker interjects. “They know nothing about taking you back or helping you in the least. They further said that they don’t help people find jobs and they don’t help them get housing, either.”

I shrug. I do this because I’m not surprised that the therapist at the crisis center lied to me. I’m not surprised that she told me what I wanted to hear so that she could pass me along to the next slob along the production line, and so that she could absolve herself of all responsibility for me.

“I’ve made arrangements for you to go to a homeless shelter,” the social worker goes on.

“I told you that I’m not going there,” I tell her. “I keep getting pushed from one shitty place to an even shittier place. But it stops here, at this shitty place.”

“You have no choice.”

“Yes, I do. I can go back to the desert.”

“You can do that after you go to the shelter. Just ask them for a bus pass, and then take a bus to the desert, and then do whatever you want to do. No one will care. We certainly won’t.”

I don’t say a thing.

“If you don’t take your medication and you don’t accept a transfer to the shelter,” the doctor says, “I will have no choice but to put you in Closed West. And it is not so nice as here.”

“It is not so nice *in* here.”

“Fine,” the large nurse states. “You’ll leave today.”

The meeting ends, and I step out into the hallway, where I see Daniel standing a short distance away. A couple of days ago they threw him out, and now he’s back again. He’s back in the production line, and in the very same room as before.

“Well?” Kofi asks me when I return to our room.

“They’re tossing me,” I tell him.

“You are kidding with me.”

“Nope. They’re sending me to Closed West. Today, they say.”

He looks shocked. He looks more shocked than I feel. At least a little more.

“It’ll be all right,” I tell him, even though I’m far from sure of this myself.

The large nurse then struts in. She struts in and says, “Okay, Colin, strip your bed.”

#

It’s Tuesday, which means that it’s no longer our day off. So I expect to return to watering trees in the pastor’s backyard. I expect to be doing this all day long.

As Bible study concludes that morning, Chuck announces chores for the day, and I learn that Tony and Roberto and me will be going shopping this morning with our brand new EBT cards. Also, because the total amount of our cards isn’t sufficient for this week’s groceries, Carlos will be coming, too. So will Paul, but only so we can drop him off at some urgent care facility because his diabetes is acting up.

Bible study now officially ends, and I step outside and wait to go into town. I do this while listening to Giuseppe tell everyone multiple times about how his daughter and

granddaughter are visiting him later that day. He's happy. He's so happy that no one picks on him or mocks him, not even Mike.

But not everyone is so happy. Tony has a face full of anger as he exits the chapel carrying a backpack full of his things.

"What's going on?" Roberto asks.

"They won't let me see my dad at the hospital," Tony tells him. "So I'm walking."

"Why don't you tell him the real truth," barks Manuel, from right behind him. "Tell him that you didn't want us to use your EBT card to help feed the rest of us."

"Whatever."

Ted tries to convince Tony to stay. He says that he will even call the pastor to see if things can be worked out.

"Just let him go," Manuel insists. "He's a loser. What is this, your 7th time, dude?"

Tony doesn't respond. He just starts off, though before he gets too far I shake his hand.

"Take care," I tell him, even though I know the words are well past trite.

"You, too," he tells me back, just as tritely, and he walks down the driveway and down Lytle Creek Road right passed us and the home, and I can't help feeling envious. I wish I was doing what he's doing. But unlike him, I don't have friends and family at the bottom of the hill, or even a shitty job waiting for me. Also unlike him, I'm no longer 27. But, most of all, unlike him, I'm afraid.

Fear is actually the biggest thing that separates me and Rudi. It's not fear itself, but how we deal with fear. She gets afraid. Perhaps she gets even more afraid than me. But she never lets this fear get in her way, while I can't get out of the way of mine.

It's soon time to go shopping. Chuck collects everyone, which now includes Mark, whose EBT card will be replacing Tony's. We then take out some of the seats from the van so that we'll

have enough room for all the food. We do this and start off, with Mark driving and Chuck and Sean coming along to do all the buying. They'll do the buying while the rest of us do all the paying.

"You think we'll see Tony?" I ask Roberto, as we glide down Lytle Creek Road.

"Nah," he says.

"But he left just a while ago."

"We won't see him."

Roberto's right. There's no one in the road. Tony has vanished, and I already miss him. I miss him even though he was kind of a jerk. He was kind of like me.

We soon reach Fontana. We reach it and drop Paul off at the urgent care center, and we drive down the street to a supermarket I've never heard of called Stater Bros. There I learn that this is just the first of many places we'll be going to this morning, as some things are cheaper in one store and others are cheaper in another. Which makes me wonder why we don't just join Sam's Club or Costco and get everything cheaper, especially in the quantities we need. But I guess that would make too much sense.

"We don't need your card yet," Sean says to me, and I stay in the car with Mark, the tall guy with the southern drawl who likes fitness magazines. Who somehow starts telling me his story. He tells me of how he was once a rising manager at UPS before he discovered the joys of meth. He also tells me about how he once walked — that is, how he left the home. He planned it very carefully, he tells me, and late one night he started off toward San Bernardino without telling anyone, carrying his things in one of those big suitcases you can wheel. He thought he was being real smart using luggage with wheels, considering how far he had to walk. He thought this until one of the wheels broke less than an hour from the home, and he ended up carrying the suitcase over his shoulder for the next 14 miles.

Eventually, Mark came back to the home. He came back but he doesn't tell me why. Lots of guys here have walked only to walk back. Even Carlos did it once. Tony, of course, has done it 6 times, and I can't believe there's anybody who doubts there will be a 7th, especially Tony.

I wonder why. I don't wonder why they leave, but I wonder why they come back. I wonder what attracts them back to a place that holds no path of any future. Maybe it's this what attracts them — that they can disappear here without having to worry about a future.

The inmates eventually return from the supermarket. They do this with a bunch of groceries and we head to a 99 Cent Only store a short distance away. Actually, it's not far from where we got our EBT cards. We even pass the place on the way.

This time it's my turn to pay, and a few of us go inside the store, where I buy — with my falsely obtained food stamps — many big boxes of eggs that I'll never eat. Which I almost break outside the store when I accidentally let the shopping cart get away from me, and it almost rolls off the curb.

We then head to the van, and I open a Gatorade that I was allowed to buy inside the store. We were each allowed to buy one drink there, and I take a nice long sip of mine. Though I have to put it on the ground when I help put the eggs in the van.

This turns out to be a big mistake, as someone knocks it over. Still, I didn't have to pay for it. The U.S. taxpayers did, and probably their grandchildren, too.

Next we go to WinCo — another supermarket I've never heard of. This place is huge, maybe twice the size of Stater Bros, and at least three times that of the 99 cent store. Here we're gonna buy most of the groceries, so everyone goes inside, because everyone's cards will be needed.

By the entrance, we take three large shopping carts. We take them into the store and take off in groups. We further fill these carts. We fill them with bacon and sausage and giant bags of

potatoes, and just about anything else you could think of, including crackers and cracker-like things. We also buy 6 huge steaks — the biggest steaks I’ve ever seen. I mean, they’re almost the size of a cow, and thick, too.

Since they’ve never fed us with anything close to the quality of these steaks, I wonder if they really are for us. I start wondering a lot of things. There are 30 people at the home. So, if each one of us is getting nearly \$200 a month in food stamps, then we should each be getting around \$6.50 per day in food — and that’s not including food we get either as a donation or through something they call “salvage,” which I guess means food given to us because it’s past its sell date. But here’s the problem: there’s no way we’re each getting \$6.50 per day in food. Not even close. Maybe it’s a dollar or two, but that’s a big maybe. So, either some people aren’t paying for food or some of the food is going someplace else. Either way, lots of people are getting ripped off, and I’m not even counting the U.S. taxpayers and their grandchildren.

It’s now time to pay. We have so much food that the supermarket opens a register just for us. We then pay, leaving me with about \$20 on my EBT card. This is when I start thinking how smart Tony was to leave this morning, before they drained his card — and how dumb I was to stay. Now, even if I had the courage to leave the home, I couldn’t realistically do it before September. I’m stuck here, and I can’t help wonder if perhaps I wanted to be stuck here.

We now pack the food into the van. We do this and there’s not even a little space left, even though we still have to pick up Paul, who’s not exactly small.

“Maybe we could come back for him later,” Mark says.

“He’ll fit,” Chuck insists, and we go to the urgent care center and find Paul waiting outside it, looking a little past dead. Which is to say he looks normal.

He crawls into the van. He does this and squeezes into the back between the potatoes and the eggs and we go home. There we put everything in the kitchen. We also put the seats back in

the van, while learning that we've missed lunch yet again. But now there are plenty of crackers and cracker-like things to munch on.

"Pastor needs help," Chuck says, while talking on his coveted, but yet not-so-special Samsung phone.

Like the Pavlov dog I am, without further command, I go outside and cross the street. Nearby stands the pastor, along with his red pickup truck and his clearly adopted teenage son, as well as some inmates who didn't go with us this morning. They're all looking under the hood of the vehicle.

"Do you know anything about water pumps?" the pastor asks me, even though I'm pretty sure he already knows the answer.

I shake my head, and he doesn't seem surprised. He just shuts the hood.

"You wanna help us?" he then asks.

"Sure," I tell him, and we all get in the truck and take off, with the pastor listening to a Sherlock Holmes audiobook on the truck's stereo.

We don't drive far. Just a handful of blocks. We drive up to someone's house — outside of which lays all sorts of junk. Heavy junk. Useless junk. Heavy and useless junk that we must load onto the truck.

We all work hard doing this, especially me. I don't know why but I feel compelled to impress the pastor. Maybe I want to show him that I'm a hard worker and worthy of outside jobs, or maybe I just want him to like me. It's probably a little of both, but I think it's more of the latter.

We finally finish loading the truck, and we return to the home, and we dump all the heavy and useless junk we collected onto the pastor's backyard, which is already full of heavy and useless junk just like this. Which makes me wonder if this is more "wax on, wax off" work.

But I realize it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter if there's any purpose to it. The pastor is obviously pleased with our effort. He's even pleased with me — and this is all that matters. It really does matter what he thinks of me, and this is a surprise — and not an unpleasant one.

#

Darkness surrounds me. It has surrounded and swallowed me whole. But not for long. There are only a few more hours of it left, and maybe not much more of anything after it.

It has been said, and has been said way too many times, that your life flashes before your eyes when faced with mortal danger. Right now, I'm not in mortal danger, lying on a soft comfortable bed in a cool comfortable motel room, so my life isn't exactly flashing before my eyes. But I've had more than my share of introspection in the last few sleepless hours.

Tomorrow I must do it. I tell myself this over and over, thinking if I say it enough times maybe I will believe it. I must do it because I cannot put it off any longer. I must walk into the desert tomorrow.

I now realize that even a few hours of darkness is too much. Because it gives me too much time to think. It especially gives me too much time to think about my failures. Not finding work is just my latest. It's not my greatest. Not even close. I'm not even sure I could rank them.

I didn't use to fail. I used to only succeed. But that was only because I never really tried when I was young. I never went after anything that wasn't well within reach. But this got boring. It got so boring that I started reaching, and started failing.

I failed in Prague. Actually, I didn't completely fail there — I had my moments, but I failed to create anything longlasting. I remember the feeling of emptiness that came with leaving the city empty-handed — of giving up — something I would feel again and again afterward.

I especially failed Rudi. I failed to make her exist beyond me. She's so larger than life, but yet she couldn't get out from my tiny shadow.

I've failed at so many things. A half-dozen business ventures I've begun in the last 10 years have all failed, and they all failed for the same reason: me, and my failure to connect with others and be seen. I take up space but I'm not there. I'm surprised people don't walk right through me. When I walk into the desert tomorrow I will leave nothing — not even a footprint. I wonder if they'll even bother burying me.

Self-pity sucks. It really does. It sucks to read it, but it really sucks to spew it. I need to stop. I need to stop right now.

#

I'm limping down the hallway of Open West. I'm doing this while carrying my linen and the few things I have of my own.

People are staring. They are staring at me from both sides of the corridor. It's like a gauntlet. It's like that really bad Clint Eastwood movie from the 1970s. Only I don't even have Sondra Locke to motivate me forward.

I give my linen to an aide. I give it to him and shake Kofi's hand. I also remind him not to forget that glass of water during his interview.

He smiles at this and at me, though it can't hide his fear.

Trying not to see this, I cross the red line along with the large nurse — on our way to a door at the end of the hallway, which a security guard opens for us. Now, instead of Clint Eastwood, I'm Jimmy Cagney. I'm Jimmy Cagney heading to the electric chair. So why am I not scared?

"His lunch!" cries a female voice from just behind us. A voice with a thick accent.

The large nurse and I stop and turn around, and a small Hispanic woman with thick glasses and green scrubs rushes up to us with a food tray. Her name is Rita.

"That's all right," I say to her, "I'm not hungry."

The large nurse takes the tray anyway, and we step through the doorway together, and I find myself in Closed West. Which really doesn't seem much different than Open West. It's a little smaller, but it's the same exact place, with the same exact smell. The smell I can't escape. I can't even wash it off me.

Though there is one small difference here. This ward has a pay phone, and right now some guy is smashing the receiver into its cradle over and over.

"What are you doing, Charlie?" asks the large nurse.

"The phone doesn't work," Charlie replies.

"I wonder why?"

The nurse then leads me into a nearby TV lounge, and she puts the food tray down on a coffee table.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" yells a woman from behind us, and we turn around and see an angry black nurse. I think she's somehow mad at me, but it's the large nurse she's pissed at.

"This is Colin," the large nurse says.

"I don't give a fuck who he is," the black nurse says back. "I told you we weren't ready for him."

"He can sit here until his bed is ready."

"Just get the fuck out of here — and take that fucking tray with you!"

"What's your problem?"

"You're my fucking problem. Now, get out!"

The large nurse grabs the tray. She does this and storms out — out of the lounge and out of the wing, and I have to bite my lip to keep from smiling. I like this new nurse already.

She rushes off, too, and having nothing better to do, I sit down and pretend to watch TV. Quickly, I notice there's another patient here with me: a tall woman in her twenties, who's missing one of her front teeth. She tells me that her name's Jennifer.

"You're Jewish," she says.

"Yeah," I say back, without a lot of enthusiasm, knowing the conversation likely isn't heading toward a good place.

"What are you doing here?" she then asks, and I tell her my story, and she looks incredulous.

"But all Jews are rich," she tells me.

"That's not true," I tell her back.

"Yes, it is."

"Have you ever met a Jew before?"

"No."

"Well, there are lots of poor Jews."

"No, there isn't."

"My mom came from one of the poorest neighborhoods in America. Worse than anything around here."

Jennifer still doesn't believe me, and she looks at me as if I have horns on my head.

"Why don't you leave Colin alone," says a nurse from the doorway. A nurse I recall from the other wing.

"I wasn't doing anything," Jennifer insists.

"Don't you have some packing to do?"

Reluctantly, Jennifer leaves.

"Thanks," I tell the nurse.

“Don’t mention it,” she says.

“So what’s so different about this wing?”

“Nothing really. They’re a little stricter here. You get checked every 15 minutes, not just at night. Just do what your told and you’ll be fine.”

That’s the problem. I don’t like being told what to do.

My bed is finally ready, and I limp down the hall toward it. Slowly I limp, and I pass a room in which lies a screaming old man. He’s screaming for help and no one is helping him. No one even seems to listen.

Next to him lies Henry — the old man who waited 4 days in the waiting area just for this, and he seems unfazed by it.

I nod at him, and he nods back, and I continue on my way. I do this and pass a room on the opposite side of the corridor. In this room lies a sleeping woman, with an aide sitting next to her and watching. She’s watching her intently. She’s watching as if she were frightened.

My room is only a few steps away, and I step inside it. The place looks much like my old one only it’s smaller. It also has only two beds — mine and an empty one that looks slept in.

I lie down on mine. I lie there and do nothing. Though I do think of somebody, and not Rudi. I think of my mother. I have Jennifer to thank for that.

My mom was a lot like Rudi. She was no punk, or anything close to it, but she was a lot like Rudi. She had Rudi’s brains and her toughness. She wasn’t even 5’ tall, yet no one could induce more fear, especially when she was cursing. She used variations of “fuck” that I’ve never heard before or since, and the words would just flow out of her mouth like one of those big fountains in Rome.

Though underneath all this was warmth. Warmth very much like Rudi’s. A warmth that could melt anything.

My mom also had a life full of irony. She grew up poor — beyond poor — beyond even Rudi's poor. Because of it, she had a compulsive desire to buy things. Not expensive things. Just things. Any things. So, while some families had picnics on the weekends or went to the movies together, we went to flea markets. I've been to every shitty flea market in New Jersey, and believe me, there were lots of them. Then, when *Home Shopping Network* was invented, in the evenings my mom would rarely venture from her TV set.

The irony of her life came when she married my dad — a man she didn't love — at least not what I would call love. My father was an ugly man, but rich. His family was as rich as my mother's was poor. He even had servants dedicated to specific floors in the London house he grew up in. So, when he proposed to my mother, she must've seen the marriage as a great escape.

Here comes the irony. My father was such a bad businessman that she soon ended up in poverty almost as bad as what she thought she had escaped. She not only ended up working the same kind of crappy secretarial job she had when she met my dad, but she now also had a home and children to take care of. All of which put her in an early grave. That's what you call irony.

I guess there's also some irony in that she had a son who graduated with honors from George Washington University, with a degree in Computer Science — a degree he only got so he would never have to worry about finding work — only to find himself without work, and in even worse poverty than her.

The irony doesn't end there. Early in my career, I became a junior partner in a small financial research company in Hoboken, New Jersey. A few years ago, I read that it was sold. For \$1.5 billion. If I had held onto my shares, today they'd be worth \$22.5 million. I laughed when I read the news. I laughed hard, just like I'm laughing now.

I've had enough irony. At least for today. So I get to my feet and I stumble into the hallway. There I see Cathy helping Jennifer get her things together so that she can leave the hospital.

"You'll like this new home," Cathy tells her. "They'll take care of you."

Jennifer doesn't seem too excited about this, and I'm not sure whether I should feel sorry for her or feel envy.

#

It's Tuesday night. Which means it's time for our second Bible study of the day, which I think beats a third church service, depending on what card is wild.

I usually just sit in the front pew for these things and try to pretend that I'm not here, and I'm trying to do the same now. I really am. But I don't succeed. Tonight I read. I read aloud from the Bible for the first time, and I don't know if this means anything.

Am I conforming and becoming like everyone else? Or am I trying to impress Ted, who for some reason has joined us and is sitting a few seats down from me? Or am I just tired of listening to everyone else butcher the Bible?

I really don't know. Maybe it's a combination of all three. But I don't turn into salt afterward. Nothing has really changed, or so I tell myself.

The Bible study goes on, like usual without a point, and it also ends, just like it always does. Only now, with nothing to do, everyone steps outside onto the porch. Also stepping outside is Giuseppe, who has both showered and dressed up, and who is excited to see his family, and we're all excited for him. Even Mike.

His family soon comes: his twentysomething daughter and his baby granddaughter. He hasn't seen this daughter in years even though she lives only a few towns over, and he's never met his granddaughter at all. So he's exploding with joy. But the same can't be said of his

daughter, who seems to be counting the remaining time with her father in her head. It's both sad and reminds me of my own relationship with my father. It does this so much that I go inside the nave. I do this just as Carlos rolls the TV up front.

"TV night again, eh?" I ask.

"Every Monday and Tuesday night," he tells me, and he sets everything up like the night before, including the microphone. Also like the night before, there's debate over what to watch, or really over what not to watch. But we somehow decide on a film called *The Book of Daniel*, and Carlos puts the DVD into the player.

"Did Pastor say you can watch a movie?" asks Ted.

"It's a Christian movie," Chuck insists.

"You still need to get his permission."

"Since when?"

"Since always."

"Not that I know of."

Ted marches outside, and I can see him through the window calling someone on his phone, looking much like a little brat tattling on his big brother.

The movie starts, and it's another of those direct-to-DVD Christian movies about Jews, with actors who look anything but Jewish, in spite of there being no shortage of Jewish actors.

Angrily, Ted marches inside the nave. He does this and stops the movie, and he says, "No movie tonight."

"Why?" Chuck utters.

"I told you — you have to get permission from Pastor. And he wants to speak to you. He wants to speak to you right now."

Now it's Chuck's turn to walk outside, though he doesn't exactly march. He kind of crawls, and through the same window I watched Ted I watch Chuck make a call with his coveted but yet not-so-special Samsung phone. I watch him make a call he really doesn't want to make.

Ted walks off, and the rest of us kind of slouch. I wanna say something right now. I really do. I wanna be like Rudi and say that this is bullshit — that this whole place is bullshit. I wanna say that we're grown men, and that we should be able to watch some stupid movie if we want to. But I don't say any of this. I don't say anything. I just slouch like everyone else, and I realize that I really am conforming. I am becoming one of them, and there's nothing I can do about it.

The conversation outside is getting heated. I can't hear the words, but I can hear the volume of Chuck's voice and I can see the dismay on his face. He was once a Berkley-trained psychologist, and now, now he's just a piss boy.

Finally, he returns, and he says we can watch the movie.

"So what was all the fuss about?" asks Carlos.

"From now on," Chuck says, "from now on we have to get Pastor's permission before seeing any movie."

"Why?"

"Because . . . I don't know."

But I do. I know the pastor didn't have a problem with the movie, or we wouldn't be watching it right now. The only problem was that we acted on our own — that we expressed a small measure of free will, which is something the pastor feels is reserved for God, and himself.

We again start the movie, but no one is really into it, even after Ted tries to pick up everyone's spirits with some stale chocolate cream pie we probably got from salvage, or from

some dumpster. It doesn't help that the movie is totally soulless, even with Lance Henriksen in it. The movie has even taken his soul.

Not surprisingly, Daniel doesn't get eaten by the lions at the end of the film. It ends just like the biblical story. But there are only a few of us to see this end. But because the movie was so bad we few decide to watch another: *Seven Days in Utopia*.

It's a Christian golf movie and I hate golf, and I'm at best ambivalent about Christians. But it also has Robert Duvall in it, so it's sort of watchable, and because we know it's the only entertainment we'll receive for the rest of the week, we kind of savour it like bad wine, which of course we won't be able to drink perhaps ever again.

#

The sun is just beginning to rise outside my motel room. I can see this even through the heavy drapes.

I'm lying on the soft comfortable bed. I'm lying there trying to come up with another excuse for not doing what I'm about to do. I even wonder if Chase would approve another evening here at the motel. But I don't wonder too hard about this, and I get off the bed and take a shower.

Unlike the one in the Motel 66, the shower here is in perfect order. Everything works and nothing is falling apart and the water is just fine, and I don't want to get out. I really don't. Though I do exactly that. I exit the shower and dress, putting on one of my two T-shirts with Rudi's image.

I wonder if this is a good idea. Am I paying tribute to her or tainting her by this?

I don't know. But I don't change, either. I just go downstairs for breakfast. Which is the kind of continental breakfast you typically find at motels like this, with coffee and orange juice and toast, and miniature blueberry muffins. They also have some fruit.

I eat as much as I can, and I drink as much orange juice as I can. I also take a couple of bananas back with me to my room, where I again ice my ankle and plan out my day. Though there's not much to plan. So I pack my backpack, including the two bananas, and I check out of my room. I also take a styrofoam cup of orange juice with me. But this doesn't last long in the heat.

It's not even eight yet and I haven't yet limped a block, yet I'm sweating. Though I don't even think about returning to the motel. I don't even look back. I just head up the steep hill along Main Street. I do this while realizing that today is a holiday: July 4th. I mean, I knew it was coming, but this is the first time today that I realize it's actually here.

You'd never know it was Independence Day. Barstow looks as blah as it did the day before, and the day before that. Again there are not many people about, either walking or driving. The place is literally dead.

Up ahead is a Vons, and I remember my oath about never going inside one again. But there are no other supermarkets nearby, and I want to buy some grapes.

I probably should be buying liquids instead. But my water bottle is full and I don't have much space in my backpack, and I certainly don't want to carry anything. Besides, not long ago, I saw a western on YouTube, and one of the characters said that if you're in the desert and thirsty, you should suck on a stone — and I figure a grape has to be a lot better than a stone. Right?

I walk inside the store, and I see that it isn't set up at all like the Vons in Long Beach. So it takes me time to find the fruit and the grapes. But luckily for me the green kind are on sale — 99 cents a pound with a Vons card, which luckily I have. There are no scales around, so I just grab a bag at random and take it up to the checkout counter, where the woman there couldn't be more ambivalent about my presence. I try not to take offense at this. I try to convince myself that

it's probably because she's being forced to work on a holiday. But I'm pissed. I'm so pissed that I think about walking out without the grapes.

But I want the grapes, so I ignore my pride and her attitude and I make the purchase — and I walk out as fast as I can, while trying not to be so ashamed of myself. I do this and squeeze the grapes into my backpack, alongside the bananas. Now, I'm ready. I'm ready to limp into oblivion.

#

I awake. I awake in the darkness of early morning, on a cold bed in Closed West, and I see that I'm alone.

Yesterday, I had a roommate, for a few hours. He was a weathered and aging man with a big bushy moustache. He actually looked just like one of the Austrian military officers from *Good Soldier Švejk*. But they sent him back to jail. I didn't even ask him why he was there.

There's only one thing keeping me company right now, other than the aide that checks on me every 15 minutes. It's the light outside my window. It's big and bright and there are no drapes to cover it. It just shines on me like a sun. I'm not even sure which of the two is brighter.

"Good morning, Colin," says a smiling black nurse from my doorway. She's the same nurse who was screaming the day before at her large counterpart from the open wing. Her name's Dorothy.

"Morning," I say to her.

"Can I take your vitals?"

"Sure."

She does this and I afterward raise myself off the bed, and I stand up and limp down the hall toward the nurse's office. The old man is screaming again, screaming for help, and again no one is paying attention to him. Though this time they kinda have a reason for ignoring him.

That's because another guy is shouting, too. This guy looks about 25, and he's hefty, and he's threatening to kill all the black people working there. Though of course he doesn't use the word "black."

Interestingly, the people he's shouting at don't seem fazed by his language or threats. They approach him as if he were talking about the weather.

Me, I just continue on, and I pass the room with the screaming old man. I pass it and notice Henry's gone, and now I really am envious.

Turning forward again, I see that the young racist has somehow been calmed, and I limp up to the nurse's office, careful not to cross the red line a few steps from the door.

"Can I help you?" an aide asks.

I ask for a towel, along with socks, underwear, and a gown — and I take these things back to my room and go into the bathroom to take a shower. However, unlike the bathroom in Open West, there's no shower knob. There is nothing but a strange little button underneath the showerhead.

I push it. I do this and the shower starts, but there are two problems. First, the water is freezing cold, and second, the water goes off after 30 seconds. Still, I shower as best I can and dress, and I wait for breakfast outside the cafeteria, which is next door to my room. There I also ask a nurse about the shower.

"You gotta keep pressing the button over and over," she says. "The water will eventually get hot."

"I don't know why I didn't think of that," I say, as snarkily as I can.

We're interrupted. This happens when someone goes berserk. This time it's the woman across the hall who gets watched all day. Yesterday, she seemed calm and normal, but now she wants to kill everyone. Though at least she's not prejudice about it.

Strangely, I'm not bothered by her at all, even though she looks and sounds kinda scary. She looks and sounds as if she really could kill us all. Instead, I wait. I wait there until the food cart comes, and I wait for my name to be called, and I eat at a table by myself, while trying not to notice the small young woman at the table in front of mine. Her name's Karen, I think, and she's staring at me. She's staring at me as if I were Jesus and only I could save her.

Quickly, I finish eating, and I learn from a nurse that we will be seeing the psychiatrist soon. Fortunately, it's not Dr. Moltani. It's someone named Dr. Whyte, who Cathy says is the head of psychiatry at the hospital. She also says that he is much better than Dr. Moltani, and I sure hope so. There will also be a different social worker as well, so I have two reasons to feel fortunate.

As there are far fewer patients in this wing as opposed to Open West, we visit the doctor in two groups: one side of the hall and then the other. Today my side goes first, and I'm first in line. Like in the other wing, a nurse leads me inside a office. He leads me inside the nurses office. There Dr. Whyte is waiting, in a chair by a desk. Physically, he couldn't be more different than Dr. Moltani. He's young and tall and black and bald, and he doesn't look a bit depressed. Also sitting by the desk is a social worker. Like the one in Open West, this one is also nameless and wearing a black shirt. Unlike her, he's a heavyset middle-aged man.

I sit down in front of them. I sit by a table next to the desk, along with the nurse, and the doctor asks me basic information about myself and why I'm here, just like Dr. Moltani did, and I tell him just like I told Moltani. Dr. Whyte further wants to know why I've been moved to this wing.

"He won't take his medication," the nurse says.

"It was making me feel worse," I insist.

He asks me what I was taking and I tell him. I also tell him that a nurse here has recommended Wellbutrin.

“We can try that,” he says.

“Is it addictive?” I ask.

“It can be. But we’ll keep the dosage low. Do you have any questions for me?”

“No.”

“So we’ll meet again tomorrow.”

“Is this it?”

“Is what it?”

“All you’re gonna do is prescribe medicine?”

“What more would you like me to do?”

“Pills aren’t going to help me. I need hope.”

“You have to understand that this is an acute care unit. All we can do is stabilize you, so that you don’t want to kill yourself. The rest is up to you.”

“What rest?”

“The rest of your life.”

“But —”

“— Why don’t we just take it one day at a time.”

I nod, I’m sure unconvincingly, and I start back to my room. I do this while thinking how all my life I’ve thought psychiatrists were psychologists who also prescribed drugs, and now I realize the latter is all they do.

The old man’s screaming again, but not even I’m paying attention to him. I just keep limping to my room. There I see I have a new roommate. He’s Hispanic and his head is shaved,

but I can't tell anything else about him because he's asleep. I try to sleep, too. But I can't. I'm just too restless. Or is it restive? Is there a difference?

I finally give up trying to sleep, and I wander into the hallway. I also wander to the TV lounge, which is the only place you can really wander to here. There are bunch of people inside the room, coloring picture books and eating hard candy. Also there is a middle-aged woman I've never seen before.

"Hello," she says to me. "Would you like to join us?"

"Join you for what?"

"Group therapy."

Group therapy in this hospital is not the group therapy of books and movies. We're not sitting in a semi-circle exchanging feelings and experiences. Here it's just another term for nursery school. So I'm about to leave. I'm about to do this when I notice something on the therapist's cart — something other than candy and coloring supplies.

"Are those books?" I ask.

"They sure are," she says.

"Real books?"

"They look real to me."

I walk inside the lounge, and I check out her stash. They're mostly garbage. Garbage and potboilers. But one book catches my eyes: *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* by Thornton Wilder.

#

It's Wednesday morning, and time once again for Bible study. Again, I participate by reading aloud.

Perhaps it's just another sign that I'm conforming, but I at least believe I have another reason. Today we're reading from *Ecclesiastes*, and I get to read these famous words: "To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven."

It's a pretty nice Byrds song, but it's really nice poetry, too — and I wonder what it sounds like in Hebrew. I wonder if it's as pretty and poetic, or even more so. I also wonder if it holds any real meaning for me, in any language.

If it does, I sure can't find any. I can't find any meaning in the whole Bible, except for that *Hosea* reference, which I tried to find yet again this morning without success.

Bible study ends. It ends and it's time for chores, and I'm certain today I won't escape the pastor's backyard and his saplings. But strangely I do escape them.

"Colin," Chuck says, "why don't you rake the front lawn, and sweep the paths and the driveway area."

I nod, though I wonder whether this is a promotion or a demotion. I also wonder if it matters. It must, I guess, because I'm wondering about it. I'm the only one of the waterers with a new position, and I can't help wonder why.

Unsurely, I go outside, and I start working, and I find the work is a little easier than watering. I don't have to carry anything, but I also have to stay in motion, as I'm under constant observation of Chuck and others. Even worse, there's not nearly enough to do for a whole day.

The work kinda reminds me of the work I did as a teenager, for the Youth Employment Agency of South Orange, New Jersey. I did pretty much the same work I'm doing now: sweeping and raking, and raking and sweeping. Back then, in the early 1980s, I made \$20 for an afternoon of this kind of work. 35 years later, I'm doing the same thing, only for less. Actually, I'm making nothing. That's what you call progress.

Chuck tells me that I'm doing a good job. He keeps telling me this. Others are telling me the same. Two different guys at two different times tell me that they've never seen the driveway look so good. But this doesn't make me feel good. It actually scares me. It does because I know that I could get stuck doing this job every day forever, and that forever could be a very long time.

It's now lunchtime, and the chore is almost done. If it weren't for the breeze occasionally blowing a stray leaf or a piece of garbage onto my domain, I wouldn't have any work to do in the afternoon, other than pretend in the scorching heat that I am doing something. Which I know from experience is way harder than actually doing something.

The men come in for lunch. They come in from the pastor's backyard across the street, and I notice Roberto is looking at me funny.

"It's not that easy," I tell him, thinking his look is accusatory.

"I can see," he says, and he continues on.

"Is something wrong?"

"It's nothing."

"You sure?"

"It's just one of those guys back there was insinuating that I wasn't working hard."

"You work hard."

"I know, and that's what's pissing me off. We almost got into a fight, and it wouldn't have ended well for him."

"You just gotta let it slide."

Roberto sighs. He sighs deeply and we enter the chapel together and eat. We eat salad and bologna sandwiches, and I can't help but wish Chuck would send me across the street afterward with everyone else.

But he doesn't, and I return to the sweeping, with even more people giving me undeserved compliments. I'm so bored that I want to scream. But I'm afraid no one will hear me, including me, so I just keep sweeping the same places over and over: the front porch and the driveway, and all the surrounding areas by the driveway. It's now spotless. I mean, it's *spotless*. There isn't even a stray leaf around. I pounce on any the moment they appear.

I think I'm losing my mind. I'm losing it with each stroke of my broom. It doesn't even help that I can get a drink any time I want, or go to the bathroom. Time just crawls. It crawls so much that I wonder if there is a different system for it up here. I also wonder how I'm gonna survive this system for another 359 days.

Just a couple of steps.

I suddenly remember something. I remember about the guy getting hit by a car, and I take a small step into the road.

"Come on in!" Chuck shouts, at no one in particular. "It's three o'clock."

I step out of the road. I do this and go to the chapel. There, after noticing the time on the clock in the back of the nave, I get myself a drink. I also sit on the porch bench, and I relax in front of the beautiful view. I do this while trying to forget all about the guy who got hit by the car.

This only happens when the pastor's red pickup truck drives onto the driveway. It pulls up in front of us, and the pastor pops out with a big smile on his face.

We greet him, and he greets us back — and I'm surprised that he knows my name. I'm surprised he knows me at all, and we start talking — just him and me. We talk the same kind of small talk people talk all over the world every day. The kind that usually doesn't mean a thing. But it means something to me. What, I'm not sure.

"You worked in computers, I hear," he says to me.

“Yeah,” I answer, with some surprise. I’m surprised that he knows what I once did, but I’m really surprised that he’s inquired about it.

“Hardware or software?” he goes on.

“Mostly software,” I tell him. “But I know hardware, too.”

“I might be able to get some work for you.”

“Really?”

“I know this security company that uses lots of computers. But this work wouldn’t be tomorrow, mind you. You’d have to be a little patient.”

“I can be patient.”

I’m excited by this. I really am. I’m so excited that I would run into a wall right now if he asked me. Instead, we return to small talking, and we almost seem like friends. A stranger right now might think we were friends, and that’s pretty weird.

“Pastor!” comes a female voice, and from across the street comes a middle-aged woman.

“You still needing help with those windows?” he asks.

“Do I,” she answers.

“I’ll send a couple of men over.”

“Thank you so much.”

The pastor turns to Mark, who’s playing basketball a short distance away, and he says, “Could you help her clean some windows?”

“Sure,” Mark tells him before passing the ball.

“And grab someone else to help you.”

“I’ll do it!” I yell, and I rush over to Mark — and the two of us follow the woman across the street to her house. There we clean a set of double-pane windows on the second floor, which are caked with mildew and grime. I clean the insides and Mark does the outsides with the aid of a

ladder. We both work hard. I work as hard as I've ever worked. I make sure there's not a speck of dirt left on them. I want to show the pastor that I'm someone he can count on.

"Thank you so much," the woman says to me as she looks at the windows. "My daughter's having a party in here in a few days, and I didn't even realize how dirty the windows had gotten."

Quickly, we finish, and the woman walks me out of the house. She also hands me ten dollars and says, "Will this be enough?"

"I don't know," I mumble, feeling and I'm sure looking shocked. "What did you discuss with the pastor?"

"We didn't," she says, with her smile turning into a frown. I think she's thinking I want more money.

"I, I thought this was just a favor," I tell her. "He didn't tell us anything about getting money."

"I pay my way," she tells me back, and her frown turns back into a smile. She also gives Mark \$10, and the two of us return across the street, with my feet never once touching the ground.

"You know about the arrangement we have with the pastor?" Mark softly asks.

"We give him half," I softly reply.

"Yeah," he mutters, without much enthusiasm.

We return to the pastor, and we each give him our booty.

"She paid you?" he utters, with even more surprise than what I expressed.

"Yeah," Mark says, and the pastor hands each of us a \$5 bill.

I should be pissed. I should be pissed that he's stealing from us. But I'm not. I'm more happy than I've been in a long time.

Why? I ask myself. Why, when not that long ago, I was unhappy making a six-figure salary? Back then, all the money I was earning meant nothing to me — or even less. But this \$5 means the world. Which makes me recall a story I once heard. I heard it in Hebrew school some 40 years earlier. I don't even remember where the story is from, but I remember the story clearly.

It's about this wealthy farmer who's got a spoiled son. To change this, he sends the boy to work at a neighboring farm for a month. However, because this farmer is rich and is friends with his neighbor, he doesn't make the kid work. Though he still gives him 10 gold coins at the end of the month, which means nothing to the boy. It's so meaningless that he doesn't flinch when his father takes the money and tosses it over a cliff.

Next, the farmer sends his kid to another neighboring farm. The same thing happens. The farmer is rich and is friends with his neighbor, so the kid doesn't have to work, and the kid doesn't care about the 10 gold coins he gets at the end of the month. Which his father again tosses over the cliff.

Finally, the farmer sends his kid to a third neighbor. But, unlike the first two, this farmer is poor. He can't afford to pay the boy while receiving nothing in return, and he can only pay him 5 gold coins. At this farm, the kid must work. He works hard. He works harder than he ever worked. Then, at the end of the month, the father takes the 5 coins from the boy, and like before, he starts to throw them over the cliff. Only this time the boy stops him. He stops him because this time the money means something.

That's what this \$5 means to me. It means the exact same something. It means that I've earned it and that I deserve it. It also means something else — something I can't escape. With this \$5 I've bought into this place. I've bought into this whole fucking place. No longer am I an outsider. No longer am I just some crazy Jew from New York who got lost in the mountains. I'm one of them. I'm one of them and I don't dislike it.

#

I'm walking through downtown Barstow. I'm walking through what they call the Historic District.

Though to me it looks just like the rest of Barstow, rundown and dead. Nothing looks particularly historic. But at least there are no tire stores or fast food restaurants.

I'm now approaching a liquor store. I'm approaching it and I see a woman exit with a shopping bag. She's one of the few people I've seen on the streets this morning. She smiles at me. She also compliments my T-Shirt — the one of Rudi. Maybe she even sees a little of herself in it.

I thank her, and I really mean it, and I continue on. I also notice some trees lining the road up ahead, and a bench. It's the only public bench I've seen in Barstow, and it might be the only one in the whole city.

I'm not really tired, but I sit anyway — probably because I know I might never get another chance to sit anywhere. I also suck on some grapes. The guy in that movie was right — it does relieve my thirst, and I curse myself for not buying more.

It's getting hotter. I can feel the temperature rise, and I know that if I want to have any chance of reaching the Rainbow Basin today I need to move forward. So that's what I do. I stand up and continue down Main Street. I continue until I reach First Avenue, where I hang a right. I'm basically retracing the steps I took when I got here.

Soon I pass the original Del Taco again, and I again cross the bridge. Finally, I approach the train station and I notice there's a park beside it, with trees and manicured grass — something I haven't seen in Barstow.

It's too good to pass up. So I go there and sit under a tree, and it's beautiful. I mean, it's really beautiful. This is the one nice place in Barstow. It's even cool here under the tree, and I

have it all to myself. On July 4 no less. There are no picnicens or homeless people. It's just me. Me and Rudi. I can see her. I can see her lying near me.

Part of me doesn't want to leave. It wants to lie on this grass forever. But I don't do this. I stand up and continue forward, toward the Rainbow Basin.

It's not a straight path. The road curves a lot — first in big long motions along First Avenue, and then onto Ft. Irwin Road, where it moves more like a snake. A snake slithering its way through the sand.

Frequently, I stop. I stop whenever I can find some shade. I've stopped now, across the street from a convenience store — maybe the last I'll see. It's open but I don't go inside. I just take off my sunglasses and sit under a dying tree, while staring at nothing. I also drink some of my metallic-tasting water — and I suck on some grapes.

Around me is what I guess they call a suburb of Barstow. There's a business here and there, but it's mostly crumbling little houses, with crumbling little gardens. Why someone would live here is beyond me. But perhaps they've got nowhere else to go, and I can understand that.

It's hot out. I mean, it's really hot. It's gotta be past 100, and it's not even noon, or close to it. Involuntarily, I start to rise. This is when I realize that I've somehow sat on my Vans sunglasses and broken them. They're still sorta wearable, but they're plenty goofy looking. Which means they're perfect for me.

I start walking again, and the road starts rising, and I rise along with it. I rise until I see a park. But it's not just a park. It's a cemetery. Though it also has trees and nice grass, and I walk inside and sit in the shade. I also notice something. In front of me is a section reserved for veterans. It's also the only part of the cemetery that has visitors: a middle-aged couple and one of their mothers. They're here, I suppose, to visit one of their fathers.

Another family arrives. This one is different. It's a young woman and her two young children, and they're likely visiting the grave of the father of those two young children.

I wish something. I wish something I know will never come true. Still, I wish it. I wish I could change places with the man in the grave. I'd do it. I swear I would.

Of course my wish doesn't come true. That's one of the ironies of life. Some people who really love it, and who add value to it, lose it, while others can't even give theirs away.

It's my turn. It's my turn to go, and I rise to my feet and I exit the cemetery. I do this and continue up the hill. Soon I pass the last house on the street. On the balcony of this house sits a couple sipping drinks and enjoying the view.

They ignore me, and I do the same to them, and now there's nothing in front of me. Nothing but sand and mountains and destiny.

#

I finish the book. I finish *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, and now I'm really depressed. I'm even more depressed than when I was taking Remeron.

"Morning, Michael," says a smiling aide as she passes my door, while doing her 15-minute checks.

She's talking to my roommate — the Hispanic guy with the shaved head — a guy who mostly sleeps. Even now he looks pretty drowsy.

Michael's leaving today, having slept off whatever he was on, and he's returning to the streets. He'll return there until he comes back here, or to Arrowhead, or to both. I know this will happen. I know it because every single staff member here knows him and knows him well.

It's time for breakfast. Michael unsurprisingly stays in bed, trying to get every last minute of mattress time. But I walk next door to the cafeteria. I do this not because I'm hungry, but because it's something to do other than sleep or watch TV or read depressing novels.

I get my breakfast tray. I get it and take a seat in the way back. Like usual, Karen sits nearby with her food and stares at me without saying a word. She never says anything to anyone, other than to ask the staff for water, thinking it will dilute the effects of the medicine she takes. There was also one time when she went berserk, and claimed that the staff was trying to kill her baby. But usually she says nothing, like she's doing right now. She's just staring at me right now, with those eyes of hers, hoping today will be the day that I finally save her.

Quickly, I finish. I finish my bacon and pancakes and return the tray to the cart. I also leave the cafeteria, where a nurse stops me. He does this so he can give me my daily iron pill and dose of Wellbutrin.

I don't mind this. Surprisingly I no longer mind being drugged. Not because the Wellbutrin helps. It doesn't. It doesn't do much at all.

Cathy tells me that it's a popular drug in prison, where she says inmates chop it up and snort it like coke. But to me it's kind of like those NoDoze pills I used to take in college when cramming for exams. I feel a bit of a caffeine high, and then, then nothing. But at least it's not making me more depressed, which can't be said of most else around here.

The other side of the corridor is going first today. They're seeing Dr. Whyte first. So I've got nothing to do for an hour. So I go to the TV lounge — the perfect place for doing this nothing, and I see Sheryl sitting there not watching TV.

Sheryl is a short blonde around 30, who's got baby blue eyes shaped like one of the characters from *Doonesbury*. She's also one of the few patients I can talk to here. Sometimes. Sometimes she's coherent and smart and well read, and other times she's not — like today. Today she's telling me that Jello Biafra has AIDS.

I shrug.

"It's true," she insists. "He's a friend of my family."

I shrug again. I also wonder why she thinks I even know who Jello Biafra is. I haven't once mentioned punk rock to her. I haven't even thought about it until now. Though now I'm not only thinking about it, I'm thinking about how it got me through my teenage years.

Punk rock was like a drug to me. I'd leave high school every day pissed off, feeling alienated from the whole world. Then I'd come home, and for a few magical hours I would scream along with the music — with the Dead Kennedys, Black Flag, the Sex Pistols, and lots of others. It was like a fix, and I afterward felt almost okay, at least until the next day.

But Sheryl doesn't know any of this, and she certainly can't tell that I'm a fan of punk rock by looking at me. So how does she know? Can she see Rudi, too?

I like Sheryl. I especially like her because she's got interesting stories. For instance, she once told me that one night she was so strung out on something that she crawled through the doggie door of a house, thinking it was her house, even though she had no house, or a dog. The family living there caught her the next morning. They caught her making breakfast in the kitchen, with their pit bull licking her hand.

She got probation for that. She did because no one would ever believe that she could do anything out of malice. Even the pit bull knew this.

Sheryl's here now because she went on a drug-fueled tirade on a Metrolink train. She kept insisting that she didn't know why she was on it. Me, I think she just wanted someone to know she was there. Not on the train but on the planet, and I know exactly how she feels.

Sheryl has suffered much in her short life. Too much. She's got a 9-year-old daughter she never gets to see, and another child who was taken from her at birth, and she has a mother who absolutely loathes her. She's also lonely. She's as lonely as me.

If this were a movie, we'd probably fall in love — Sheryl and I. It probably wouldn't end well, but we'd both find some meaning out of it. Some meaning that would at least propel us a little bit forward. But this isn't a movie.

It's now my turn. It's my turn to see Dr. Whyte, and I step into the hallway. There I see a woman stepping out of the nurses office. Her name is Rose and she's in her late sixties. She's also from New York. Only unlike me she has a good reason for being out here in the Inland Empire, as they call it.

A few years ago, her longtime husband passed, and Rose couldn't cope. So, some psychiatrist somewhere hooked her up with a bevy of drugs so that she could cope, and she started traveling around the country visiting her grandchildren, which is why she was in the Inland Empire. But somewhere along the way the complex cocktail her doctor cooked up for her somehow went awry and she ended up here.

It's still awry. I can tell this because she's crying right now and she can't stop.

"I just want to go," she pleads, to no one in particular.

"We'll talk tomorrow," comes the voice of Dr. Whyte.

"I wanna go now."

Dr. Whyte doesn't respond to this, and an aide leads Rose by the arm to her room, and I go into the office.

"How are you doing today?" the doctor asks me after I sit down.

"Better than her," I tell him.

"You still want to kill yourself?"

"I still want to kill myself."

"Then you're not doing better."

"I just said that I was doing better than her."

“Are you doing better than yesterday?”

“No.”

“Why do you think that is?”

I tell him all about *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. I tell him how it’s about this rope bridge that collapses in 18th-century Peru and kills a bunch of people, and how this monk tries to figure out why God has chosen them all to die.

“And does he find the reason?” the doctor asks.

“He doesn’t,” I reply. “That’s the whole point of the book: that there’s no reason for anything. That life is just random and has no meaning whatsoever.”

“Perhaps this isn’t the type of book we should be handing out in this ward.”

“Perhaps.”

“What about the Wellbutrin?”

“What about it?”

“Is it helping?”

“It isn’t hurting.”

“But it’s not helping.”

“It’s not doing anything.”

“I would like to up the dose.”

I shrug.

The doctor then turns to the social worker, and he asks, “What about getting him into a place after he’s through here?”

“I don’t know what to tell you,” the man says. “He’s got no family, no income, and he won’t go to a homeless shelter.”

“What are we going to do with you, Colin?”

“Let me go back to the desert,” I tell him. “I’ll even sign a waiver, absolving you of any responsibility.”

“We’d still be responsible.”

“I’ve got no family to sue you.”

“There may be one possibility,” the social worker interjects. “But I don’t know if it would be amenable to Colin.”

“What’s that?” I ask.

“Pastor John’s.”

“I’ve heard of it. It’s some kind of Christian labor camp, right?”

“It’s called a Christian men’s home. You’d be working a lot. But it’s not like a chain gang or anything. It’s better than a shelter, too. You won’t be sitting around all day. You’d earn your keep. It’d be almost like having a job.”

“Yeah?”

“Some people swear by it. Others, others they just swear at it. It’s not for everyone. For instance, there’s no smoking allowed, and that’s a non-starter for lots of people here.”

“I don’t smoke.”

“So you’d be interested?”

“Where is it?”

“I think it’s in Scotland.”

“The country?”

“The town.”

“And where’s that?”

“Not far. I can see if there’s an opening.”

“Why don’t you do that,” the doctor says. Then he turns to me and adds, “We’ll talk again tomorrow, after we increase your dosage. Do you have any questions for me?”

I don’t. So I get up and walk out of the office. I further go back to my room, where nothing happens other than the 15-minute bed checks. So I get even more depressed. I get so depressed that I just have to go somewhere. I go out into the hallway.

There I hear voices coming from the cafeteria, even though it isn’t time for lunch or a snack. So I walk into the doorway and see a half-dozen patients, along with a short and plump middle-aged therapist I haven’t seen before.

“Would you like to join us?” she asks.

I shrug, but I walk inside and take a seat.

“We were talking about,” she says, “we were talking about what we can all do to make ourselves better.”

“What if there’s nothing I can do to make me better?”

“Excuse me?”

“Nothing anyone’s doing here is helping me.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“All they can do is push drugs on me, and no drug can solve my problems. It can’t get me a job or pay my bills or rent me a room.”

“I . . .”

“What if I can’t get better?”

“Perhaps we should move on.”

That’s exactly what I do. I move on. I move on out of the cafeteria and I move on down the hall. I keep moving, and I want to move right through the ward exit, even if it means taking the security guard with me.

But I don't do this. I reach the end of the hallway and I stop. I stop because I see Cathy standing nearby. I see her smiling at me.

"How are you, sweetheart?" she asks, with motherly concern.

"You think you can get me some paper?" I ask back, even though I only vaguely know why I'm asking. "And something to write with?"

#

There's no dinner tonight at the men's home. But that doesn't mean we're stuck eating crackers and cracker-like things. There's gonna be a big buffet after church, in celebration of the pastor's wife. Today's her birthday.

Some of us are unhappy about not eating until then, especially those of us who have been working outside in the heat. They're unhappy about having to sit through a whole church service before eating. Not me, though. I'm still high over my first big payday, and the prospects for more. I'm so high that I don't even care about the cold shower I'm taking or the lack of water pressure.

Quickly, I finish. Very quickly. Then, while avoiding my Holbeinesque appearance in the mirror, I put on my best shirt and jeans and wait outside for the van. I wait on the chest press bench while staring again through the leaves of the trees into the heavens, with Meister Eckhart again buzzing through my head.

Maybe I could stay here for a year, I wonder. Or maybe longer. Maybe for the first time ever I actually could fit in somewhere.

We soon get into the van. We all get in and the van rumbles out of the driveway and onto Lytle Creek Road, just as it's done many times since I arrived. We also listen to that same Christian rock station, just as we've listened many times since I arrived.

Thy will be done. Thy will be done. Thy will be done.

Again I hear this inane song. But now, now I seem to be humming along with it. I really am becoming one of them. Maybe I'm even becoming more like them than some of them themselves.

We're now making a pit stop. We're stopping at a Walgreens so we can pick up the selection of drugs Dr. Moltani's has concocted just for Roberto. The store has a drive-through, and we get in back of a line consisting of two cars, and we wait. We wait and wait and wait, and the first car still hasn't moved.

"Don't you think it would be faster if Roberto just went inside to pick it up?" I ask.

No one responds.

"Well?" I go on.

"It wouldn't be faster," Chuck barks.

"How do you know?"

"I know."

So we wait some more. We wait and we wait and we wait, and the first car still hasn't moved, and somehow I think that this, too, is a metaphor for something in my life. I'm just not sure what.

"Maybe Colin is right," Carlos says.

"What if Roberto and I go inside," Chuck says back, "what if we go inside and you reach the head of the line before we get the prescription?"

"We'll call you," I say.

Chuck thinks about it. He thinks and thinks and thinks, and even with his fancy Berkeley education he's unable to come up with a rebuttal. So he and Roberto exit the car and walk inside the store.

Again we wait. But we don't wait too long. Chuck and Roberto soon come out with Roberto's drugs, with the two cars still ahead of us. But I don't gloat about this. No, a good Christian doesn't gloat, or even someone who's unsure whether he's a Christian, or even good. Though I do smile. I smile all the way to the church. I'm even smiling inside the church. Not even Mr. Rapture can bring me down when he comes around to give us his super-duper Christian pep talk.

I smile as well through all the terrible songs at the beginning of service. I even smile when the pastor sermonizes yet again about Hiram and those goddamn pillars. This must be the third or fourth time that he's given the same exact sermon, and even Hiram would be bored with it. But the pastor is clearly not, but I'm still smiling.

The service is as long as ever, and it should feel even longer because I'm hungry. But it doesn't. Maybe because I'm daydreaming the whole way through. I'm daydreaming about a future.

The service finally ends. It ends and we inmates march outside the church and set up the buffet. That's the reason we've been invited to this shindig, so we can put out the tables and the chairs from the supply closet, and then put them back after the buffet is over. We all know this, but we're okay with it. Everyone has to contribute, and it's not like any of us can bake a cake. Well, maybe Sean — and I guess Ted and Chuck, too.

Quickly, we've set everything up, and now women are placing food they've brought with them on a long set of tables. Only women are doing this. I guess that's because only women are allowed to cook, just as I guess not too many of these same women work, if any. But I'm still smiling. I don't have to believe in everything they believe in just to be one of them. Right?

Maybe I'll answer this question on another night, when perhaps I'm not smiling.

I feel even better when Roberto pulls me aside, so he can ask me if he could borrow one of those 5 dollars I just earned. He wants to buy some tooth floss at the 99 cent store when we go there on Sunday. It's important to him, I can tell, to have some little piece of normalcy, and it's just as important for me to give it to him. Besides, he says in exchange he'll buy me a strawberry shortcake ice cream bar with his EBT card — something I would never buy for myself.

We conclude our little agreement. We do this and return to the others, and I see that a line has already begun to form by the food. A line composed solely of us inmates. Jose and Felipe try to convince everyone that we should wait until all the women and children have been served, but not too many of us are listening. Me, I just wait at the back of the line, more than willing to give up my spot. But no one takes it. The parishioners seem to be waiting for us to go first.

They start serving food, and I look it over. Most of the people who've brought something seem to have made it themselves. But they were given the option of buying something instead, and at least one person has done this. This person has bought a big container of Louisiana Fried Chicken.

Most of us want this, me included. I think this is because the other food we could theoretically get at the home. We certainly could get all the ingredients for all the dishes that have been made here, and our cooks could certainly make it, but most of us are never gonna get any Louisiana Fried Chicken — not while being locked up on the mountaintop.

So many of us want the chicken that even the thighs and legs are going. I get one of the last of the latter, and I continue down the line, adding pasta and enchiladas and birthday cake to my plate, before sitting next to Carlos and Roberto, whose plates are overflowing.

I should be smiling right now. I should be especially smiling now. But I'm not smiling, and I'm not sure why. So I look around, and I notice something. I notice that none of the

parishioners are eating with us. They're all sitting as far from us as possible, as if we had the cooties or something. They're almost sitting inside the church.

In a way, it's kinda like segregation. They've segregated the inmates from all the good and proper Christians. Even the few minority families that are part of the congregation won't eat with us.

I now realize why I'm not smiling. I realize that I will never be one of them. The most I could ever hope for is to be one of us.

#

I'm climbing. I'm climbing Ft. Irwin road, with nothing but desert and mountains and sun ahead of me.

I'm moving at a brisk pace — brisker than I would've imagined. I also glance to my left and to my right, at the sagebrush and the lifelessness of the desert. Then, I see it. I see it by the side of the road: a lone black rabbit.

It takes one glance at me and disappears, moving faster than light, and there's now nothing else. No animals or birds or trees. I'm walking into the shadow of death, and yet I have no fear. I have no fear because Rudi is with me. I can see her. I can see her right beside me.

I keep moving. I'm tired and thirsty and my ankle burns with pain, but none of these things are all that bothersome. I really believe I can make it. I believe I can make it all the way to the Rainbow Basin.

A car suddenly passes me, and then another in the opposite direction, and this kinda surprises me. I can't imagine where they could be going or coming from. Maybe the Rainbow Basin. Maybe it'll be packed with people. Wouldn't that be a hoot?

I think I've slowed down some. Maybe just a bit. But not much. I'm still making good time, and if I can just reach the top of this hill and start downward I know I could really get somewhere.

I say this, and I keep saying it, but I also keep slowing. I slow more and more until I realize something. I realize I've stopped.

#

Cathy hands me a big stack of fresh white paper. She hands me this and one of those little pencils you see at libraries when you need to jot down the Dewey Decimal number of a book.

"They won't give us plastic knives," I say to her, "but they'll give us sharp pencils?"

"Go figure," she says back, before walking off.

Me, I just stand there holding the paper and pencil. I'm not sure what I'm gonna do with them. So I stand there looking stupid. At the same time, the social worker comes out of the nurses office, and he says, "I was talking to Pastor John earlier. There might be a spot for you. He wants you to call him. Do you have time now?"

"I guess."

We walk into the office together, and the social worker gives me a cheap-looking office phone and Pastor John's number. Hesitantly, I dial it, and I get the man's voicemail — and I leave a terse message about wanting to find out more about his place.

"We'll see what happens," the social worker says.

I nod, without a lot of enthusiasm, and I take the paper and pencil to my room. I take them there and stare at them.

"What do I want to do?" I ask aloud.

I get no answer. So I just start writing. I write a poem. I'm not much of a poet, but it doesn't matter since I don't care if they're any good. I just want to write something, something that expresses how I feel. More importantly, I want to know how I feel. I write this:

Here I am,

But not me.

It's someone else,

Not me.

I see and feel and hear,

But outside me.

I am not me,

And here I not am.

I write a full page of poems like this — nine all together — and then another page of them. But they haven't helped. I don't feel any better, or even know how I feel.

Someone's at the door. His name is Dwayne and he's an aide, so I figure he's doing a 15-minute check of everyone. But he's got no chart. He's just standing there.

Dwayne's a big man. He's only a shade over 6' but he's muscular and ferocious looking, with dreadlocks and a constant scowl. Though he controls his temper well. He gets angry sometimes and even shouts, but it never goes beyond that, even when someone's screaming the N-word at him and threatening him with all sorts of anatomically impossible acts. This kind of stuff actually seems to calm him. Once I asked him how.

"I just let it slide," he told me. "The words, the threats, they mean nothing. They mean nothing unless you're willing to back them up, and no one here does. Hell, half the assholes here

I see in town. I see them all the time when they're in between hospitals. They don't even look me in the eyes. They don't dare."

For days now, I've wondered if there was something under that scowl of Dwayne's. I've wondered this because he's one of the few people working here that never talks about money or Starbucks or anything like that. He only talks about work. It means something to him. It's something more than just a job. I just don't know what.

"Can I come in?" he asks me from the doorway.

"Sure," I tell him.

He walks in and stops by my bed.

"Most of the people here I don't bother with," he tells me. "They're just not worth it. They come in and out and in, and they don't give a fuck about nothing. But I feel you're different, and I'm gonna believe that until you prove me wrong."

I don't say anything. I just listen.

"We all go through shit in our lives," he goes on — "me included. A few years back, I wasn't much different than you. I had no job, my family situation sucked — my life sucked. I had a hard time just getting up in the morning. But that's exactly what I had to do. I had to get up. And that's what you have to do, too. You have to get up. I know it's hard, believe me, I know. But there's no way of getting anywhere until you first get up. Until you get up and do something. It don't even matter what this something is as long as it's something."

I don't know what to say to him, so I just thank him. I thank him for taking the time. It's not his responsibility to lift me up. It's not anyone's responsibility, and yet he did. Though as he leaves I feel just as hopeless as before.

I try going back to my poetry, but I'm just not feeling it. So I try something else. I try writing a story. I write a story about Rudi. I don't even think about the plot or how it's going to end. I don't plan it at all. I just let it out:

She awoke in a room. A room she did not know.

It was plain and white, and had no door or windows — just four walls and a floor.

She had no idea how she got there — or why. She just was.

Slowly, she rose and touched the walls. She further called out. She called out for help.

There was no reply.

Though she did hear voices. There were also smells — of people. At first, she thought they were coming from outside the room. But they weren't. They were coming from within.

"Who's there?" she demanded.

Again, there was no reply — just more voices, and more smells. A cacophony of unhumanity.

"Help me!" she screamed. "Please help me."

But no one did.

The days went by, and she lingered. She lingered in the room. Along with the smells, the voices continued, and she realized they were the same. The same voices and the same words. Words that weren't saying a thing.

She pounded her fists against the walls and screamed. Not to get their attention, but to ignore them. But they won out. They always won.

Finally, she fell to her knees. She accepted her fate: to be and not be there.

To be nowhere.

I write a few more stories about Rudi, skipping both dinner and snack time, and I write some more poems, too. I keep writing until the big light comes on outside my window.

Wanting to escape it, I walk out of my room and down the hallway, toward the only destination here: the TV lounge. Many people are there, including a middle-aged therapist I briefly met in Open West. They're all eating popcorn — the stale, oversalted yellow kind that comes in big plastic bags at the supermarket.

"Tonight's movie night," the therapist tells me. "Would you like to join us?"

"What are you watching?"

"*The Great Gatsby*."

"I guess."

I sit down, and she brings over the popcorn bag and a styrofoam bowl, and she pours some popcorn in it for me, and I watch the movie, which has just started.

"I can hardly hear nothing," some woman complains.

"I already have it as loud as it gets," the therapist insists.

"Why don't you just turn on the closed captions," I utter.

"Good idea," she says, and now we can at least read what's happening. But this is too much for most people here, and the room thins. It thins quickly. Soon it's just me and Sheryl and the therapist.

"What movie would you guys like to see next week?" the therapist asks.

"How about *Across the Universe*?" I say to her.

"What's it about?"

"It's a Beatles musical. But it's not about the Beatles, nor are they in it. It's a love story set to the Beatles."

"And this is something you want to see?"

“I’m peculiar.”

She’d really think I was peculiar if I told her it’s one of my favorite films — at least of the new millennium. I thought I’d hate it before I saw it for the first time, especially as I’m not a big Beatles fan. But it’s kind of like *The Sound of Music* — another movie I thought I’d hate before I saw it the first time — another movie I now love so much that I can’t even count how many times I’ve seen it. There’s just something about both films. They both make me aspire, and aspiration is addictive, and I badly need a fix.

“I’ll see if I can get a copy,” the therapist says, before she steps out of the room. Now it’s just me and Sheryl.

“What do you think of this?” I ask her, while nodding my head toward the screen.

“I’ve already seen it three times,” she tells me. “What do you think of it?”

“I’m biased. I didn’t like the book. But this is no worse.”

“Yeah.”

She says this and walks out, and now it’s just me — me watching a movie based on a book I didn’t like. What’s more, I not only didn’t like the book, but I never really understood why everyone thinks it’s so wonderful. I could care less about Gatsby or his wussy pal, and I especially don’t care about Daisy, who couldn’t be more opposite of Rudi. It seems to me that only someone who really hated women could create a character as loathsome as Daisy.

In spite of all this, I can’t stop watching the movie. I can’t keep my eyes off it. I don’t know if it’s because I really do like the story and won’t admit it to myself, or if I just don’t want to return to my room.

Either way, the movie ends. It ends and I start to leave, and I notice all the popcorn on the floor. It’s everywhere. It’s not my responsibility to clean it, but I realize someone will have to do

it, and it's not really their responsibility, either. So I step out of the lounge and ask the aide sitting out there on a chair if I could borrow a broom and a dustbin.

He seems surprised by this request. He actually looks at me as if I'm speaking a foreign language. But he gets me the broom and dustbin, and I start cleaning the room. I do this and an amazing thing happens: I feel sorta good about myself. I feel sorta good that I'm doing something.

The berserk woman has now peaked her head into the doorway. She does this and I pause. I pause because I have no idea whether she's going to be nice or a vicious psychopath.

She's nice. She's so nice that she offers to help me, and she takes the dustbin — and the two of us clean the room together. I think we both feel sorta good about doing something, and I wonder if Dwayne just might be right.

The woman and I soon finish, and I return to my room and to the bright light — and I try to sleep. I try and I try and I'm almost there when an aide comes by the crack in the doorway, presumably to do her check. But she's not there to do her check. She's there to make the empty bed next to mine.

"I'm getting a roommate?" I ask through a yawn.

"Eric," she says. She says this like it should be obvious to me who Eric is.

"Eric?"

"He got into a fight with his roommate in Closed East."

"That, that's where they put the real psychos, right?"

"Yeah."

"And he's gonna be my roommate."

"Don't worry about Eric. He's a real good guy."

Eric comes to my door, escorted by two huge security guards and Cathy. Eric himself is a big burly guy in his mid twenties, but with a Barney Rubble face. So he doesn't look too psycho.

The security guards escort Eric to his bed and talk to him, and Cathy walks up to me.

"Don't worry," she whispers. "Eric's a real good guy."

All of a sudden, I'm worrying.

#

Bible study ends. It ends and Chuck starts doling out chores. I'm actually hoping he assigns me watering. I'm really hoping because sweeping all day must be the only job more boring. But of course he assigns me sweeping.

Today there is even less work to do than the day before. By 11:00, I'm literally going through the motions with the broom. Though I again get compliments about how good everything looks, and I know this means that I'll likely be doing this job until Judgement Day, if not past it.

Then something unexpected breaks up the monotony: a tiny bluebird. It lands on the porch bench, and it's not the slightest bit afraid of us. It's almost expecting us to feed her, and of course we do. One inmate even jokes that she's the new house mascot, and another even tries to pet her. Though that's a bridge a little too far for her.

The bird has brought some color into our lives, and I'm not talking about her plumage. She's alive and free and everything we're not, and we all envy her. Though she soon flies off and the monotony returns, and it continues through to lunch and past it. The only thing that breaks it up just a bit is when Daniel shows up — the tall guy who kept coming in and out of the hospital.

He sits on the porch bench with his things and waits. He also asks Chuck for a cigarette, and when Chuck tells him that there's no smoking here, he tells Chuck that he wants to go back to the hospital.

I go back to my imaginary sweeping. But by 2:00 I'm on the verge of a breakdown. I'm so bored that I beg Chuck to let me spend the last hour watering the trees.

He agrees, and I scurry across the street before he can change his mind, and I water the trees with the handful of others that are out there. I water them better than I've ever watered them before, even though they were already overwatered long before I got here. Strangely, watering doesn't seem nearly as boring as before, now that I have something to compare it to, and time moves by almost quickly.

"It's time to go in!" Jose calls out, from somewhere unseen.

I put down my bucket. I do this and return to the chapel, where I notice that I'm the only person there. I also notice the clock in the back of the nave, and I see that it's a little after three.

Feeling thirsty, I get myself a cold lemonade from one of the coolers in the dining room and I go back outside, and I sit on the porch bench and once again enjoy the view. It's a view I could look at a million times and still want to see again.

Giuseppe joins me. He joins me on the bench and hands me a portable phone, and he asks me for help.

"I'm trying to call my daughter," he says. "But it's not working." He further gives me a slip of paper with her name on it and a number, and I dial it.

It's busy. I tell him this and hand him back the device.

"Maybe we'll try again in a few minutes," he says.

"Maybe," I say back. I say this and notice something: the pastor's red pickup truck pulling into the driveway. Strangely, unlike the day before, he doesn't pull all the way in. He's idling by the basketball net, so I'm thinking that perhaps he needs help with something. So I walk up to the truck and see him through the window talking on a phone, with his teenage son sitting beside him.

He soon hangs up, and I ask him if he needs help.

“No,” he says to me, with a strangely twisted smile. “I’m fine.”

He further backs onto Lytle Creek Road and speeds down it, and I return to the porch, where standing nearby is a furious-looking Chuck, who’s clutching his much coveted but yet not-so-special Samsung phone.

“Pastor saw you sitting just now,” he growls at me.

“So?” I ask, without a hint of a growl.

“It was before three.”

“No, it wasn’t. It was after three. Somebody called us in from across the street, and when I came back the clock inside said that it was after three.”

Chuck doesn’t say a thing. He just mad-dogs me.

“Take a look at it yourself if you don’t believe me,” I holler.

“He says that it was five to three,” Chuck hollers back, “and he’s pissed. He’s really pissed. Everyone now has to work until 3:30, and if he sees any more loafing, we’re all working till dinner.”

“I wasn’t loafing. It was after three.”

“Listen, Colin, if Pastor says that it’s two in the fucking morning, that’s what time it is. Now go back to those fucking trees.”

I do this. I return across the street while listening to Chuck order everyone back to work, and I start watering again. Though this time I do it without much enthusiasm. Actually, I have none at all. I now kinda realize something. I realize I have no control of my fate. Even when I follow the rules and do everything I’m told exactly, I’m still at the whim of a petty mercurial man, who could either save or destroy me on any given day depending on what side of the bed he wakes up on.

Still, I keep watering. I do this while getting angrier and angrier, and it eventually becomes obvious that it must be past 3:30. Way past it. So I return to the house and see that it almost 4:00 — at least by the clock in the nave.

I feel both exhausted and used. I also feel hopeless, and instead of taking a shower like I usually do at this time, I just go to the barn. I go there feeling much like I did the last time I tried to take my life.

#

I'm sitting by the road. I'm sitting by Ft. Irwin Road and melting in the sun. Literally. Sweat is just pouring out of me.

I've been sitting here for about an hour, watching the cars pass. One a short while ago stopped, and the woman driving rolled down her window and asked me if I wanted a bottle of water.

I told her no, but now I really wish I hadn't. I wish I had offered to buy one. Or two. Because I'm out of water and the grapes aren't working as well as they were before.

It's so hot, and my arms burn so much that I take off my T-shirt — the one with Rudi's image — and I look for my blue dress shirt in my backpack.

First, I find the bananas. The ones from the motel. They look as if they'd been deep-fried for weeks, and I toss them into the desert for the rabbit to nibble on. Finally, I find the shirt. I also put it on, and I feel a little cooler, and I lie back on my backpack and stare out into the mountains. Those beautiful mountains.

I do this but I'm thinking only of Rudi. Soon I see her, too. I see her sitting across the road in front of the mountains. She's glaring at me. But I still love her. She's made life bearable these past years. She may be just something that my mind cooked up — something that exists

only in a pair of books no one will ever read — but she's real. She's realer than me. She's the only thing real.

Her glare starts to fade, and so does she, and suddenly I see someone else.

#

I'm pacing the hallway. It's two in the morning and I'm pacing the hallway of the ward.

I'm doing this for two reasons. One, I'm trying to escape my roommate Eric, who instead of being a psycho is just your garden variety sociopath, who enjoys keeping me up all night with his flatulence and self-flagellation. The second reason I'm doing this is that I'm hoping I can get tired enough that I can fall asleep despite his flatulence and self-flagellation.

The tiles on the corridor floor are composed of perfect squares — squares of about a meter in length. So I've been keeping track of the distance I've walked, knowing that there are 16 squares from the red line by the nurses office to the red line by the cafeteria. Right now I'm approaching 2 kilometers for the evening.

I pass the time talking to Rita — the small Mexican aide with the thick glasses and an even thicker accent. Though she's my age or maybe even younger, she likes to mother me, and I don't mind it at all. She's yet another person here who constantly tries to uplift me even though it isn't her job.

Rita likes to tell me stories. She likes to tell me all sorts of stories — about her strict childhood in Mexico, and her family, and the new home she has just bought. She's not a rich woman, but she's a big success, especially in comparison to where she started. She knows she's a success, too. That's why she's always smiling, no matter how crappy her job gets or how many double shifts she has to pull.

I check my room. I check it and see that Eric is still farting and still incessantly slapping that big fat thigh of his, just as he's been doing the past couple of days.

“Why don’t you sleep in the solitary room?” Rita suggests.

“I can do that?” I ask.

“Sure. If someone goes nuts later on, we’ll have to put him there, but until then you get some sleep.”

I do what she says, and I get some sleep. But I’m still tired when I wake. So I go back to my room, and I see that Eric is fast asleep.

I try to do the same, after doing some pushups and situps — something I started doing a day ago. But I still can’t sleep. I’m just too tired. So instead I write more poems, and more stories about Rudi.

A nurse has come to my door. He’s the same nurse who did my intake when I first arrived in Open West — the one who looks like a prison guard, or even a prisoner. He stares at me from the doorway and says, “Sometimes intelligence is a curse.”

I think he’s talking about me, but he’s really talking about himself. It doesn’t take me long to discover that he’s the smartest person in the hospital — smarter than any of the doctors. He probably should be a doctor, and I wish he were mine.

His name is Dave, and he’s from East Boston — close to the island community where I lived during the Dot Com bubble. He’s been through a lot in his life: drugs, crime, and too much hopelessness. But he’s still kicking around, as he says.

“Just like you,” he adds. He then tries to cheer me up. He tries in much the same way Dwayne did the other day, by encouraging me to start over. The two, I can tell, are very similar people, even if they look anything but. They’re both people of faith, too. Not the preachy kind, but the kind that talks from the same desperation that led me to faith. But Dave’s not here just to cheer me up. He says he noticed something in my charts when I first came to the hospital, even

though I wasn't his responsibility. He noticed it and showed it to the doctors here, and they now think I'm seriously ill.

"With what?" I ask, even though I could care less.

"They're not sure," he says. "That's why we're gonna be doing both a colonoscopy and endoscopy tomorrow morning. So you can't eat today."

"Not a problem."

"And we'll have to clean out your system tonight. It won't be pleasant."

I shrug. I do this and he leaves. I also leave. I go down to the TV lounge to wait for my morning fun time with Dr. Whyte. There I see Sheryl, and I see that she's in tears.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"My mom called while I was speaking to the doctor."

"Yeah?"

"And she left a message. A written message. You wanna know what she said?"

"What?"

"She said: 'Tell Sheryl, tell her that she's the worst person there is.' She couldn't even wait to tell me this herself over the phone. She had to have someone else write it down for me to read."

"You're not."

"I'm not what?"

"The worst person. Not even close."

"I don't care. I'm getting out of here today."

"You are?"

"They're trying to get me into a rehab, but if there's no space, they're just gonna drop me off at a homeless shelter. As long as I'm outta here, I don't care."

She scampers off, still in tears. She does this and it's soon my turn to see the doctor.

"How are you feeling today?" he asks.

"All right," I tell him. "I've even started exercising a little."

"I understand that you were disruptive the other day."

"Disruptive?"

"Janey — one of the therapists here — said you disrupted her group therapy in the cafeteria."

"I didn't disrupt it. I simply expressed how I felt. Isn't that the whole point of it?"

"You understand that you need to leave here soon."

"I don't want to stay. I never even wanted to come. You haven't done a damn thing to help me. You don't help anyone."

"We've tried to help you. In fact, I think we've gone out of our way to help you. I actually think that the effort everyone here has put in to help you has been remarkable. Heroic even."

"Heroic?"

"What's going on with Pastor John's?" the doctor asks the social worker.

"I talked to him a little while ago," the social worker says. "Unfortunately, they're full."

"You're only option is —"

"— There was this woman at the Barstow hospital," I interrupt, "she was telling me about a jobs program."

"What kind of jobs program?" the social worker asks.

"LDS."

"Are you a member?"

"No."

“Then they won’t help you.”

The doctor sighs. He sighs and says to me: “You’re only option is the homeless shelter.”

“That’s not even one of my options,” I say back.

“You don’t have a choice.”

“I do. I can go to the desert. You don’t want me here — fine: release me. But you can’t make me do anything.”

The nurse interjects. He interjects by letting the doctor know about my tests and how sick I might be.

“All right,” the doctor says afterward. “Why don’t we just see what the results of those tests are first. Do you have any questions for me, Colin?”

I don’t even play this game with him. I just get up and step outside, and I go back to the TV lounge, and to the cocoon of my writings, hoping I can bury myself inside them.

I write all morning, only stopping briefly when I see a Carl Jr.’s commercial on TV. They’re advertising the same Jalapeno cheeseburger I ordered in Barstow. It looks big and plump and fresh, and the cheese is melted. It looks anything but how it really is. It’s like everything else here in the Inland Empire, as they call it.

I go back to writing. I write until I see Dr. Whyte exit the nurses office, after a long morning of drug pushing. He sees me, too — and he looks as if he wants to say something. But he’s off the clock, so he just walks off. He does this and I return to my cocoon.

#

I reach the barn. I reach it and it’s empty, and I climb up to the second floor.

While struggling to lift my limp frame upward, I see that nothing has really changed since I got here. I haven’t gotten any better or stronger, and I haven’t moved forward. I keep moving backward or at best sideways.

Finally, I reach the second floor, and from there on all fours I see Roberto resting on top of his bed, drowsy from all the medications he is taking. He looks almost catatonic. Though he still notices that something is wrong with me, and he asks me about it — and I tell him. I tell him all about my run-in with Chuck and the pastor, and how I caused everyone to work an extra half-hour. Everyone, it seems, but Roberto.

“You just gotta let it slide,” he tells me with a grin, obviously recalling what I had told him the day before.

“There’s a big difference between some random person being a prick and the pastor being a prick,” I tell him back.

Roberto shrugs, and he goes off somewhere, and I’m the only person in the barn. I know dinner will be starting soon and that the barn will likely be empty awhile, and I know that it would be the perfect time to try something fun, like hanging myself. I further want to do it. I want it badly. What’s more, unlike in my bedroom in Long Beach, I could actually hang from something here. Perhaps death would even be instantaneous, or at least the loss of consciousness.

I think about this, and I spread my fingers across the sheet. Though it doesn’t take me long to realize that I wouldn’t have any more will to do it here than I had in my bedroom. So instead I just mope and feel sorry for myself.

“Collins, dinner!” yells Ted from the entrance of the barn.

“I’m not hungry!” I yell back.

“You sure?”

“I’m sure.”

He leaves and I continue moping. I even think about skipping service so I can keep doing this. But I just don’t have the will. So I climb out of bed and onto the floor, and I climb down the scaffolding and leave the barn. I then enter the chapel and the nave, and without thinking I just

take a seat. I've taken Chuck's usual one, and he lets me know that I've done this, and he also lets me know that I need to move.

I do, and he sits next to me, and he notices my melancholy.

"You okay?" he asks.

"I'm fine," I tell him.

"Are you comfortable here?"

I'm not sure whether he means the home or my seat, but it doesn't matter. I just shrug.

Soon, the pastor arrives. He does this and for some reason tonight he goes through the pews shaking everyone's hands. Maybe he's doing this because there's no one else to do it. Eventually, he comes to me and shakes my hand. He shakes it without looking at me, and I can tell he's still pissed — for no reason at all. I also know there's not a thing I can do about it, other than to fall to the great man's feet, proverbially or literally. Or both. Actually, I can do one of two things: I can either be broken by him or I can finally get up.

The service begins. It does, but I'm not listening. I'm not even here. I'm still outside watering those trees. Only my body's here. It stands when everyone else stands and it sits when everyone sits.

Though suddenly I'm brought inside — by the bluebird, who has flown into the nave through an open window. She flies past me and around the room several times, and she perches on the windowsill, where she watches all of us and we watch her.

This has interrupted the pastor. It has also caused much laughter and frivolity in the room, and the pastor doesn't like it. He doesn't like it at all. He's smiling, but he doesn't like it. He really hates that bird. He wants to shoot it. I can see it in his eyes. He hates the bird because the bird is free and she'll always be free, and there's not a thing he can do about it. He can't scold her. He can't shame her. He can't play mind games with her.

Eventually, he tries to ignore her, and eventually the congregation does, too. Everyone but me. Me, I'm staring at her. Me, I'm admiring her. Me, I'm wishing I were her.

She's a lot like Rudi. Perhaps that's why I keep calling her "her" even though I have no idea what gender she is. Her blue feathers are much like Rudi's spike peroxide blonde hair. They both demand to be noticed, and for good reason.

I can see Rudi, too. I see her by the windowsill. She's petting the bluebird, and the bluebird's looking right up into her eyes.

Perhaps even the pastor has noticed Rudi. Because he has segued into punk rock, and I can't imagine how. He's mocking it, making it seem moronic and repugnant and empty, when it's he who is all those things, not it.

I wanna tell him this. I wanna tell him about Bad Brains and "King of Glory" and all those punks who were so moved by it that they were swaying, swaying to the word of God. I wanna stand up and scream this at him, just as Rudi would. I wanna tell him that punks are thrice more blessed and have thrice more faith than he ever will know. I wanna tell him that even Jello Biafra — the biggest religion hater of them all — has more faith than him. Even if he does have AIDS.

But I do or say none of this. I just imagine I would. My whole life has been spent imagining instead of doing.

The sermon ends. It ends and it's time for silent prayer. Though tonight I'm faking it. I'm totally fucking faking it. I'm barely even doing that, and when the pastor grabs my shoulder, I barely feel it, and he only keeps it there a fraction of a second.

Quickly, I open my eyes. Just as quickly, I rush out of the nave, and I rush back to my bed and to my moping.

I can either be broken by him or I can finally get up.

I see now that my one singular moment in life wasn't the one in the desert outside Barstow. It's right now, and I have to choose. I have to choose right now.

#

I'm hallucinating. I'm sitting in the desert hallucinating.

I know I must be. But then I wonder: if I really were hallucinating, wouldn't I think I weren't?

I'm not sure. I'm not even sure it's God I'm seeing. He kinda looks more like Frank Zappa. But who's to say that God doesn't look like Frank Zappa?

He's standing there, whoever he is. He's standing between me and the sun, and he's waving his arms toward himself.

I want to go. I want to go to him, regardless of who he is. But I can't. I either can't move or I don't want to move. I don't know which. But I just lay here and stare. I stare and watch him continue to wave.

Eventually, he goes away. Even he's tired of me.

The minutes go by. They go by and so do the hours. I'm just waiting. But I've been waiting so long that a little more won't matter.

I'm now standing. I'm standing and crossing to the other side of the road. I'm not even sure why I'm doing this, but it somehow makes sense. Maybe it's so I won't be staring into the sun anymore, or maybe it's so I won't have to look at God again, or Zappa, or whoever it was or wasn't.

A car pulls up to me. I've seen around a hundred of them pass since I sat here, but this is only the second that has stopped.

"You okay, buddy?" an aging man asks, from some kind of convertible.

"I'm fine," I tell him.

He nods, and drives off, and I start to drift off — both my mind and my thoughts. But my body is going nowhere.

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It's late. It's late at night and again I'm limping down the corridor of the ward, and again I'm counting the steps.

Only this time whenever I get to the nurses office I have to chug from a huge plastic container of blue liquid, which looks much like antifreeze. Even worse, though I've never tasted antifreeze, I can imagine this is exactly what it tastes like.

Any minute now I should be rushing to the bathroom — something I'm told I'll be doing all night. Even worse, some guy went nuts this afternoon and tried to beat up the entire staff, and he is now in the solitary room. So, with Eric farting and slapping himself up like usual, I have no place to sleep tonight. So I plan on just walking, back and forth down the hall, and going to the bathroom. I plan on doing both, and doing it a lot.

I finally finish the tub of antifreeze, but there's no mad rush to the bathroom. Like my walking, it's just slow and steady right into the night.

I've now bumped into something. I've bumped into it as I turn back toward the cafeteria. I've bumped into a big and burly security guard. This man has a crew cut and a large crucifix tattooed into his neck. He's not the kind of guy I'd think would have much sympathy for me, but he smiles at me and we chat, and he offers me encouragement.

"Sometimes we can't make sense of the things that happen to us," he tells me. "I know I can't when it comes to me. But I believe there is a reason for everything."

"What makes you believe?" I ask. "How can you be so sure?"

“It’s like believing in God. I just do. I just know nothing is an accident. I know this from my own life. Even the two of us talking right now is not an accident. You just gotta stick around a little longer and find out what the reason is.”

I don’t know if I buy anything he says, but I thank him anyway. I thank him not only for his kind words but for taking the time to say them. I do this and continue on my journey.

Miles I’ve now walked. I’ve walked for miles, just like that old Rolling Stones song. The one that wasn’t old when I was young. I’m so tired that I go to my room and grab my blankets and a pillow, and I fall asleep on the floor of the TV lounge. Fortunately, there’s a bathroom just across the way.

I’m now awake, and it’s early. I limp down the hall carrying my things, along with a fresh gown, socks, and a pair of underwear that I just got from an aide. Then I stop, in front of Rose’s room, and I see her sitting on her bed fully dressed, in real clothes.

“You’re going?” I ask.

“Yeah,” she says, with one of her sweet smiles. “My son is picking me up.”

“You’re all better?”

“They think they’ve got the medications straightened out. That’s better, isn’t it?”

“That’s better. You’re actually the only person I’ve seen them help.”

“What about you?”

I shrug, and after wishing her well, I return to my room, where I wait. I wait for someone to come and take me for my colonoscopy and my endoscopy, and whatever other scopies they may have in mind.

But no one comes. They were supposed to have been here at 7:00, but no one has come. So I wait some more.

They're now a half hour late and it reminds me of when that Amazon recruiter blew me off. So I think of doing what I did then. But instead I ask a nurse what happened. I ask him and he asks someone else. I don't know how many someone else's get asked after that, but the nurse eventually comes back to my room, and he tells me that the procedures have been canceled.

"Why?" I ask.

"Your insurance wouldn't approve them," he says.

"Why didn't they get approval before they scheduled the procedures, and before they made me drink that shit?"

"That's a good question."

"Now what?"

"Once they get approval, they'll reschedule the procedures."

"So I guess I can't be so deathly ill."

"I guess not. But you never know."

The nurse leaves. He does this and the social worker comes to my door, and he says, "There's an opening at Pastor John's. You still interested?"

Am I still interested? I ask myself.

I don't know the answer. So I pause, while trying to come up with the answer. I know it's not gonna be great there. I know it'll probably suck. But can it possibly suck worse than this?

"I'd be doing work there?" I ask, in a monotone voice.

"You'd be doing work there," he tells me. "Oh, and I was wrong. The place isn't in Scotland. It's in Lytle Creek."

"Where's that?"

"Near Scotland, I think."

"You've never been there?"

“Not exactly. But it’s not far from here. That I’m sure of.”

“When would I leave?”

“Today.”

“All right.”

We go to the office, and I call Pastor John using the cheap office phone, and I talk with the man for the first time. He tells me about the program. He tells me about going to church every day, and he tells me that I can’t smoke. He further tells me how I can’t communicate with anyone by phone for 30 days, and he tells me all about the food stamp scheme, and he dangles the possibility that I may be able to work outside the home for \$5 an hour, but he can’t tell me exactly when.

“I’m not a Christian,” I tell him. “I believe in God, but I’m not a Christian.”

“It wouldn’t matter if you were an atheist,” he tells me back. “Everyone’s welcome. All we ask is that you are respectful in church.”

I can do that, I say to myself. Still, I’m unsure. Still, I say to him: “Can I think about it?”

“You’ve got an hour.”

I hang up. I do this and talk to the social worker.

“You don’t have to go there,” he says, sensing my ambivalence. “You can always go to the homeless shelter.”

“No, I can’t.”

Right away, I call the pastor again. I call him and leave a message on his voicemail. I tell him I’ll be there today. I say this but I’m not sure about it. I’m not sure of anything.

It’s time now for breakfast, and I’m almost hungry, and I almost get something to eat. Almost. Afterward, it’s time to see Dr. Whyte. It’s time to see him one last time. I walk in and sit down, and he asks me if I’m suicidal.

I hesitate. I hesitate while I think about the question and my answer to it, and the consequences of my answer. I hesitate but still say yes, because it's true.

"Do you have an active plan to kill yourself?" he counters.

"No," I say, and just like that he releases me. Though I still have to wait for transportation, which the hospital will provide to Pastor John's. This means I will have to wait all morning and into the afternoon here. But this gives me a chance to say goodbye to everyone. I even say goodbye to Eric, who spends most of the morning crying into the office phone, while trying to make his dad care. Something he does without success.

I also meet some new patients — those who have taken the place of those who have at least temporarily left the mill. There's Rich — a young guy with a deep voice and various drug addictions, who's from Oakland, many hundreds of miles from here. He doesn't remember at all how he got here. He doesn't even remember entering the hospital or what happened to his guitar. Then there's Katie. She's young as well, and tall and paper thin, and she's here because she just found out that she's 5 months pregnant and thought that it was perhaps a good time to get off meth.

"How could you not know you were pregnant?" I ask her. "What did you think was happening with all your periods?"

"I thought I was missing them because I was so thin," she tells me.

I also meet this black guy named Jeff. He just got out of prison, and he actually interviewed with Pastor John, too. He tells me that the pastor did everything he could to dissuade him from coming. He even wanted to charge him \$700 a month rent.

Feeling some buyer's remorse, I ask everybody about Pastor John. I ask patients and I ask staff. The latter can only say good things about him, but not one of them can tell me where Lytle Creek is, or anything about it, even though they all insist that it's nearby.

Snack time comes. It also goes and so does lunch, and then another snack comes. I eat this snack. I eat a little. A nurse then gives me back my things. He gives me a big shopping bag filled with all my clothes and my backpack, and he also gives me some additional shirts and socks and underwear they happen to have lying around for some reason. He further gives me another big shopping bag with all the paperwork and prescriptions the hospital is giving me.

I even get to shave. Though I have to wait for that. I have to wait for the nurse to give me 5 minutes of his time so that he can watch me do it. So that he can watch me shave with a dull electric razor that can barely cut whiskers. It takes more than an hour to get these 5 minutes, but I get them. I get them and my shave. I also shower and get dressed in real clothes, and I wait for the van to take me to my new home. I wait and wait and wait, but now I'm used to waiting. It will never bother me again.

It's now late. It's so late in the afternoon that it's the early evening, and the van finally comes — and Dwayne says goodbye to me. He even smiles. For the first time I see him smile. He also puts one of his big fists into his equally big palm and bows. He bows to me Eastern style.

I bow back. I do this and cross the red line, and after the security guard opens the door, I walk out of the ward into Open West. There they give me back my valuables, and surprisingly little is stolen. Even my baseball card collection is mostly intact. All I gotta do now is walk out the exit.

I do this, and I limp into the broiling evening heat, and I see a white SUV in the parking lot, waiting for me a short distance away. Slowly, I make my way toward it. I do this real slowly and someone who looks just like Morgan Freeman exits the vehicle and opens the back door for me, and I hesitantly put my things on the seat. Though I really don't want to put myself there.

“Wait!” a female voice screams, and I think they’ve changed their minds about releasing me, and I think about running. But I quickly realize that I wouldn’t get far. I wouldn’t get far at all.

It’s only Cathy screaming. She’s come to say goodbye to me. She runs up to me and hugs me, and she’s crying a little. She’s really crying.

“You take care of yourself,” she mumbles while squeezing me hard.

“I’ll try,” I tell her back.

“And if it doesn’t work out, you come right back here.”

“All right.”

I say this, but I know it’s not true. I’m not coming back. I’m not coming back anywhere.

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The sun’s about to rise, so I don’t have much time.

I make it out of the barn, and I stumble between the barracks on my bad ankle. I stumble toward the gate, which sets off the motion sensors and the flickering light. My heart is thumping, and desperation mixes with hesitation as I step farther but shorter into the nothingness.

I’ve now stopped. I’m also looking around, unable to decide which way to go or what to do.

All night I’ve been thinking about this moment. At times I’ve convinced myself that I will leave, and at other times I’ve been certain I would stay. Finally, I got out of bed, and got dressed, putting on one of my Rudi shirts, hoping it would give me courage. Then, with the moon shining a bit into the barn, I packed all the things I wanted to pack into my backpack. But none of this means that I’m actually leaving.

I’m actually looking. I’m looking for Rudi. I look and look and look, but she’s not here. Though something else is. A voice. That silent but all too loud voice.

Just wait, it whispers. Just wait till September. Then you'll at least be able to buy food.

Yeah, I silently whisper back, and I take a small step. But I take this step forward, just like Rudi would. I may not be Rudi, but she's a lot like me. She's a perfected me. She's the me I could be. The me I want to be.

The first step I took wasn't hard. It wasn't easy, but it wasn't hard, either. But the second step is easier — and the third is easier still. I'm now like a snowball rolling down a hill, and the gate is getting closer.

Soon, it's in reach, and I reach out and open it. I also walk through it and around to the front of the chapel, where sits a big bag of Cheetos by the front door. The crunchy kind.

I'm thinking that maybe they leave this out every night just in case someone walks. Or maybe it's a modern form of manna that the Great Zappa has bestowed upon me. Or maybe even Rudi has left it for me, as a parting gift.

It doesn't matter which. I pick it up and open it, and I start munching as I walk down the driveway I've cleaned so well. Lytle Creek Road is just a short distance away.

Soon it, too, is in reach, and I take a small step into the road.

Just like that I'm free. I'm free but I'm also on my own and alone. Not even Rudi is with me. Still, I take another step, and then another, and now I'm limping down the road.

It's not exactly like the end of *The Sound of Music*. I'm not triumphantly marching up the Alps, and there's no chorus singing behind me. I don't even know where I'm going or where I'll sleep or what I'll eat, but at least I'm moving, and moving forward, and that's something.

Rudi, I think, would be proud of me, and so would Dwayne. He'd be especially proud of me, because I've done it. I've gotten up.

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