

## First Snow

*Clouds so swift, rain won't lift*

*Gate won't close, railings froze*

*Get your mind off wintertime*

*You ain't goin' nowhere*

– Elston Gunn

They were saying snow that night, but it sure didn't look like it. The sun was well up in a cloudless sky, and it beat down cold and clear on the high desert scrub, dried-out lake beds, and blasted mountain faces surrounding the one-street mining town. The light doubled the fence lines that snaked across the rocky surface of the earth, endless barbed wire containing nothing, barbed wire that joined up, at times, with an empty, two-lane highway that followed the leanings of the land, winding north and south out of town.

At one such spot along this highway, nothing had moved for quite some time when, as if in some vision, an old white pickup truck reared around a bend and cut across the pockmarked wasteland. It rattled and shook on its rusting frame, coughing black smoke, a bulging tarp strapped across the bed. Inside, a driver: a younger man of indefinable age with a pair of haunted eyes that looked out from beneath his shock of russet curls. The windows were down, in spite of the early chill, and he took long drags from a half-smoked spliff, ash whorling around the cabin then out the window, floating to a standstill on the blacktop in the truck's wake. The man's whole life was in the truck, and he was headed south, somewhere, somewhere away from where he came.

With the smoke in the lungs and the headlong hurtle and the rush of the wind, he didn't see the first few dun houses set back in the foothills, nor the white-wood chapel, nor did he notice the highway becoming a street and the speed limit decreasing correspondingly. In those moments before the Sheriff pulled him over by the only diner in town, he would have told you how it was *finally*

beginning to feel pretty clear, the world, how things were *just* starting to take shape. All he would've deigned to muster, by way of explanation – and this in his slow, cryptic way – would've been something about a roadside campsite the night before bordering a salt flat in east Oregon, the smell of the burning cedar, the weight of a bloody hunting rifle in the bed of his truck, and about how, passing through mountain country, down the east-facing slopes, and south, out into the vast, flat chill of moonscape spaces, the universe seemed to be marching in time to some further bassline.

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Inside the only diner in town, the bassline was all but imperceptible. The only waitress on duty wore a white uniform and a tired smile as she filled Old Frankie's coffee from behind the counter. She was tall and thin, her hair was black, and her ears and fingers glinted under the weight of so much silver. A leafy vine curled around her left arm and disappeared up under her sleeve. She looked out through the long windows onto the quiet, familiar scene: the ancient red-brick post office across the road flanked by the saloon and antique store, and, further down, the water tower, interposed against the sky and the rise behind, framed by piñon, "Paradise Valley Township" inscribed across its flank.

The waitress poured the burnt coffee and sighed and hoped for snow. Winter couldn't come soon enough; to her, winter was a time of extremes, and within those extremes there was space to get warm, to finally concentrate, less nervous energy. With the mines frozen, the company men would beat it out of town, go back home or find work elsewhere for the season. People would shut themselves in, and the ones who didn't, who came out, were the interesting ones, the lovable outcasts and eccentrics who didn't much care about the cold, or anything else for that matter. Wintertime revealed the true colors of this strange town, and the upcoming solstice fire marked its inception.

Maybe this year, she thought, Kenny would chill out with the videogames. She could teach him cards or a boardgame – Catan even. They’d be back soon from their hunting trip, Kenny, Jeff, and the rest of them. They’d been gone for over a week, but she didn’t stress like she used to when they were away, about the girls, the booze, the drugs. She’d even come to appreciate the space. She liked being alone, cooking for one, lighting palo santo in the predawn light. Still, a week was a lot, especially when it coincided with extra shifts at the end of a long semester of teaching pottery to middle schoolers. Especially when they had bills to pay.

“They’re sayin’ snow tonight,” Frankie commented. “First of the season.” The ancient woman had a penetrating stare and a brightness that looked out through years of leathery creases. She’d been around Paradise Valley so long that no one remembered where she’d come from, and now no one bothered to ask.

The waitress nodded and glanced out at the sunlit day. “Sure doesn’t look like it, but let’s hope. First snow’s my favorite. Feels like I’m seeing it for the first time.”

“Oh, I seen enough myself. It’ll be a long winter. Just pray it’ll clear up ‘fore the solstice.”

“For the fire? Lookatchu!”

“Figure I’d see what all the fuss is about.”

“It should clear up, my phone says it’s just tonight.”

“Well, ain’t that gospel.”

The waitress shrugged and wiped her hands on her apron, drinking in the silence. She’d always gotten along with Frankie. And she was partial to these in-between times with old-timers who ate alone, their weathered auras, habitual meals, and pleasant, surface-level questions, which could be answered as if all were well, nothing were new, and she’d spend the rest of her life like this, serving coffee and steak at mid-morning on a Thursday. But then the feeling always crept up that this was it, she was being duped, she was just one more old-timer-in-waiting.

She shook herself and started filling her coffee when a siren sounded down the street. It was coming closer. It hovered there for a few seconds, heard but not yet real, before the quiet vista out the windows was shattered by a beat-down pickup truck that skidded into the diner's dusty parking lot, followed closely by the Sheriff's flashing cruiser.

"Ope, nailed someun'," Frankie said, turning to look out the window.

The waitress glanced outside, lost in thought but curious, in spite of herself, because, seeing the truck now, she knew the Sheriff, Kenny's dad as it happened, would not take kindly to it, mirrors dangling off, clothes, by the looks of it, heaped behind the front seat, bits of colored cloth tied to the grille guard. Bill was nearing retirement and considered most people under the age of forty to be "upstarts," especially out-of-towners, as this one seemed to be.

"Woah there," Old Frankie said, pushing back from the counter.

The waitress looked down. The mug she had been filling was overflowing. Jet-black coffee spilled over the counter. She jerked the pot away, splashing more coffee around in the process.

"God! I'm sorry." She began patting down the counter with a towel.

But Frankie had already turned back around. They saw Bill get out of his cruiser and walk up to the driver's window, but they couldn't make out who was inside.

Outside, the Sheriff was bending down and squinting into the open truck window. "Where you headed?" he asked.

"South," the man replied. His hands lay in his lap, and he regarded the Sheriff with cool, hooded eyes.

Bill ducked his head further, peering into the cabin. "Sure got a lot of stuff with you."

"I'm looking for work," the man said, as if this explained it.

"Mind if I take a look?"

"In my car?"

“Yeah.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah, you mind?”

“Uh-huh.”

Bill gave him a look. “And why’s that?”

“I don’t feel like it.”

Bill fingered his mustache and glanced toward the bed of the truck, which was covered with a blue tarp, thinking. The man wasn’t cowed by his badge; that alone was different. His years on the job told him that this automobile was one big rolling crime scene, of one kind or another, but he needed something to go on, something more than a hunch, and the man wasn’t giving it to him.

“Suit yourself,” he said, “license and registration – I’ve got you going 65 in a 35.”

The man handed over his papers and took out a cigarette, then he watched through the side mirror as the Sheriff sauntered back to his car. God, he hated uniforms and what they did to people. He yawned in spite of it all and glanced around the cabin. Nothing was in plain view, that he could see, just mounds of clothes, boxes of shoes and electronics, crumpled fast food bags, interesting pieces of wood and feathers. If an alert was out and this shithead could access it, he was done for. He contemplated this worst-case scenario for a moment, embraced it, and, with a deep sense of peace, snatched up a lighter, bent his face to the flame, and sucked in the heat.

But nothing like this worst-case scenario happened. The Sheriff just issued the ticket and drove off, and the driver of the white truck thanked God and realized he was starving. He tossed his butt away and spat before stepping into the diner. The handful of customers raised their heads at the sound of the bell, taking in the curious sight: the long, matted hair, patch-covered leather jacket, dirty, ringed fingers, and blithe, gamboling lack of self-awareness. He gave the place a once-over and locked eyes with the waitress where she presided behind the counter, all the days contained in one

look. A flicker of recognition passed between them. She told him he could sit anywhere he liked, he chose a booth by the window, threw his legs out, and fixed his gaze out the window, oblivious to the stares.

“Coffee?” she asked, later, standing over him.

He let out a sigh of contentment. “Oh, yes please.”

She set down a mug, and they watched it fill. She was surprised by his mild voice. He looked to be about her age.

He wrapped his hands around the mug and brought it steaming to his face, breathed in, took a sip. He had a lightning bolt tattoo on the back of his hand. “You don’t realize what a godsend this is...” he gestured generally with his head, “everything.”

“Never seen a diner before?” she said, deadpan. Her eyes twinkled, but he didn’t see.

“A couple.” He took another sip.

She stood there with the coffee pot in her hand. He kept looking out the window at his truck.

“Gotta watch for the speed traps, they’ll get you.”

He turned and fixed a pair of unfathomable eyes upon hers. His eyes were dark and the dirt was dark in his beard and in the lines of his face, but a general color was up in his complexion, alive and beating. She returned his look.

“I like your rings,” he said, after a long moment.

“Know what you want?”

She returned to the counter and dictated his order back to the kitchen. It wasn’t uncommon for unknown men to pass through Paradise Valley, winos or rootless vagabond types, but, in her five or so years here, she couldn’t remember ever seeing someone like him. He could be a firefighter, a woodsman, maybe even a trucker, but it looked like some time had passed since his last job. His eyes had a detached, even dangerous look, and yet, too, they were as if fixed upon some flickering

purpose. He was bound for some very specific destination, she decided, or going nowhere at all. The tower tarot card she had drawn that morning popped into her mind: on the one hand, disaster, destruction, and upheaval; on the other, rootedness, resisting change...

It was late afternoon by the time the man had finished eating his third round of food. The time had passed faintly. The way he ate, it might have been days since his last meal. She brought him a to-go cup and took the cash.

“Where you headed?” she asked, languorous and constant.

“South.”

“Supposed to snow tonight.”

He looked out the window. “Sure don’t look like it.”

“That’s what I said... You know this country?”

“Been through.”

“Just telling you,” she said, “could be bad for driving. ‘Round here it can look like one thing then turn to another like that.” She snapped her fingers.

“I hear you. Weather the only thing like that?” A slight pause. “‘Round here?”

She looked into his eyes for the meaning, but he just smirked.

“Probably not.”

His features softened. The good ones were few and far between. “Well, I’ll take your word for it. If someone were to catch some rest in—” he looked out the window at the water tower, “Paradise Valley, any idea on a nice spot, outta the way, maybe to camp and see the stars?”

So, she described a side road a bit back the way he’d come that would take him to the base of a small mountain. It was one of her spots. There was nothing out there, she said, but sagebrush and spirits. He thanked her, they exchanged an unspoken look, and she watched him out into the empty day, saw him turn back up the way he’d come. It was late, the sky clear. Maybe he was just humoring

her and would drive all through the snowy night. She wondered again where he was going and what he was leaving behind. But what did it matter? She looked down at her phone and realized it was almost time to clock out. Still no response from Kenny. She braced herself against the counter, and a pit she knew formed in her gut. It would be a long night.

The man drove north, back the way he'd come. The sun had arced over into the western air and now the land glowed golden and the fence lines and the road conformed, as before, to the empty, rugged terrain. All was as it had been, but utterly changed, and he cruised along, slowly this time, following her directions, an image of her pale, lucid face swimming unsmilingly behind his eyes. He wondered why he wasn't leaving town tonight, why he wasn't putting as much distance as possible between himself and the law, owing to his situation, the evidence in the back of his truck, but soon he found the unmarked turnoff and saw the peak she had described where it rose against the now-purpling sky – and he realized he didn't care. He bumped toward the rise across the pathless chaparral. By the base of the slope, he cooked some canned beans and corn over a fire, ate some of his remaining acid, and watched the heavens explode.

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In the late morning, he woke to a wall of white. It took a second to realize it was his windshield, covered in snow. He lit a roach, cranked his seat back upright, and opened the car door. The world beyond had transformed. Everything lay in a blanket of snow, and the clouds across the big sky redounded upon it all. The desert brush was all soft, humped shapes, and the escarpments and hillsides rose and fell in smooth, hushed lines. The dark face of the earth had been erased, washed away into emptiness, and he felt some flickering appreciation for what it could all mean.

Later that same day, she was outside on a smoke break, taking in a similar sight, when she saw a figure trudging through the drifts on the far side of Main Street. It took a few seconds to recognize him. What the hell was he doing? She stamped out her cigarette in the snow and went inside. When



he came in a few minutes later, as she knew he would, she just nodded, and he went over to the same booth. The place was even emptier today. Something about his presence bothered her. Was he stalking her?

“Hello again,” he said when she brought over the coffee.

“Hey.” She wasn’t in the mood for talking.

He watched her fill his mug. “Your coffee’s too good, couldn’t stay away.”

“Liar.” She knew it wasn’t good, but it didn’t have to be.

He smiled. “Yeah, no – also, I’m waiting it out another day. The snow, you were right.” He took a sip. “But I do love this place.”

His cheeks looked cold, raw, and his eyes were brighter than the day before. She wondered if he’d found the campsite.

“I’ll do the usual,” he added.

She went back behind the counter, put in his order, realized there was nothing else to do, and scrolled blindly through Instagram posts she had already seen. It was radio silence from Kenny, which was strange because he normally got reception in the backcountry. They’d probably gotten even more inches over in Wyoming. Worst case scenario, they were snowed in at some camp. She shuddered. She’d drawn the tower card again that morning. Seismic change, rupture... She would talk to Trinity about it tonight, Trinity who was a medium, who would know what to do; Trinity who had taught her to read tarot and who had first brought her to the drum circles. Trinity was friends with some of the oddest people in town, and she was universally loved. She lived far out of town with her wife and children, there were hot springs and animals, they grew herb and made art. She had become fast friends with Trinity. It was like Trinity actually understood what she was saying. Their standing Friday night date, across the street at the saloon, was often the highlight of her week.

She looked out at the snow-muffled street and quiet buildings. Everything stood out against the blankness of the snow, entombed, everything but the white water tower, which she would've missed if she hadn't known it was there, its bulbous weight supported by four spindly shadow legs. It gave her an inexplicable feeling of unease, like some childhood intuition, and she had a sudden longing for the summer; the whiteness had taken on a fell, inhuman cast. Her gaze came to rest on him in the foreground, where he sat profiled against the window, his bushy copper hair contained by a neon beanie, a warm light hanging down above. He was scribbling something on a napkin, deep in concentration. She realized he'd probably slept in the snow last night. His truck shouldn't have had a problem with a few inches. Was he out of gas? Money?

Eventually, she went over with his food and saw the napkin in front of him full of doodles and strange, repeated patterns. "So," she asked, "did you find the spot?"

"I think so. It was..." as he reached for the words, a rapturous look passed over his face, "magical. I know what you mean about the spirits."

She nodded and pressed her lips together, like you don't have to tell me. "The spirits probably sensed the snow coming."

"Facts."

"You got a tent?"

"Yeah, but I slept in my truck."

By the time he'd finished eating it was already getting on evening and the place was emptier and closing soon. She was ready to go meet Trinity. She found herself over by him again, clearing off tables, and he invited her to have a cigarette when she got off. Her doubts had lapsed with the hours, the longer he'd sat there, wolfing down food, scribbling away on his napkins. Also, she got the feeling he could use some company. She clocked out and saw him bundled up, waiting outside,

back to the window. She grabbed her coat and checked her phone. Shit, Trinity had texted and called. She needed to stay in with the kids. Their communion would have to wait.

She stepped outside, sealing her coat against the chill. The late sun cast everything in pure, high resolution: the wooden buildings, the crests and dimples of snow, the green-and-brown piñon and ponderosa along the rise above town. The cold was good and bracing. He stood next to her, hood up, looking east toward the hillsides receiving the last light. They were quiet, like old friends. She pushed away thoughts of Kenny and Trinity and looked out at the world. A light wind crept along the street and nothing moved.

“Tell me you didn’t walk all the way into town?”

“No,” he said, “caught a ride for most of it. Some rancher cat.”

“You’re spending another night?”

“Yeah, I guess so.” His tone made it seem like he hadn’t thought that far ahead. “I was planning on skipping around town first, see what’s going on.”

They both laughed, the joke was obvious. The buildings on the street were shuttered and dark, all except one. Their gaze found the low-lying saloon across the street, “Last Chance” glowing neon in a bracketed window.

“Yesterday you were all in a rush to get out of Dodge and now you’ve got no better place to be. If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were looking to settle down.”

He shook his head. “I’m probably a fool for hanging around this long.” He’d taken his tobacco out and was rolling a cigarette. “But I just had a good feeling when I woke up today.”

“Listen to your gut, I guess.” She scuffed the melting snow with one of her boots. What hellhounds were on his trail? Her eyes found the glowing sign again across the street. “We can smoke inside.”

Inside the Last Chance Saloon, they found seats at a small wooden table against a wall, semi-shrouded in darkness. The establishment had one open floor with a long bar opposite the front door, a moose head mounted centrally over it, the proprietor, Dusty, presiding underneath. Dangling, green- and amber-hued lamps lit up tabletops and pool surfaces, and old beer signs ringed the room, blinking preternaturally in the muted air. A slow country western song blended with the smoke and the smell of stale beer. From out of a grainy TV mounted in the corner, Arnold Schwarzenegger grimaced and pointed an Ithaca 37.

A few groups of people sat at tables scattered about the room or at the bar. Two women were playing a game of pool. She looked around and knew most of them and, as they settled into their table in the corner, she felt their stares and found herself imagining a place far, far away, where she was anonymous, where no one would know her and judge her. It wasn't something she normally did, go to the Last Chance with a strange man, but nothing about this was normal. She had nothing to hide, and no one deserved any kind of explanation. She sensed a vulnerability in this man, despite his gruff poise. She looked over at him, tilted back on his chair legs, darkly handsome, holding his whiskey in one hand, cigarette in the other, looking around approvingly, and felt her frustration direct itself toward him, as well. How could he act so... comfortable?

She took a sip of her ranch water – they made them straight to the point here – and said, “So, what’s your deal, man? What do you do?”

“What don’t I do?” Then he saw her expression, leaned forward, and ashed his cigarette. “To be honest, all kinds of things: construction, side hustles, crypto. Right now, I’m moving with the wind. Heading south for the season.”

“So, you’re a drug dealer?”

He laughed.

She half smiled.

“In a manner of speaking. I mean, what’s not a drug? No, alright, mostly I drive. People need things driven, I drive ‘em. Homes, tractors, boats, or I go along with those signs, you know, that say, like, ‘Caution Heavy Load’ or some shit.”

“How long you done that?”

“Oh, on and off five, ten years... Time’s funny.” He looked off toward the ceiling for a moment, then returned his gaze to her. “You wouldn’t believe what people pay.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah, I mean people have got *all* this shit these days. Shit they don’t even use, can’t use, because there’s too much of it. I mean, extra cars, ten TVs, CDs they can’t play, Persian rugs, mattress pads, Chinese salamanders, croquet sets, and that’s not to mention all their baggage, you know, from being a kid and whatnot.”

“Right,” she smiled.

“I mean, no one could handle it all. I think something’s gotta give one of these days – people are gonna have to lose their shit or change their lives ...” he trailed off, “wake up or something.”

“Yeah, well don’t lose *your* shit, man.”

“I’m trying.” He grimaced and drank. “It’s some soul sickness.”

She drank too. What he said prompted all sorts of thoughts. The crowd inside had gradually begun to swell or the noise had increased or the music, she wasn’t sure. She lit a cigarette.

“I don’t know what it is, either,” she said, “but it’s not like that everywhere, or at least it’s less in some places. Here, I think, people have it pretty well figured out—”

He squinted his eyes like how do you figure.

“No, they have to – at least when it comes to possessions. Because everything’s always changing here, people are always leaving. And the seasons: the winter, and the summer too, they just wash

things clean. You can't hold onto much. You seen it today. All that's left after the snow is the shapes, the mountains and the desert. Bones. It makes people more frugal or something, conscious."

"Yeah," he murmured approvingly. "Death. Nothingness."

"Sure," she said. "Before about one hundred and fifty years ago, the Shoshone lived here, alone, or the..." She racked her mind. "I don't even know which tribe exactly, but the Native Americans lived here."

"Not that long ago."

"Exactly." She took a drag and leaned forward, animated. "And it must've looked the same back then, you know, desert, emptiness, and all, but it was fuller to them, right? I mean think about how long they lived here. It was like this when *we* got here," she gestured around the smoky room, "and now all we can use the land for is mining, cracking it wide open—"

"—raping it—"

"—yeah, raping it, and even with all the progress and so on," she put 'progress' in scare quotes with her cigarette, "even then, we can't learn how to live with the land for more than a generation; the mines get wasted, equipment ruined, the cattle start dying of radioactive mystery diseases, the economy's sinking..." She let out a sigh, shook her head, sucked her teeth.

"You heard about Georgism?"

"No," she said distractedly, and carried on with her previous thought. "You know how many ghost towns there are around here? Failed mining towns? Man, it's some weird shit. I want to go and see them all, take photos."

"You should."

"Yeah, maybe I will."

He was looking at her with a strange expression. "You're kind of... on it," he said. It wasn't a question.

“I try.”

“Now *I'm* curious.”

“Now you are?”

“How’s someone like you end up in Paradise Valley?” He took a sip then added, teasing it out with a looping hand gesture: “I mean, you’d think everyone here would have to, you know, look like you for it to deserve the name, but...” he looked around the room with a disappointed expression.

She laughed it off. He had said it playfully. She felt confident and full in the warmth of the low barroom light, having a real conversation. His weren’t like most men’s compliments, so many mosquitoes and gadflies to brush off. No, this she wanted, it felt good. And she gently pushed it away.

“Well, we moved up here five years ago, from Texas.” She saw his look. “Me and Kenny.”

“Nice.” He nodded slowly and kept his eyes on his drink. “Where in Texas?”

“Midland.”

“I’ve been through, I think. Pumpjacks and flatness for days? Even the gas stations out there are called Jacks or something.”

She laughed. “Yup, you’ve been to Midland alright. Big oil.”

“And George Bush, somehow?”

“Somehow,” she agreed. “Anyway, it’s where I grew up. Kenny was working at an oil rig down there, that’s where we met... fell in love.” Her eyes were looking beyond him. “Then we moved here, where he grew up.”

“And here, what?” he asked. “You just run the best diner in America?”

“I teach. Just got on winter vacation.”

“What subject?”

“Art.”

“You *do* have to go take those photos.”

“It’s nice, I love the kids.”

“Why don’t you have some yourself?”

She was about to say fuck off, but then she looked at his even expression and realized that it was fine, free association, that he didn’t mean anything by it. He had no way of knowing it was an ongoing discussion with Kenny, kids and marriage, both of which she was opposed to so long as they had no savings and a mortgage to pay off. She sighed and rapped her pack against the table.

“I like it here. The land, the light, the energetics... the UFOs.” She saw his look and winked and made a face as if to say believe what you want, stranger. “It’s a special place, people have always said so, but, on the other hand, this is it. I got to be careful thinking too much, because I know there’s a whole lot more.”

“That’s true,” he said, “but it’s also completely, I don’t know, infinite, right here.”

Easy to say, she wanted to reply, but she didn’t, because, in that moment, she found herself agreeing. The bar had filled up, and she had a distinct sense of wellbeing. She felt they could talk for hours. There was something she trusted in his presence – he was alive but non-asking, present but far away. He didn’t seem to mind when she had brought up Kenny. Why would he? he seemed to suggest. She was at the bottom of her drink, and she had an idea.

“Hey, want to play cards? They’ve got some decks.”

She crossed the room, ordered two more drinks from Dusty, and ran into Keith and Wyatt, miners from out of town who knew Kenny. They came back over with her, hairy, plaid, high-spirited, and were surprised to find a stranger at the table. She felt their looks and unspoken questions for the first few rounds of pinochle, but the tension dissolved as she joked with them about drunken nights of the past and Kenny’s backcountry misadventures in Wyoming. Before long the laughing boys became convinced that it was all in their minds, and, with the stranger too, they



bantered free and easy. The night waxed on. She floated. The barroom got hazy with smoke and laughter and took on a glow. As she chatted with people, though, she could always sense him over against the wall, now surrounded by a small group, now telling a story, now punching something into the jukebox.

She was ordering another round when she saw, with a jolt, a ruddy, mustachioed face she recognized. Bill, the Sheriff, was down at the far end of the bar, facing toward her. She hadn't noticed him before, what with the crowd and the noise. He didn't come out often. He waved before she could look away, and she went over. They made short work of the pleasantries and Kenny talk – he reassured her that his son would be fine with a bit of snowfall – then Bill gestured across the room.

“You know this man over here, with the long hair and jacket?”

Her gut clenched. He must have seen them talking. He knew the answer.

“Yeah, just met him. He's from out of town.”

“Funny, 'cause I gave him a ticket *yesterday*. Right across the street, in front of the diner. You must not have been on shift, you'd have seen.”

“Oh no, I think I remember that...” she said, backtracking. “Yesterday 'round lunchtime?” Had Bill seen him enter the diner? Why was he asking?

Bill ignored her. “Have you learned anything about him? He said anything?”

“No, hasn't said much at all about himself. You think he's, uh...?”

Bill gave her a fatherly look, like good job Nancy Drew, then lowered his voice confidentially, though no one was paying any attention: “Between the two of us, after I ticketed him yesterday, I ran his plates back at the station, just out of curiosity, you know. Well, guess what? – and I'm telling you only because we're family – there's an Idaho warrant out for his truck, issued a few days ago.”

“Huh.” Her mind raced.

“Didn’t see it anywhere outside, though?”

“What?”

“The truck. White Chevy.” Bill was looking at her.

She shook her head.

“You see anything, you let me know.”

She nodded, he turned to Dusty, and she took her chance to leave. Her pulse slammed in her ear. The barroom was now crowded and thick. Did he know? And if so, why was he being so reckless? She wanted to tell him, but... And how could she get him to leave?

She found him over against the wall with Keith and Wyatt and some girls she didn’t know. His arm was draped around a younger girl, who was laughing. He saw her approach and she gestured to the door.

“Hey,” she mouthed, “we gotta talk.”

Stepping out onto the street was stumbling into outer space; the stars were splashed across the sky and the snow was a soft, lunar paleness in the dark. The bar behind them was nothing but a hum, a small star they’d left behind.

“You have weed?” she asked.

“Oh-oh!” he laughed and, fumbling around in his pockets, produced a paper and Ziploc baggie.

“Sorry to interrupt that,” she gestured back inside. Saying it, she realized she wasn’t.

“Oh,” he waved dismissively. “Is this what you wanted to talk about?”

She was silent, looking into the quiet night. Muffled shouts and music drifted out from behind them. Content with the non-answer, he took his eyes off her and pinched some bud onto a paper.

“Listen,” she said, mind made up, “I know this is none of my business, but are you in trouble?”

It could have led to any number of reactions, but he just gave her a soft, quizzical look. “In a sense,” he said, eventually.

“What happened?” Maybe he knew.

“That,” he said, “is a story for another night.” He sprinkled tobacco into the crease and began massaging it up and down.

“Is it, like, people or the feds?”

“In a sense.” He smiled.

She looked down and scuffed the snow with her boot. “The sheriff, who pulled you over yesterday, he’s here.”

“And?” He was looking at her closely.

“It’s just...” she raised her eyes to his.

“Just what?”

“Is that why you left your truck up there?”

He looked at her with surprise. “Man, are you *trying* to put me down?” His fingers looked cold as he raised the paper to his lips, licked, and sealed it.

“No,” she protested. But he had taken the bait, she was relieved, maybe he did know.

A sudden crazed smile spread across his face, and he began to play a character, his voice a sort of mocking, old-timer drawl: “Listen, I’m on the damn lam, darling, trailed by twenty hounds, but not to worry, I’ll be gone in the morning. Lady like yourself can’t be bothered by my low-down station ‘n situation.” He paused and raised the rolled specimen into the moonlight. “Now, if you’ll forgive me.”

She let it drop. She couldn’t bring herself to go further. And she didn’t like the character.

When they had finished smoking, they were cold. She offered him a ride and, to her relief, he accepted. She drove slowly, keeping the tires on the dark mushy lines in the white. It had been a while since she’d smoked. She still didn’t know if she should, or could, tell him about Bill. He would be gone, he would be gone... They passed out of town, only the occasional light from a home off to

one side. The road felt closer, only the short distance lit by the headlights, but more alien in the surrounding dark. They could've been in Russia, she imagined, or Canada. It had started snowing again. There came the abrupt clicking of a lighter.

“South,” she said.

“South,” he agreed.

“Texas?”

“Border town called Presidio.”

She rounded a corner slowly. “That’s ‘fort’ en español” she said. “You been to New Orleans?”

“Yeah, why?”

“I don’t know. South.”

“It’s nice.” He seemed deflated, down from his barroom high, defenses down, too.

“You been most places?”

He thought about it for a second. “Yeah.”

Snowflakes drifted down across the path of the headlights, slow-dancing to the floor.

She sighed, lost in thought. “I wonder what it feels like, free to up and go and keep on.”

“You are free,” he said, “maybe more free than me. It’s what we do with it.”

“Still, moving around all the time, seeing new things...”

“Yeah – until it’s your normal, the eye of the storm. I’ve moved around since I was a kid. Staying put must be nice, too.”

“Were you military?”

“Dad was in the air force.”

“Where are they now, your family?”

There was a silence. He exhaled smoke into the dark cabin. “Dad’s in Alaska. One sister’s in Montana, the other in California, last I checked. Mom’s dead, died when I was a kid.”

“I have two sisters, too.”

There was another, longer silence. She wanted to know more but didn't ask. And he didn't ask about her. Instead, he was thinking of the last time he'd seen his dad, four or five years back, and the cabbage and chicken thighs at the dingy tablecloth kitchen with his half-siblings, how he and Pops stayed up outside after in plastic chairs with more cigarettes to keep the mosquitoes away and his father saying a woman's what you need to keep you honest because you think you can fly, right, I was there too, but it's not like that come some time and you'll have to settle down, find stable work, but how it was hard to take him seriously what with another whiskey opened and deflecting every question about Mom, what she had said at the end, because he was too young to remember, hard to keep the keel steady what with the sky already growing lighter and the churning in the gut. That's what he was thinking, but she didn't ask.

The car moved slowly into the night and the headlights shone on the banks of the snow beside the road, the fence posts beyond.

“Got a kid, too,” he added, “with his baby mama in Idaho. Malachi.”

“Malachi,” she said. “That's where you're coming from?”

“Thereabouts. Rosa and I been apart for a minute now.”

She looked over and his face was dark and far-off.

“What is it?”

He didn't answer. She looked into the space cleared by the headlights and didn't say anything more. She was thinking about his freedom; it didn't seem so glorious anymore. She sensed some awful emptiness, and she wanted to fill it, to reach out and touch this man who, just moments before, all night in fact, had been so warm and responsive. But she couldn't. He had to leave. She extended her hand, he passed her the cigarette.

She found the turnoff, checked the temperature gauge: 28 degrees. She pulled off and up along a faint path, no more than a car-sized zigzag between clumps of chaparral and shrub. Eventually, her lights ricocheted off his reflectors, the truck camouflaged in the snow.

They had warmed up on the ride, so they both got out, so beautiful and bright were the stars. The summit rose in the east, darkly silhouetted against the Milky Way. There was no wind, and all was eerily still. Coyotes yipped and howled.

For a brief moment, she thought that she was a fool, that she was playing right into his trap, that he could murder her now, kidnap her, do whatever he wanted. She pictured her rifle in the backseat. She looked over the hood of her truck at him. He stood on the opposite side, his arms spread wide. He looked to the stars and shouted, “Hallelujah!” It seemed to linger, vibrating in the night. She relaxed. It wasn’t like that at all.

He looked over and met her eyes with a blind intensity. She looked away. There was nothing to say. All the loveliness of the night had bled out into the void of their future. The raw bleakness hit her in the stomach, and she felt a physical pain in her chest, in the set of her mouth. One more cigarette? she thought, but no. She looked over at him again – he was still looking at her, really looking – and then she got back in her truck, turned the ignition, and reversed down the rocky slope, back into the night, leaving him alone out in all the nothingness.

\* \* \*

She was up before first light the next morning in her empty, single-story ranch house. Only recently had it started feeling like a home, but today it was back to being blank and anonymous. She lit some cedar and sat for some moments before her shrine – dead flowers in a vase, obsidian and shells and pieces of wood, a portrait of Madonna. Today was the solstice. She had work, and then it was the celebration. Trinity would be the master of ceremonies. The bonfire would burn big and bright, and the drummers would do the rest. She still hadn’t heard from Kenny.

None of this was on her mind, though, as she turned on the shower and let the water run hot. No, she was far away, imagining New Orleans, the wrought iron and the brass, people dancing in secret streets beneath a yellow Creole moon; she saw fading post offices in ghost towns across the land, the angle of the sun, her wavering shadow in the rising dust; and the Pacific, its seaweed and seals, a relentless, grey pounding, nights perched on earthquake cliffs beneath crumbling stars. When she was little, one of the only trips with her family all together, her parents had loaded her and her sisters into a car and driven west, first through desert, then red mesas, then valley grasslands, until they emerged through mountains out onto the innumerable freeways of Los Angeles. They had gone straight to Venice Beach. She still remembered the brutal cold of the ocean, its unchecked power. Jackie and Angela had come splashing out into the deep with her, heedless, diving beneath whitewater and laughing, laughing at how good it felt, in spite of the cold, in spite of everything – how good everything felt. Never again had there been so much light. She couldn't remember many trips since, other than the Midland to Paradise holiday route with Kenny. And her sisters had grown distant and strange, reincarnations of their vanishing mother. But all of this, she felt, as if for the first time, was merely in the past, contingent, nondeterminative.

The night before was still present in her mind, not as a burden but as a lovely piece of sadness. She mourned for the lonesome, hellbent drifter whose name she had never asked, and she worried about his dangerous way, but she was jealous, too, of how the present must be unfurling before him right now. His transgressions, whatever they were, were liberatory. She hoped he was already across the county line, full from two nights in Paradise. There had been a connection between them, she knew, something that only needed air and a spark. But that was life, and it was for the best that he had moved on, before someone decided to throw it all away. She laughed at herself being dramatic. No, she was excited for her own life, whatever it might bring. Maybe this winter Kenny would go on some longer trips with her, or she could tear Trinity away from the kids for a weekend, or she would

just go on some solo adventures. She dried off, combed her hair, and got dressed. She looked at her reflection for some time in a vacant sort of way, then put in a pair of dark hoop earrings and tied her hair up in a loose bun. She didn't feel like eating or sketching or watching the news. She was underneath it all. She made coffee and chain smoked and watched light fill the valley until it was time to go in.

On the way to work, she got a text from Kenny. They had been snowed in for several nights, he said, and they'd just gotten moving. They'd leave later that afternoon and would probably spend the night somewhere along the way. He'd shot an elk. There was a picture of him crouched over the kill, holding its limp head up by the antlers. She was angry. He was going to be spending the night at the casino. And didn't he remember the solstice? If only he'd seen her last night, the way they'd been talking and laughing. He wouldn't have liked it, but it was fine, something she could tell him about, would, even. She felt crazy thinking about it now. Her thoughts went to his hard, weathered hands, the knowing smile. He had been so thoughtful, and, in his own way, she knew, he had wanted her. Her hand brushed involuntarily against her opposite forearm and she shivered.

It was busier at the diner, a Saturday, but his booth at the window stayed empty. She shook herself. How long had it been? Only two days? There was a weightiness as she sipped coffee and wrote out someone's check. Colors and thoughts came clear and distinct. She was punching some numbers into a calculator when Old Frankie leaned over the counter.

"Here he is," Frankie whispered confidentially.

She looked up, wondering how Kenny had made it back so soon, but then she saw the white pickup, saw it lurch off the road and pull in front of the diner windows, front and center, saw him there behind the wheel. Her breath caught and her stomach did a weird flipping motion. A dread fullness expanded inside her. Of a sudden, she knew.



She busied herself with the calculator when he entered, then followed him with her eyes as he walked over to the booth by the window. He wore an old, bleach-stained, denim button-down, and his hair was held back in a bun. It looked like he had tried to clean up. Her eyes found the truck.

Inevitably, she went over and poured him a cup.

“Hey,” he said.

She met his eyes, cautiously. She didn’t know what else to do. “Hey.”

He returned her look openly. “Thanks again for the ride last night. As they say, ‘one more cup of coffee ‘fore I go.’”

“To the valley below,” she completed the line.

“You look different,” he said. “In a good way. Not that...”

She wished he hadn’t come. It only made things harder. That, and the truck. “You really shouldn’t be leaving your truck right out front,” she said and scanned the street. The occasional car passed by slowly.

“Why’s that?”

She looked at him pleadingly. “I thought...”

His look softened. “Don’t you worry, I’ll be gone soon enough.”

But he wasn’t. To her chagrin, he ordered food. And she was glad he did.

As time passed, she tried to find things to occupy her, but her eyes kept flicking to the street, every sedan looking like Bill’s cruiser, and then back to him in the window, sketching again. It was like he’d been doing it for all of eternity. She felt woozy and disoriented, incapable of action. He kept glancing out the window and back to his napkin. He occasionally sharpened his pencil with a knife. At some point Frankie tried to make conversation, but it barely registered. She took orders in a haze. She kept imagining Bill walking him out in handcuffs. He needed to leave, but it was too late. She had to go clear his plates.

“The vibrations are out of control today,” he said, glancing out the window distractedly, then back to the napkin in front of him. “I’m trying to figure out what it is exactly.”

She didn’t have to ask, she knew, but she snatched the napkin out from under him to see. It was the view out the window, across the street, but rendered in a strange, surreal key. The pencil strokes were loose and many, and the forms blended and wound into each other. Still, she could make out the buildings in the foreground, the post office with its off-center door and limp American flag, the Last Chance riding low beneath a sagging roof. The trees along the ridgeline behind were spindly dark whorls reaching up, and the sky above was dotted with fantastical moons and stars. He’d included the water tower. It rose and leaned to an almost monstrous height. She looked from the napkin out the window and back again, and the two vistas blended into one. The craggy, vine-covered tower flashed across her mind’s eye like lightning. She handed the napkin back to him.

“It’s great,” she said.

“I made it for you,” he replied, not taking it. “A portrait of a post office. Just promise to put it up in your exhibition. A blueprint, right?”

She hesitated, then assented.

The sun had begun to sink, too soon in the sparkling day, when she went outside later to meet him where he leaned on his rear bumper. Inside, the afternoon crowd was thinning. He offered her a cigarette, gave her the lighter. They took deep breaths and stood close together. He trembled. She had accepted his drawing, and she sensed that this was enough for him. He was ready to go, go and not look back. And it was not enough for her. It was a Saturday, she realized, suddenly. Bill took Saturdays off. A wave of relief seemed to crash over her.

“Today’s the solstice,” she began, “the shortest day of the year, the witching hour...”

“It sure feels like it,” he said. He was twirling his keys around a finger.

“There’s this bonfire drum circle tonight, if you want to hang around,” she said. “It’s a good time. And there’s definitely no ops.”

He was silent, soaking in the invitation. She glanced sidelong at him, hoping. She couldn’t read his expression. He looked back at her and tossed his butt on the ground. There was a ladybug crawling along the collar of her dark corduroy coat. It stood out red in the clear light, against the dark material. The dark collar accentuated her long smooth jawline, which seemed to him, in that moment, something ecstatic, something beyond. “Yeah,” he said. “I guess I will hang around.”

She met his eyes, and tried not to respond with: “You *gues*”? It was already more than enough. Her soul soared, and an inner fire ate away at her doubts and fears.

“It’ll be a good time,” she repeated.

“I believe it,” he said. He was silent again, looking out.

She gave him directions, and, since it didn’t look like he was moving anytime soon, said see you later and went back inside.

\* \* \*

It was a wildflower meadow up against a wooded slope with the last traces of snowfall melting. An old, ramshackle, crumpled-in barn alongside and a swift, rocky stream descending, the water cascading clear and cold against the smooth rocks, the channel running deep. A bonfire in the meadow by the abandoned barn, raging already, with drums and smoke and pickup trucks, plastic folding tables and chairs, haybales for seats, and an assemblage of thirty or so, talking, laughing, high already. As dusk fell, Trinity, lilac-cheeked and wearing a leopard print headscarf, directed the drummers to their seats by the fire, where they gathered their few necessities to them and began making giggly sorties into the soundscape. A full moon was rumored, and no one thought to turn off a radio that merged with the cricket song and crackle.

A wizened, self-described medicine man who had traveled several days for the celebration was mansplaining the apocrypha to her when she saw him. It was a little before dark, and his razor shadow appeared out from behind the barn and made toward the fire. She excused herself, crossed to him, and they hugged. He was warm. A kind of question was in his eyes, but she didn't know how to respond. She brought him into the circle and introduced Trinity. Trinity looked at the strange man for an endless moment and was satisfied. They spoke of the things around them, the snow, the trees, and the things inside them, their feelings for the winter, new year. She could tell he and Trinity liked each other; they were synchronized, auto-tuned. Eventually, Keith and Wyatt came over and clapped him on the back and the men picked up where they had left off on Ethereum, K, and the coming civil war. She watched them wander off to smoke, and Trinity gave her hand a tight squeeze before taking her position back up in the drum circle. She drifted into the flux of the crowd. She no longer felt the need to consult Trinity. She felt an acceptance settling in around her. On the threshold of so much silence and darkness, one last crashing hurrah.

The individual was already dissolving into the collective as the drummers found the first, deeper groove of the night, a syncopated, up-and-down pulse that expanded outward through the clear air. She danced, everyone danced, stomping on the cold ground, and it felt good to dance, just dance!, the mind sloughing off and mindlessness taking hold, twirling around with so many happy, swirling people, from one to the next, until, out of nowhere, she was arm in arm with him, she'd forgotten he was there, and suddenly in the thick of the whirl, she was laughing up at him with unadulterated light, him in a jean jacket and her hair down flowing black, cheeks flushed pink, a smile breaking his thin, chapped lips and for a moment it was all cracked lightning of the soul forever after.

The dancing carried on, and the moon rose, full-faced in the star-stricken expanse. People she knew and loved, people she didn't know and loved. Friends and strangers, seekers and askers all, dressed in patchworked, colorful garb, shawls and dresses, homemade masks and feathered hats.

Old Frankie had been true to her word, she sat at what seemed a special place by the fire, wrapped in a blanket, rapping along with a tambourine. They met eyes and Frankie delivered a searing smile. She realized she'd never seen Frankie smile before.

She danced and danced, circling the ball of energy, until, gasping for air, she withdrew from the melee. She was warm and steaming from the movement. She gazed up at the stars and saw angels dancing around countless other fires, on the cusp of all the nothingness between. Then her gaze fell to the earth, and his thin slant was the first thing she saw, angled against the river, facing the revelry, on the edge of the light, stark, ponderous, smoking. She had a sudden urge to pull him into the crowd, drag him face-first to the flames.

She joined him, though, in silence, heard the violent plunging of the river behind them. It felt so different than just a few feet away. The drums took up another beat.

She grabbed his forearm. "Why don't you come dance?!" She felt like a little girl.

He didn't respond right away, she let go. What was he thinking? Did he feel an outsider? Everyone here was, one way or another. His aloneness, if that's what it was, was self-imposed. But she let herself imagine it, the sense of being on the edge of it all, imagined a car parked right over there, keys in pocket, pursued by the past, and she felt, viscerally, how strong the urge must be to go. So long as he held those keys, she knew, he would always be on the precipice, ready to abandon everything at a moment's notice. She wanted to cling to him. Or she wanted to go with him, wanted him to scoop her up and take her along, anywhere and everywhere, to amethyst heights. She looked over at him. He'd retreated again into those depths. She felt crazy, and quite alone.

"I like watching y'all," he said, finally.

She lit a cigarette and murmured in agreement. The music mounted, people kept arriving, the figures twisted more and more freely. With the blue darkness and the silhouettes of people against up-licking flames, it looked like a scene from time immemorial. Off to one side stood the old

wooden barn with doors ajar, a cave, some dark gate beckoning further inward, standing back from the fire, looking on, waiting and asking. The universal bassline was there again, in the background, they both felt it.

“It’s so right, nights like these, when everyone comes together,” she said.

She looked over at him, his dark beard and grim, noble cheekbones lit by the dancing light, a faerie sprung from some western fairytale.

“You ever think you want to stop running?” she asked.

“Running?” There was an edge to his voice.

She nodded. He looked at her and she looked back and for the first time she outdid him. He looked away.

“Tell me,” she said, and she was begging, defiant. “Talk to me.”

Her eyes found the barn in the night, and she took his arm and led him over to the old, creaking structure. She looked back as they disappeared within and saw Frankie across the fire. It looked like she gave an imperceptible nod, but then a fork of flame shot up and she was gone.

Inside, it was cobwebs, broken floorboards, the smell of rotting wood. They picked their way through the debris and found a corner where they lay and could see straight through a hole in the roof to the stars above, the shadowy moon. Firelight licked through the chinks in the walls and the drumbeat carried on.

He began to talk, unprompted, and his voice was different, his words halting, full of pain. Rosa, he told her, the most beautiful woman in the world, busking in Boise and flowers and lavender cotton dresses... And when he had finished talking, there were tears in his voice, and he said he didn’t know why he was still here, that he needed to go, he really needed to go, he needed to leave. They lay in silence. Even the drumbeat had faded. Her head had shifted and was lying against his shoulder. She didn’t feel fear or disappointment – just a great sadness.

He wondered what she was thinking. He braced himself. The road beckoned in all its simple heedlessness.

“Well,” he said, “now you can turn me in.”

She propped herself up on one elbow to look at him. Now she would never tell him. “No,” she said softly, “I’m sorry.”

His throat became choked, her mystery hair was halo-ed by moonlight. His eyes sought hers. She was already looking into his. He breathed in, shaky and deep, and she ran her long fingers through his beard. He was looking at her in precisely the same way that she was looking at him, and each became aware of the other’s beating body, pressed up, one against the other.

Suddenly, a shout went up from outside, a cheer. People began chanting. Then they made out the words: “Kenny, Kenny, Kenny!”

“What...?” she said, and her body grew tense.

“Kenny, Kenny, Kenny!” the shouting continued.

“How the fuck?” She rose up slowly, and a moonbeam hit her where she stood in the midst of the rotting ruins. “He’ll kill me.”

He stood up, slowly, too.

“You need to go,” she said.

“I know.”

She looked at him, and in that instant she had some weird crystal vision of them hurtling across frozen tundra expanses under pale moons wearing skulls of lynxes and crowns of ice, on the way to unearthly sunset towers rearing up against snowy peaks sheltering fires of the night and endless princelings in numb cradles painted feather blue, rocking slow and deep to bedside enchantments on and on... Her head spun. She placed her hands on his chest, tilted up, breathed him in, and kissed him. Then she was gone, ghosted out into the night.

He stood dumb for a long moment, then went back to the riverbank and took out his pouch of tobacco. The drummers had sped up and the crowd around the fire had grown; things were reaching new heights, and he saw the man who must be Kenny holding a handle of whiskey in one hand, what must've been an elk leg in another. It was time to go. But Wyatt reeled away to piss, spotted him, came over, and the cigarette became a spliff. Wyatt rapped on about herd immunity and a cowgirl in Reno, laughing drunk. He was quiet. Wyatt wanted to introduce him to Kenny, a great guy, he said, so he tossed the roach and followed Wyatt into the tumult.

By the fire, Kenny held her by the waist and nuzzled her with his big, bearded face. He'd missed her, he signed to her. He had raced back to make it, for her, because he knew how much she loved the solstice. She kissed him thank you and looked away at the fire. She felt jittery and sick. There was too much commotion. Only Old Frankie saw her for who she was, looking on through the flames, a blazing Romani seer. The elk haunch was now spit-roasted over the fire; it sizzled and spat fat.

Then she saw him approaching with Wyatt, and her head throbbed with sudden fever. Why hadn't he left? She leaned against Kenny to remain standing. Wyatt thrust him toward Kenny, and Kenny looked up and saw the man, silent and veiled. The man held out his hand, an offering. Time slowed.

"What's up," the man said.

They stood close, and Kenny did not return the dap. Instead, he turned to her and signed and nodded toward the man.

She looked between them. "He says," she said hesitatingly, "that you must be Pan." The name tasted strange on her tongue. Pan.

Pan didn't say anything, he was studying Kenny with a curious expression. She looked back at Kenny and he continued, growing animated.

"I never heard a name like that," she said.



“What’s yours?” Pan asked.

She asked and Kenny ignored the question. “Pan,” she translated, slowly, reluctantly, “you’ve been... making an impression, it doesn’t look good. Why are you still here? Why don’t you leave? This isn’t a place for...” she faltered and didn’t go on. Her chest was almost bursting from the pain.

Pan just looked at Kenny, his hands were bunched down in his coat. Kenny was glaring at him. She stepped between them and put a hand on Kenny’s chest, appealingly. Kenny took her in his arms and gave her a significant look, he would tell her later. They were frozen in the midst of it all. Wyatt had vanished. The drums had reached a fever pitch, and it was so warm around the bonfire that people were half-naked.

Then Kenny asked about the white truck, and she knew. Kenny knew. Bill had told him. Kenny nodded insistently toward Pan.

“Is that your white truck?” she asked Pan, with a helpless expression, then, wavering: “You’d better leave.”

Still, Pan didn’t say a word. He only had eyes for her. “You better leave,” she repeated, this time in her own voice, steel-edged. Kenny was looking from one to the other, confused. Pan stared at her ever more intensely, and the moment expanded outward to its breaking point. She was paralyzed, but she rode the rush, somehow, a million miles per hour. A bolt of understanding passed between them, then Pan turned heel and walked off, slowly, out of the ring of fire.

She watched him pass away, Kenny turned the elk meat, and she left the circle. She entered the old barn and sank shuddering onto the holy broken wood. She couldn’t cry. Not for herself or for Pan, nor for how she would never call him by his name, Pan, nor for all the gilded, unaccountable dreams. She was all dried up, a great aching sore. She shuddered and shook and wrenched the crumpled napkin from her jacket pocket, gazed desperately upon those thin etchings, limned in moonlight, retraced the traceless pencil tracks. She saw the old post office and old saloon anew and

again that same crooked tower, soon to crumble. In the silent wreck, she became acutely aware of the racing drumbeat and of the weeping stream rushing past. Both seemed to be saying something, and she listened with all she had. An old song from childhood came to her mind, and, as she got up, she began to hum.

Pan stumped through clumps of grass and snow, shoulders hunched against a bone-deep chill. He stopped at the stream, watched it for a while. He hadn't really seen it before, how dreadful its passing, how white the eddies and, inside of them, how frothy the pallor of the reflected moon. Those people no longer existed as he passed by the barn, the first traces of light creeping around the eastern rim, the stars all dimmed – all but one. He made his truck and didn't look back as he threw open the creaky, rusting door, slammed it shut, turned the key, and bent to, curled over the wheel for the first hour or so, windows down and shivering, tears leaking down his cold, whiskered cheeks, dropping onto denim, the hum of the tires and the big bleak truck battling its way through still air, past nameless, barren places, snow melt on rock and purple sage, across the county line heading south, not even necessarily to Presidio, or anywhere else for that matter, just going.

Back in Paradise, as the light continued its mundane conquest of the world, as the drummers faded, as the crowd thinned, Kenny looked around and didn't see her anywhere. Just blackened elk bones, smoking embers, and a leaning, forgotten barn. The seed of doubt grew quickly in the new light, until it was full bloom.

“Rue!” he bellowed into the mind's pitiless dawning. “Where are you?!”

And there came no answer from the secret land.