New Fiction from Andria Williams: “The Attachment Division”

1. The Bureau for the Mitigation of Human Anxiety

They were the survivors, they should have been happy, they should have been fucking thrilled (the President accidentally blurted that on a hot mic few years back, everyone quoted it until it was not even that funny anymore, but that’s what she’d said, throwing up her hands: “I don’t get it. They should all be fucking thrilled”), but three decades of daily existential dread had taken its toll. The evidence was everywhere: fish in the rivers poisoned not by dioxin runoff now, but by Prozac, Zoloft, marijuana, ketamine. There were drugs in the groundwater and the creeks and the corn. Birds were constantly getting high, flying into windshields, Lyfts, barbeque grills, outdoor umbrellas, the sides of port-a-potties. The different types of thunks their bodies made, depending on the material they struck, were the subject of late-night talk show jokes.

As for humans, the pills weren’t enough, the online therapy, in-person therapy, shock therapy, exposure therapy, clown therapy, none of it. The suicide rate hit twenty percent.

It was Dr. Anton Gorgias—still alive, now, at one hundred eight, and very active on Twitter—who initially proposed, and eventually headed, the Bureau for the Mitigation of Human Anxiety. The leaders of fifty-six nations came together to declare a worldwide mental-health crisis. Ironic, really, because the climate problem had been mostly been solved (the U.S being third-to-last to sign on to the Disaster Accords, just before Saudi Arabia and Equatorial Guinea. Thank God we even did, Steph sometimes marveled. She was twenty-seven;

people just ten or twenty years older than she was would often tell her she was lucky to have missed the very first years of the Wars; she'd think, yes, it had all been a real joy, thank you). Nothing could be reversed, but they could buy themselves some time, maybe even a few hundred years. That was in Sweden—of course it was Sweden—and so Minnesota was the first U.S. state to grab the ball and run with it, copying its spiritual motherland with only a smidge less efficiency.

Twelve states had Bureaus now, with more in the queue. But those states all looked to Minnesota, where the successes were measurable: suicide down by seven to nine points, depending on the study; people rating their daily satisfaction at a respectable 6 out of 10. It had once been two. Remember that, Stephanie's local director had told them in training. We brought it up to six. It used to be two.

Using combinations of genomic scanning, lifestyle analysis, and psychological evaluation, people could pinpoint their main source of anxiety and apply for its corresponding relief branch. The only hitch, at this point, was that each person could apply to only one branch. It was a budget and personnel thing, Steph explained when asked; the Bureau had its limits like anything else. People did not like being told they had to choose, but their complaints made Steph feel a little defensive. What more could people ask of a government agency? "At least we allow you to be informed," she'd pointed out to her parents, her sister, Alex, anyone who took issue. She was cribbing from the Bureau's original slogan, "It's the Most Informed Decision You'll Ever Make."

"Yeah," quipped Alex, in the recent last days before their breakup, when he claimed Steph was getting too sensitive, too cranky, too obsessively hung up on the death of her dad. "We should all be fucking thrilled."

People complained about other aspects, too: registration was a bitch, the waiting period took at least two years and there

was mandatory yearlong counseling, but, again—the numbers didn't lie. "It Used to Be Two" was now printed on the sides of bus stops, above the seats on the light rail.

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2. Never Laugh in the Presence of the Pre-Deceased

Steph worked for a small subset of Mortality Informance called the Attachment Division. The Attachment Division was tailored to people with anxiety caused by the prospect of loss: that their significant other might pass away before they did. This was what kept them up at night, what woke them with gasping nightmares. They wanted to know that they would die first, because the opposite horrified them. They could choose to be informed—if indeed they would be first to go—either six months or three months before their partner.

True, plenty of people registered for the program as newlyweds and then rescinded their applications a few years later, submitted them elsewhere. But Stephanie still liked this niche, this branch of the Bureau, for its slightly less self-involved feel, its unabashed sentimentality, the gamble its applicants were willing to make for love. A person had to put aside a bit of their pride to work for the Attachment Division. It was not considered one of the sexy branches. It was the Bureau's equivalent of an oversized, well-worn cardigan sweater.

I am a Mortality Informant, my work is an honor and a responsibility, it is not sad. Each day I do my job with compassion and, above all, professionalism. I am on time, clean, and comforting, but never resort to intimacy. I remember that a sympathetic nod goes a long way. I do not judge or discriminate based on a Pre-Mortal's appearance, race, creed, economic status, or any other factor. I will never contact a Pre-Mortal on my caseload outside of work for any reason. I remember always that I, too, will die.

She recalled her classmate Devin, the first day of training, raising his hand and asking how the Attachment Division defined “intimacy.” Steph tried to get his attention, jabbing her finger silently at its definition on page four of their brand-new handbooks to spare him the embarrassment of asking something obvious, but he asked anyway. It turned out that “intimacy,” for a Mortality Informant, encompassed almost everything, other than 1) helping someone if they collapsed, and 2) the required shoulder squeeze upon first releasing information. They’d practiced The Shoulder Squeeze in the same Estudiante A/Estudiante B setup she remembered from high school Spanish, reaching out a straightened arm, aiming for “the meat of the shoulder.” “One, two,” the instructor had called, briskly clapping her hands. “One, two. Fingers should already be prepared to release on the two.”

“You could probably squeeze a little harder,” said Devin, diligent in his constructive criticism. “But that could just be me. I like a lot of pressure.” They practiced with classmates taller, shorter, and the same heights as themselves.

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3. Nils Gunderson, Neighbor

Steph settled onto a green metal bench across the street from the address she’d been given, swiped her phone, and logged into her Bureau account to access the file, waiting as it loaded. A long page of text came up. Mortality Informants like herself were required to read their cases’ backgrounds first, before viewing the image, to help prevent involuntary first impressions (which, it turned out, were unpreventable).

She jiggled her foot as she scanned, her flat shoes slapping lightly against her heel. Even a year and a half into the job, she was always nervous, right before. She’d been assigned to

tell whoever came up on her screen —as professionally as she could, and because this was what they had requested, they had signed up for the program themselves — that in three months they would be dead.

The top line read, in bold, NAME: NILS GUNDERSON.

“Shit,” she muttered. It wasn’t that this name made anything worse, necessarily, but that it represented, to Steph, something particular. A man named “Nils Gunderson” would be what she thought of as one of the Old Minnesotans. A lot of them had moved out of the Cities the last few decades, but she — perhaps because she was not one, or only partially one (on her mom’s side), her late father having been relocated to Minnesota from Thailand as one of thousands of the state’s climate refugees — had a soft spot for the ones who’d braved the rapid change and stayed, the folks who loved their city and weren’t freaked out by the people from all over the world who’d come, out of necessity, and often reluctantly, to live in it. She scrolled down: Nils Gunderson was forty-four years old, married to Claire, worked a desk job for the utilities company. Mother, Edna, still alive; father, Gary, dead of a heart attack at fifty. Four sisters, alive also. An adopted brother from Ghana, interesting. Thirteen cousins around the state. A large family, the traditional sort that believed in upward mobility, that had reproduced with diligence, steadily, starting in Sweden or wherever five generations back, and then came here and just kept it up, moving through the world as if it all made sense, as if the world were bound to incrementally improve simply because they believed or had been told it would, naming their children things like Nils Gunderson. (Although it was worth noting that Nils Gunderson, himself, did not have children.)

She tapped “Open Photo.” But when she saw his face she gave a small jump, not because of anything alarming about the image itself, but because, surprisingly, she recognized him. He was the man who walked his cat past her apartment every night. He

was someone she, casually but genuinely, liked.

The Bureau tried to prevent matching caseworkers with anyone they knew. Each time a name came in it was scanned against the lists Steph had provided: her mom and brother, extended family, ex-boyfriend Alex (newest name on her list), former bosses. But she hadn't known this man's name, and couldn't list him. And so while it hadn't happened until now, here she was, confronted with the face of a familiar person. Her phone buzzed with the drone update: he was ten minutes out, headed home from work now.

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So now she knew that the man who walked his cat past her apartment in the evenings had three months left to live. It would have been a sad piece of information even if she did not have to deliver it herself.

"Walking the cat" was an energetic phrase for her neighbor's nightly routine. He and the cat strolled, really, in no hurry, stopping often, Nils Gunderson smoking, following the gray tabby which wore a red halter and leash. Stephanie had seen him just the night before, in fact, as she'd hip-nudged shut the door of her car, a cloth bag of groceries in each arm. He was shy and polite, middle-aged, always slightly rumpled-looking, dressed in the way of a person who was not entirely proud of his body and embarrassed to have to select clothing for it. He wore, usually, an oversized gray t-shirt with the writing worn to nothing, baggy cargo shorts; his white legs slabbed into sandals that were themselves slabs. He had a way of answering her "hello" with a head motion that was both a nod and a duck, replying "How's it going" so quietly she could hardly hear him—as if he were almost-silently, in a disappearing voice, reading the disappearing words on his shirt— then glancing fondly down at his halter-wearing cat as if glad for the distraction of it. He didn't carry a phone, which was unusual. Maybe along with the cat and the cigarette

that would have been too much. The cat's name was Thor. Stephanie knew because she'd hear him try to chuck it up like a horse sometimes, a click of his tongue and a little jiggle of the leash: "Let's go, Thor."

Thor, who matched his owner with a slight chubbiness, did not go. Thor moved along the sidewalk with excruciating distraction, sniffing every crack in the pavement as he came to it as if solving a delicate mystery, inspecting each tuft of grass or weedkiller-warning flag ("No, no," the man said with gentle concern, tugging it away, though he must have realized the flag was a joke, pesticides had been banned for two decades). It must take a world's worth of patience to walk that cat three blocks, Stephanie thought. Or maybe this was the only opportunity the man had to smoke, and he was relieved not to hurry. Smoking was illegal indoors now, even in your own home, and you needed a license— one pack a week, but of course people still got cigarettes other places.

She hadn't, all this time, known Nils's name. But because she saw him almost daily she also saw him on the worst day of her life: the evening, six months before, when she'd gotten the phone call, at work, that her father had died. Frantic, numb, she'd only just texted Alex to tell him, and she pulled up in front of the apartment and couldn't park her car. The space was too small. In and out and in and out she tried, yanking the wheel, blind with tears, and the man with the cat, walking by, seeing her struggle, paused to direct her into the space. She remembered him in her rearview mirror, waggling his fingers encouragingly, holding up his hand, *Good, Stop*. His supportive, pleased thumbs-up when she finally got the car passably straight. And then she whirled out of the car and rushed toward her apartment, toward the blurry form of Alex who had come out to take her in his arms with the gorgeous, genuine sympathy of some kind of knight — Alex had held her and cried; he had loved her father, too — and she'd almost collided with the man-with-the-cat, who noticed, suddenly, her

stricken, tear-streaked face, and said, quietly: *Oh.*

Just “oh.” With a slight step back, and so much empathy in his voice, sorrow at having misjudged the apparent triumph of their situation. There was an apology in the *oh*, and she had felt bad later that she hadn’t been able to reply, to say something stupid like No worries or even just thank him; she’d jogged forward in her haze of grief, her heart still revving helplessly, her stomach sick, while the man quietly tugged the cat’s leash and walked away.

In winter, of course, she saw Nils and his cat far less. The cat would not have wanted to stroll in a driving January rain. But after she got back from her dad’s funeral, and started to readjust to life, slowly, and notice the things she had noticed before, she liked spotting them. There was something endearing about the pair, the cat’s refusal to move quickly or in a straight line, the man’s attendant humility, his lack of embarrassment (in a neighborhood of joggers, spandexed cyclists, Crossfitters) at being an unathletic forty-something male out walking a cat.

Of course, the smoking, the lack of fitness might have contributed to Nils Gunderson’s situation. Because there he was, looking back at her out of his profile photo with an almost hopeful expression, as if he were waiting for her to speak so he could politely respond. She’d never had the opportunity to study him the way she now could, in the picture: gray-blue eyes, a slightly hooked nose, the gentle roll of a whiskered double chin cradled by what looked like the collar of a flannel shirt, a fisherman-style sweater over that. She flicked to her badge screen and held it loosely on her lap, closed her eyes a moment, preparing herself with the first line of the creed on a loop in her mind, because it was the most soothing to her. *I am a Mortality Informant, my work is an honor and a responsibility, it is not sad. I am a Mortality Informant, my work is an honor and a responsibility, it is not—* Her phone buzzed and she opened her eyes, glanced

down, saw the newest drone update that he was two miles away, expected home in four minutes. He was driving a gray Honda Civic, and would be alone. *Please activate recording device,* the message concluded, *and Good Luck.*

The capitalized "Good Luck" always struck her as slightly odd, as if she were about to blast into space. But, glancing back down at Nils Gunderson on her phone screen, imagining him coming home to his wife—Claire, she read, was a librarian, Jesus; *it is not sad*—and his cat, she did feel a sudden drop in her stomach that could have been described as gravitational, or maybe it was just the gravity and density of the information she held, about to pass through poor Nils's unshielded, unprepared rib cage like molecules of uranium, changing him almost as much as his real death would. His death, according to her notes, would occur on September 8th, three months from today.

She pressed her recording button ("for quality control") and took a deep breath. She would be compassionate and professional and punctual and clean and non-intimate. It was the best she could do.

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That morning, not for the first time, she had typed a resignation letter, then deleted it. She'd just had to tell a nineteen-year-old that her fiancée would die of a sudden, aggressive leukemia; that an 80-year old woman would lose her husband of 57 years. (Parents were exempted from the program until their children were at least 18, or else the whole world would have gone into chaos.)

"We're not all suited to the job," her friend Erica had said over the phone. "You know all the lifers are on drugs." Erica had quit the main Mortality Informance branch (not the Attachment Division) after eight years; now she had her Master of Fine Arts in creative writing and worked for a chocolate

company, writing inspirational quotes for the inner foil wrappers. “Everything is for the best!” she’d write. “Kathy N., Lincoln, NE.” Or, “Don’t forget to giggle! – Lisa P., Detroit, MI.” One night Steph and a very tipsy Erica had amused themselves by brainstorming the least inspirational quotes they could come up with. “Imagine opening your chocolate to find: ‘Shut up.’ – Jenny, Topeka, KS,” Erica had laughed, wiping her eyes. “Or: ‘Yes, it’s probably infected.’ – Marsha, Portland, ME.”

“There are jobs out there,” Erica had promised her, “that are so easy, you could cry. You don’t have to make life so hard on yourself.”

And here was his car now.

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Nils Gunderson parallel-parked, smoothly, a quarter of a block away, fumbled with something in the passenger seat for a long time—a backpack, Stephanie saw as he stepped from the car, hoisting it over one shoulder—and finally made his way in her direction up the sidewalk. He was slightly duck-footed; maybe this was more pronounced in his work khakis and brown shoes. There were light creases of sweat across the top of each khakied thigh.

Stephanie stood, patted her dark bun, smoothed her skirt, gathered her small shoulder bag and phone. She wore a butter-yellow shirt because she thought it a comforting color. The skirt, pale brown and A-line, was “sexy as a paper bag,” Alex had said: joking, she knew, but screw him anyway, she wasn’t supposed to look sexy at her job. He acted as if she should go out the door in a black leather miniskirt and stilettos, like some dominatrix angel of death.

Halfway across the street she was interrupted by a group of college-age kids, sprinting, shouting a breathless “Move!” and waving her out of the way. She knew what they were doing,

playing a new game everyone was obsessed with, where they scanned their locations into their phones at surprise moments, and then their friends had ten minutes to get there and catch them. She heard people talking about it everywhere she went. They'd win virtual cash which they spent on an imaginary planet that they'd build, meticulously, from the first atom up. People spent months on their planets and were devastated when they lost; a guy had been shot over it in Brainerd the week before, and the game itself was causing traffic problems, accidental hit-and-runs, a lady's small dog had been clipped right off the end of its leash by a speeding Segway. Steph jumped back as the three men plowed forward, one, at least, calling "Sorry" over his shoulder. "Hope your imaginary planet is awesome," she snipped. Alex had been getting into this game; sometimes his phone went off at three a.m. and he'd dash out the door almost desperately. He had started to sleep fully dressed, even wearing his shoes. If she slowed him down by talking as he made for the door, he'd get crabby, in this weird, saccharine tone where she could tell he was trying to moderate his voice because he knew it was, at heart, an absurd thing to get irritable over. He was aware of that at least. So she'd started pretending to stay asleep. Then, once he left, she'd toss and turn angrily, obscurely resentful of this idiotic game. She was glad all that was over now, Alex and his dumb game, even though he had named his planet after her, which was sweet. And last night she'd been tossing and turning anyway, but because he *wasn't* there, and she'd ended up fishing his basketball sweatshirt with the cutoff sleeves out of the back of her closet and wearing it to sleep— sweet Jesus. Was there no middle ground?

She had to catch up to Nils Gunderson. He was almost at the front door. "Mr. Gunderson," she called, trotting the last few steps in her flat, unsexy shoes. He turned, a quizzical smile crossing his face—not one of recognition, in the first instant, but because she was a small, non-threatening female person calling after him—and then growing slightly more

puzzled as he placed her.

“Mr. Gunderson, may I speak to you for a moment?”

“I – sure,” he said. “Wait. You – you live a few blocks that way.” He pointed.

“I do. Please come over here, if you would.” She gestured to the grassy strip alongside his building, wishing there were a bench closer by. It was good to have a place where people could sit down, but she didn’t want to lead him all the way back across the street.

He followed her a few steps, as she asked him to verify his name, address, date of birth. He answered so trustingly, his grayish-blue eyes patient, politely curious, that she could hardly stand to see (as she flashed her badge) the dim knowledge gathering around their edges and then intensifying. She told him, in the plain language she’d practiced hundreds of times, that she was a Mortality Informant, reminding him gently that he had signed up for this program, had requested notification three months before his death, that he would pass away long before his wife, and that was why an Informant had been sent. No, she could not tell him when his wife would die, but it was far into the future. He paled before her eyes, she could see it happen, his mortality crashing in on him like the YMCA wave pool he’d later tell her he’d loved as a child, arms outstretched, staggering backwards, chlorine, briefly, in his nose and throat—the exhilaration of having cheated death, which he was not cheating now. Steph placed one hand on his thick shoulder and gave it a squeeze, one, two. She was prepared for him to cry, to ask why so soon, so young, even his dad had made it to fifty; to tell her in shock to go away, fuck her, fuck the program, he wished he’d never heard of it: some people got very upset. They wanted this information in the abstract, but not the real, or they didn’t want the moment of receiving it. Several mortality informants had been punched or kicked. Devin had once been chased three blocks. Now they

had an emergency button on their phones that could call for backup.

But he surprised her. “Thank God,” he said, his voice choked, overwhelmed. “Oh, thank God, thank God.”

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It was close to eleven p.m. when she heard him. Windows cracked, crickets singing through the warm St. Paul night, and then suddenly a wail from street-level that sounded agonized, almost otherworldly. Somehow Steph suspected it was him even before she went to peek. From her second-story brick apartment she saw Nils Gunderson’s large figure hunched on the bench below, the cat sniffing thoughtfully at a crushed cup.

I will never contact a Pre-Mortal on my caseload outside of work for any reason.

The wail was followed by distinct, repetitive sobs; someone cycling down the street glanced over, pedaled on.

I remember always that I, too, will die.

“Fuck,” she muttered. She yanked off Alex’s old basketball sweatshirt with the cutoff sleeves and threw it onto the couch. Strode out the door and down the wooden stairs in her baggy, checked pajama pants and ribbed tank top.

When she stood next to him, he looked up, his face swollen, tear-streaked, awful.

“You can’t do this,” she said, crossing her arms over her chest, self-conscious of her braless state. “I’m not supposed to talk to you.”

“I’m not doing *any*thing,” he said. “I come to this bench every night.” She glared at him and he added, automatically, “I’m sorry.”

For a moment they both stood, staring at the black, puddled street. There'd been a late afternoon rain. Four young men raced by on bikes, whooping, phones in their hands, the thin tires splitting the puddles in two like bird-wings.

"That is the dumbest game," Nils Gunderson said, and before she could stop herself Stephanie let out a dry chuckle. He looked at her gratefully. Tapped his shirt pocket. "Smoke?"

She hesitated. The first week of training they'd had to swear off cigarettes, alcohol, weed, opiates, anything that might dull or heighten their sensitivity to other people. The database bounced them from liquor stores and dispensaries. Their mornings began with fifteen minutes of guided meditation on their phones, setting their intentions for the day. Their intentions, it turned out, were always to be compassionate, professional, punctual, clean, and non-intimate. Meditation annoyed her. She recalled Alex coming out of the shower one morning, a towel around his waist, and spotting her meditating (she'd cracked one eye just a sliver when she heard the door); grinning, tackling her, teasing her until she turned the phone face-down and just let it drone on. That had been a fun morning.

Nils held out a cigarette.

"Yes, please," she said.

He scooted over and she sat down beside him. He lit her cigarette. The nicotine wrapped her brain in the most welcome hug, tight, tighter, like a snail in a shell. God, now she craved a drink.

Nils talked. He was worried about his wife. The librarian, Claire. "She'll be so lonely," he said.

"When you signed up for this program," Steph said, rallying her work-voice though she felt worn out, "there was an unselfishness to your act. Remember that."

“Okay,” he said. “That makes me feel better. Talk about that a little more. I mean, if you don’t mind.”

Steph took a drag, exhaled. If she could just smoke all the time her job would be a lot easier. “We’ll have a team of grief counselors, a doctor, and after-care staff at your home within minutes of your passing. Claire won’t be left alone until her family can get there. The best thing you can do when you feel it happening is to quietly go lie down. It’s less upsetting for everyone.” Steph looked at him, his bleak expression heavying his face. She could see him imagining his own, undignified death, gurgling facedown in a cereal bowl, slumped in the shower while water coursed over his beached form. She repeated, “Remember that, just go to the bedroom and lie down.”

“She has a sister in Sheboygan,” Nils began.

“We know. We have it all on file.”

“Will you be one of the people there with her?” He’d suddenly developed the ability to cry silently and abundantly, like a beautiful woman in a film. Tears ran down his cheeks. He picked at his bitten thumbnails, weeping.

Steph shook her head. “It’s a separate team. My job was only to inform you.”

“I won’t be able to sleep tonight.”

“I can put in a request for something to help you sleep, but only for the next few nights. We don’t want you sleeping away the last three months of your life. Try to enjoy yourself, Nils. Go on a vacation. Sit outside. Re-watch your favorite movies, go to restaurants.” She thought of her friend Erica and her chocolate-wrapper slogans. “Remember to giggle. Watch the sunrise. Have a lot of sex.” That was not from a chocolate wrapper; that was what happened when she winged it. She should never wing it. “If you can. I mean, maybe not tonight. Give it

a week or so.”

He glanced at her, tear-streaked. “Have sex with Claire, you mean.”

“Well, of course. That’s what I meant.”

“Just checking. I don’t know what kind of advice you guys give. You’re all so smug,” he added after a moment, but in a sad voice, almost to himself, and it would turn out this was as insulting as he got.

“We’re really not,” Steph said.

“Should I tell her?”

“I can’t make that decision for you.”

They sat for a while; Steph accepted another cigarette. The cat rubbed against her pajama pants, his back arched, tail upright and quivering. She reached down to pet him. His fur was slick and soft as a seal’s.

“That one time I helped you park,” Nils began.

Steph looked at him.

“You were crying,” he said. “I felt terrible. I didn’t even notice until after you got out of the car.”

“It’s not your fault. I mean, I was in a car. You probably couldn’t see my face clearly. You were being nice by helping me out.”

“I just remember giving you this really stupid thumbs-up, and I was still holding it when you almost ran into me. Just grinning with my thumbs up, like a fucking idiot.”

“It was a really tight parking spot.”

“What were you crying about?”

Now her own eyes were stinging. “My dad,” she said after a minute. “I’d just found out he died.”

“Oh.” There it was again, Nils Gunderson’s *oh*. Steph’s vision swarmed. Nils said, “I’m really sorry to hear that.”

“Yeah,” said Steph, an edge of bitterness to her voice. “Car accident. Can’t really be prepared for something like that.”

“He wasn’t in – in the program? Like I am?”

She smiled bleakly. “He didn’t believe in it.”

Nils nodded, looked out at the street again. “I’m wondering if it was a mistake. For me, I mean.”

Steph hesitated. “Everything always works out for the best,” she said, and then stopped. “No, that’s bullshit. It’s total bullshit. Sometimes things just don’t work out at all. Sometimes people die and it’s just fucking sad.” His mouth dropped slightly and she sped up: “But I don’t think that’s the case with you and Claire. I mean, that any part of this is bullshit. I think – I think you’ve had a wonderful life together and you’ve done right by her. And that signing up for this program was the right thing to do.” She rallied: “It was the most informed decision you could have made. I believe that. I do, Nils.”

“Thank you.” He wiped his face on both arms. Droplets glittered on the hair. “That was really nice of you to say. Will you meet me here tomorrow night?”

She tossed her cigarette onto the pavement – also illegal, she didn’t care right now – and Nils ground it out with his shoe. “I can’t,” she said.

As she got up, scuffing back toward her apartment in flip-flops, he called: “What department did you sign up for, anyway? For yourself?”

She was honest: “I didn’t sign up for any.”

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4. The Confession

But he was back out by the bench the next evening, a large, forlorn form in the dark, this time standing and looking directly up at her building. He was holding something in his hands. Steph waited him out, tried to do the crossword puzzle in the Strib, made a cup of tea, dumped it in the sink. If this kept up, she would certainly lose her job before she could make any decisions herself about it. “Jesus fuck,” she said finally, flip-flopping downstairs.

He immediately apologized in a voice so hoarse she could barely hear him. “I’m sorry, but I need your help. I made something. I was wondering if you would listen to it for me, tell me if it’s okay.” He added ominously, “It’s the most important thing I’ve ever made.” He thrust the package toward her. It was wrapped in newspaper and he had triangled the corners, taped them. If he’d had a bow he probably would have put one on. “What are you *wearing*?” he blurted. “Do you play basketball?”

Steph’s cheeks flared as she fingered the edge of the sweatshirt, which went down to her knees. “Oh. It was my boyfriend’s. Ex-boyfriend’s. I shouldn’t be – I shouldn’t be wearing it.”

Nils’s eyes widened, wet. “Did he die?”

“God, no. It’s not like I – *make* people die,” Steph said, and then she started to laugh, an odd, cathartic laugh, one hand over her eyes. She realized she hadn’t laughed all day. She wheezed until she half-bent over, holding her waist with the other arm. The thought of herself as some cursed being, walking around while people dropped away like playing cards – it was too much. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” she said, waving her

hand, getting control of herself. She was not supposed to laugh in the presence of the pre-deceased.

But he was chuckling, too, tears blinking on the edges of his eyelids. He was laughing simply because she was laughing, out of some empathetic impulse. For a split second she wanted to hug him. She could probably get away with a shoulder squeeze. Lord knew she was royally fucking this up already. Instead she pinched her nose, took a deep breath, looked down at the item as he handed it to her. “What is it?” she asked.

“It’s just – things I wanted to tell Claire. Things I want her to know about me. I feel like, after all this time, she should know everything about me. Before we’re parted forever.”

“Maybe not forever,” Steph tried, regretting it the moment it came out.

He brightened. “You think so?” Whispered: “Do they teach you something in school the rest of us don’t know?”

“No,” Steph said. “I’m sorry. Why are you asking me for advice on your – your recording? I’m not, like, a writer or artist or anything.”

“But you’re honest. I can tell. And I want you to be honest with me, tell me if you think it’s any good. Promise me you’ll listen to it,” he said.

“There’s a chance people shouldn’t know everything about somebody else,” she cautioned.

He shook his head. It was the most emphatic thing she’d seen him do. “That’s not true,” he said, nearly defiant. “This is me and Claire we’re talking about here.”

*

Back upstairs, she tugged open the newspaper to reveal a memory stick tucked up against a pack of Marlboro Reds. She

smiled in spite of herself, cracked the window.

The file was enormous. He had talked for twelve hours straight: indoors, perhaps while Claire was at work; outside, voices in the background, cars swishing past. Initially, he was quite poetic. He must have been a reader, Steph thought, to marry a librarian.

He talked with a low urgency, but slowly, clearly, his voice growing drier by the hour. Steph, sitting with a notepad and pen, initially tried to jot helpful notes.

“My first memory,” Nils was saying, his voice strong at this point, “is of my own foot. I must have been six or seven months old. I remember looking at it in my crib, grabbing it, marveling. I think I found my foot beautiful. The toes were lined up in descending order like small pearls, the nails pink as areolas.”

Steph frowned. “Shifting point of view,” she scribbled. “A baby wouldn’t be able to make these comparisons.” Then she crossed it out. “Which foot?” she wrote. She crossed that out, too.

Nils roamed on, through his toddler years, a dog bite, falling off a tall piece of playground equipment, the disappointment of the local pool shutting down for water conservation (Steph didn’t even remember public pools — a startling idea, to have your body in the same water as a bunch of strangers’), accidentally wetting his pants in first grade, his first memorable, puzzling erection a year or so later, and how his mom had spanked him afterward. He didn’t think the two were related, but he couldn’t be sure. “Maybe more positive memories,” Steph suggested.

“Dad used to tell me I was a quitter,” Nils was saying, two hours later. “I quit four jobs in high school. I quit the football team because half the guys were assholes. I quit lunchtime Spanish club. There are forty-six books in our house

I’ve never read, Claire. Forty-six. You’ve read all of them. I didn’t make it to Grandma Clark’s funeral. I’m a failure in so many ways. I feel like I’ve never stuck with anything except you, Claire. You’re the only thing worth sticking by.”

Steph noted the time and wrote, “Sweet.”

“And Thor,” Nils amended. “I’ve stuck by Thor.” He went on a brief tangent of memories about the cat, charming particularities of its behavior. “Good!” wrote Steph. Smiley-face.

“But,” the recording went on, “I’m still ashamed. If I’m being really honest, Claire, I’m ashamed. Because I’ve had so many secret thoughts in my head. Do you ever wish we could know each other’s thoughts, Claire? What would happen to the world if we could all be inside each other’s heads?”

Steph yawned, a cigarette dangling from her left hand. It was the middle of the night but she couldn’t seem to stop listening. Outside, crickets sang.

“The thing is, Claire,” Nils went on, “you’re so good. I’ve realized I’m not as good and I wish I could find a way to make it up to you. I know you don’t sit there at the library checking out every guy who walks in but I look at girls all the time. I mean like all kinds of girls and women. I can’t help it. Teenage girls, older women. I can’t help but notice their bodies in their clothes. Sometimes I think about them later. And I know that’s so hypocritical because I’m no Ricardo Lee myself [an action-movie star]. I’ve never even taken very good care of my feet. I should have made my feet look better for you. I should have lost weight for you, Claire. Sometimes I thought about it but I could only stick to a diet for, like, three hours. I have no self-control.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself,” Steph wrote.

“Sometimes, when we’d make love, Claire, I’d picture someone

else. Rhonda Jones [a prominent Black actress]. Remember that movie where she had sex with Ricardo Lee? I would think about that a lot when we'd make love. Just the way her breasts bounced. I would picture them and it would help me, you know, get there." Steph felt her nose crinkle. "And sometimes I would picture your sister. Not Marla: Kate. When we went on that beach vacation to Ocean City I felt terrible because that was some of the best sex of our lives and I was picturing Kate in her orange bikini most of the time. You were always so self-conscious about your small chest but it never really bothered me. The only thing I really should have been feeling, every day with you, was gratitude. You know?" Nils was crying now and Steph, at a loss, had turned to doodling swirls in the margins of her notepad. "That's the part that just kills me. Why did I waste any of you, Claire? You're precious to me. The only thing I ever should have felt was gratitude."

Steph clicked on the screen: there were still five hours remaining. She closed the computer. It was nearly time for her to go to work. She was going to be a mess. She had only four cigarettes left and she felt too sick even for coffee. She turned the shower as hot as she could, briefly pondered her own smallish breasts, washed her hair three times to get the smoke out, braided it down her back, changed into fresh clothes, and drove to work.

*

5. Feedback

Nils waited two evenings, respectfully, before returning to the bench. "I didn't want to rush you," he said. He was composed, even a little eager, but slightly puffy through the face. He had freshly showered and shaved and was wearing a polo shirt, and the overall impression was that he had been sort of scraped, steamed, and stuffed. It made him look both less tired and more so at the same time. "I'm trying to look better for Claire," he explained. "I even brushed Thor." The

cat did look sleek.

“Have you told her yet?” Steph asked.

“No. I’m waiting a little longer.”

“That must be hard,” she said, as if it were the only hard thing about the situation. When his eyes began to water she changed the subject. “Your recording,” she said.

He brightened. “What did you think? I decided to call it The Confession. Because that’s what it is. The truest thing I’ve ever told anyone.”

“Yeah,” said Steph. “I think—I think you should definitely not give it to Claire.”

Nils’s face changed utterly with confusion. “What?”

“It’s just — I think you want to leave her with the best possible memories of you. With — with this,” she said, indicating his hair, his shirt. “These are the last memories of you she’s going to have for her entire life. I think you want them to be positive, you know?”

“But it’s the truth,” he said.

Steph made a small irritated sound. “Lots of things are the truth,” she said. “Think about Claire—”

“All I ever think about is Claire.”

“Apparently not,” said Steph, and then apologized. “You shouldn’t give someone a confession they can’t respond to. It’s — unethical. She’d be stuck with just your words here, and who knows exactly how she’d interpret them? Which ones she’d focus on? What if she doesn’t hear all the times you’re telling her you love her, and just thinks endlessly about the other stuff? Why do you need to confess, anyway? I hate to break it to you, but nothing on this recording is that bad.

It’s just – it’s just kind of inappropriate. You know?”

“But it’s the truth.”

“Yes, you keep saying that, but this is your marriage and your life, Nils. Do you really want it to be some kind of social experiment, or do you want it to be warm and loving and meaningful? Don’t shoot yourself in the foot here. You want – you want Claire to feel like she made a good decision with her own life,” Steph blurted helplessly. “That she made the best possible decision.”

Nils stood quietly a moment, seeming to shrink slightly into himself. “And you think she didn’t,” he said.

Steph felt a wash of shame. “That’s not what I meant to say.”

“No, I understand,” he said, not accusingly, but as if reeling with the thought. He spoke slowly, almost as if in wonder. “When I expressed my truth, it became clear to you that I was not Claire’s best decision.”

How many ways, Steph wondered, am I going to be forced to hurt this man? “I think giving her this recording is not the best decision,” she said. “I think *you* were probably a great decision.”

He nodded to himself, his eyes brimming again. “Well, thank you for listening to it,” he said. “And for your time. I know I took a lot of your time and energy. I feel bad about that. I took a lot of your emotional energy.”

“Don’t feel bad,” said Steph, exhausted.

“It was really helpful to talk to you,” Nils said. He began to shuffle down the street, looking defeated. Thor, gleaming like a tiny streetlight, followed. Then Thor stopped, and Nils stood two feet from Steph making encouraging kissy sounds, and the cat started up again. And then stopped. And then started, and then stopped. Nils tried to gaze up at a tree. I am going

to actually die right now, Steph thought.

But she wasn't. Or, at least she didn't think she was.

*

6. The Game

For the next few weeks, Steph was careful not to encounter Nils. She grocery-shopped on Saturday mornings, instead of after work, and she did not go outside during his walking hours. It helped that there were weeks of heavy rain, shining in intermittent sunlight, the gutters constantly steaming as if they breathed. It was not ideal weather for Thor to stroll in.

When her termination notice came, she was not surprised. She wondered, briefly, if Nils might have reported her, but her supervisor produced drone images: she and Nils smoking on the bench. There had been a brief investigation, agents sent to Nils's apartment. Loyally, unaware of the photos, Nils claimed that Steph had refused to speak to him outside of work and never had; Steph smirked at his sporadic attachment to truth. Her supervisor, noting her smirk, reminded her that there was nothing funny about being a Mortality Informant, and that was why it was necessary that she now seek another career.

"Maybe there's sometimes something funny about it," Steph said.

Her supervisor told her to pack up her desk.

*

September 8th nagged at Steph on her wall calendar; her eye flicked to it again and again. When the morning came, hot and bright, she found herself unable to sit still. She circled want ads in the paper – low-paying jobs working with the disabled, or small children – and finally went for a run. She

passed Nils's street but could discern nothing out of the ordinary; cars lined both sides, as always, and there didn't seem to be any more or less than usual. She found herself running faster and faster, the steamy air filling her lungs, her heart pounding frantically and ecstatically until it seemed to fill her whole chest and body and vision and mind. She reached a bench at a park half a mile away and bent over, gripping its metal back, nearly hyperventilating. Her mind was filled with an enormous, pulsing red. It bloomed and bloomed as if trying to push her eyeballs out. Steph dropped to her knees. The ground was muddy and gritty beneath them, pungent, slightly cool. The tiny rocks in it hurt. She tried to spit on the ground, but hit her own thigh.

"Miss?" an unfamiliar male voice asked. "Are you alright?"

She looked up.

"Are you part of The Game?" he asked. "Are you looking for John?"

It took her a moment to parse this. "No," she said. "I'm not. I was just jogging. Just a little out of shape." She added, with manufactured effort to pass the nausea, "Good luck with your Game!"

She wasn't really out of shape, but the man took her word for it and politely moved on. Besides, he was looking for John. When Steph's vision had cleared, she walked slowly toward home, hand on her cramping ribcage, small spots still dancing around the corner of her eyes. Just go lie down, Nils, she thought, as if she could send him a message with her mind. Just go lie down.

When she got home, she staggered, exhausted, into her tiny bedroom, laid on her back the bed, and balled her fists into her eyes. She was soaked with sweat, small pebbles spattering her knees like buckshot. She no longer had access to her work files, of course, but she imagined the notification that would

have popped up: CASE CLOSED. Her chest tightened again and she rolled onto her side, reaching back to yank hard on her ponytail, a habit she had in moments of grief. It was almost enough to shock her out of any emotion, that pull, hard and fast.

She must have fallen asleep, because when she opened her eyes again the sunlight was slanted, descending. She sat up, clammy, rubbed the pebbles from her knees. Wiped her eyes. She would find a new job, buy groceries, call her mom. When she stood, she let out a small sigh, which sounded like *oh*.

New Fiction from J.G.P. MacAdam: “A Sleeping Peace”

Author’s note: I arrived at this story after reading an article in Rolling Stone called ‘Highway to Hell: A Trip Down Afghanistan’s Deadliest Road’ and I thought, what if what’s happening in Afghanistan ended up happening here, in America? Would Americans finally “get it” then?

*

Sometimes the weariness in my bones was so bad it took near everything I had just to get out of bed in the morning. Captain Hernandez tapped on the front door at 0400. I was already packed and dressed. I slipped my nose out of Zachary’s doorway. His bedsheets were tousled and I wanted to tuck him

back in, but I didn’t want to risk waking him. Let him sleep. I slid his door shut and turned the knob. Matt was waiting for me at the bottom of the stairs, as he was every Monday morning. He handed me a thermos of Klickitat Dark Roast.


photo: Andria Williams

“Thanks.”

“Text me every hour on the hour.” He hugged me close. “Please.”

His beard was just the right length, not too scratchy. “Go back to sleep. Try to grab another hour or two before Zachary wakes up.”

“I’ll try,” he whispered in my ear and squeezed me closer.

Captain Hernandez tapped on the door again.

“Gotta go. Remember to ask Teacher Julie about Zachary’s—”

“I’ll remember.”

“And you’ve got another doctor’s appointment this—”

“I’ve got the home front covered, Charlie-Echo.”

“Okay.”

We kissed. Matt made sure I had my briefcase, bulletproof vest and everything else, then opened the door. The damp predawn air blew in with the sound of idling engines and Captain Hernandez’s voice. “Morning, ma’am.”

“Morning, Captain. Latest intel?” I knew Matt liked hearing the Captain’s briefings. It was practically every other week that Matt was trying yet another prescription for his anxiety. None worked.

“Contractors for ODOT took an ambush on Saturday, trying to patch up that one crater near mile marker 270. No casualties. The hole’s still there, though.”

“Any IED’s?” Matt stepped onto the threshold.

“Four, sir. EOD’s taken care of them though.”

“Maybe you guys mix up your route a little bit? Take one of the bridges across the river, or several, crossing back and forth.”

Shaking my head: “I’m already leaving at the crack of dawn as it is. We’ll take eighty-four all the way out.”

Captain Hernandez agreed. Matt shifted uncomfortably; he didn’t like being reminded that in a very real way he didn’t know what the hell he was talking about. The Captain knew when to take his leave. “Clock’s ticking, ma’am.” He tapped his watch and stepped his combat boots down the front steps.

I glanced back at Matt, hoping he wouldn’t but knowing he would.

“I don’t see why you can’t just deviate your route a little. These National Guard guys don’t know their ass from a hole in the—”

“Matt, honey, please. I gotta go.”

“Why’s the Governor making you do this? Plenty of other County Executives don’t have to travel out to the sticks. In Baker, in Grant, in Malheur, in any of the eastern counties there’s not even any county government left to speak of.”

“You know why. There needs to be a government presence in Umatilla. It’s the bridge. It’s the dam. It’s the interstate.”

“I don’t want to lose my wife to some goddamned—” I saw how much it took him to swallow his worries down. He couldn’t help

himself; he always grew so anxious right at the last minute. “I’m sorry, you gotta go.”

“I’ll see you Friday.”

Matt nodded and sighed. “We’ll be here.”

“I love you.”

“I love you, too. Zaniyah?”

“Yeah?”

“Text me, please.”

Emails were already rolling in on my phone. Captain Hernandez was waiting, holding the armored door to my SUV open for me. “I’ll text you when we make it past the Hood River base.”

*

My phone scrolled with endless memos. Everything Umatilla County—population 43,696 and dropping—from road maintenance to school renovations. Reviewing and e-signing as much as I could in the back of my de facto mobile office, a hulk of an SUV outfitted with bulletproof windows and steel-plated undercarriage.

We picked up Muri, my counterpart in Wasco County, before taking I-5 to the I-84 interchange. Our order of movement was lead Humvee with a gunner and a .50 cal in the turret, my SUV, a second Humvee, followed by Muri’s SUV, then a rear Humvee. We hit the interchange at a smooth 70 mph maintaining a strict 20-meter interval between vehicles.

I yawned and glimpsed the shadow of someone standing under an overpass. They were holding their phone to their face and tracking our convoy with it.

“D’you see that one, Captain?”

“I did, ma’am.” He commanded the convoy from the passenger seat. “Third lookout this morning.”

“They know we’re coming.”

“They always do.”

I suppressed another yawn and tried not to think about it, bending to my memos again, sipping my Klickitat Dark. Portland swirled by my window. Even at this hour the streetcars were running, bicycle lanes filling up, another day in the life of a great American city no doubt suffering its fair share of contested neighborhoods, crime, refugee-packed stadiums and smoke-filled summers where the air itself became an enemy to defend against. But the insurgency held little sway here. Portland, Salem, the coast and anything within artillery distance of the I-5 corridor was *safe* insofar as the National Guard continued to pour manpower and materials into defending it. As for any territory east of the Cascades, however, the same could not be said.

The first couple hours of our trip sped by, the lead truck passing smoothly around the handful of semis still making runs into contested territory, the whole convoy flowing apace. The question, the one question that always gnawed its way into my brain every Sunday evening, before even waking Monday morning, before saying goodbye, hit me, once again. Why not turn back? It was the sight of the first military outpost atop Tooth Rock that brought the question on. The Tooth Rock outpost was, for me, the western entry point to the Columbia Gorge, the Cascades, thickly forested, magical, wet with ferns and moss, riven with canyons and waterfalls, a fairy tale place of my youth, a place to camp, to hike, to explore. But it wasn’t that way anymore. Now, I saw only violence. The way the Columbia River had once upon a time blown a mile-wide hole through the mountains. The way the land was torn apart and uplifted, itself a testament to the hundreds of thousands of years of earthquakes and eruptions from the resident volcanoes

at present asleep under their cones of ice.

Tooth Rock disappeared around another upthrust of rock. A spattering of headlights on the westbound lane, some people still commuting into Portland. Why not turn back? Herrera, the County Executive for Gilliam County, was not in the convoy. He called in sick, as usual. The Hood River CE, Jules, slept in a bunker in the base there. Sherman County's CE was a no-show, probably nursing a hangover, the stress of the job driving her to drink her way out and drink her way back every week, or so I heard. The only other county besides my own along I-84 was Morrow County. That was Henderson's territory, or had been. He boasted of being born and bred in Morrow County, knew the people and the hills like the back of his hand. He once said to me, "Zaniyah, just be yourself. Don't be the Governor's lackey. Don't be the authoritarian dictating curfews and martial law. Don't be the savior. Just be yourself, the girl from Umatilla. You're from Umatilla, right? That's why the Governor appointed you, wasn't it?" He was right and he was dead. Insurgents ran a Corolla rigged with fertilizer and a suicide bomber straight into his SUV as he was leaving the compound down in Heppner, the county seat.

"We should have choppers."

"What's that, ma'am?"

"Nothing, Captain. Just thinking aloud."

Choppers were too scarce and expensive to fuel. The winds in the Gorge too treacherous for most aircraft, the weather too unpredictable.

The Bonneville Dam slid into view, its turbines and buttresses stretching across three separate islands. It was soon followed by the white-trussed expanse of the Bridge of the Gods which seemed to hover midair under a blaze of spotlights. A checkpoint searched vehicles before allowing them to cross. Why not turn back? Even this lake of a river fell dam-to-dam

down to Portland and out to the Pacific. To travel east was to go against gravity. “I’m appointing you all to be my eyes and ears on the ground,” said the Governor. “The mayors and county commissions elected locally, well, they’re not what I would call cooperative all of the time, especially in the eastern counties.” My phone vibrated with a new email from the Mayor of the City of Umatilla. His email was mostly a rant interspersed with all-caps saying that I did not have the authority to direct road maintenance, though they were state funds and the State Legislature explicitly directed CE’s to monitor all state expenditures. I did not have the authority to make the curfew start earlier and end later. I did not have the authority to ration medical supplies or food aid. Mayor Pete even brought out the big guns, the telltale codewords and innuendo of popular insurgent threads, the language of which was now near ubiquitous across much of eastern Oregon. “It’s only because of the Governor’s MILITARY DICTATORSHIP via stationing TROOPS in our backyard that YOU even survive your little trips out here!” Was that a threat? What else could it be, in times like these? “Where are you anyways?” he wrote. “Why aren’t you in the office yet?” I replied with only an “En route. – Z.” and pictured his face reddening at the screen. Why keep going? Why fight for people who did not want you to fight for them?

The interstate slithered its way between the dark river and darker upthrusts of rock. Exits were blocked off and closed. Corporal Barnes, ever the silent driver, clicked on the windshield wipers as the air congealed into a mist of rain. A prominent slab of rock jutted out over the right side of the road and when our headlights passed across it, I saw the message, we all did, could read those white letters spray-painted across the wet black of the rock plain as day. We Will Never Stop, We Will Never Tire, We Will Fight Until Our Blood Runs Dry.

No one said anything, hearing only my own voice in the back of

my head repeating a question.

*

“What’s that, sir?” Corporal Barnes pointed up ahead.

The sky was still black but for a rimming of cobalt. In the mountains across the river, in Washington state, the subtlest red sparks arced back and forth like a mini meteor shower. “Tracers,” said Captain Hernandez. “One of our own out of Hood River.”

We saw the glow of Forward Operating Base Hood River before we saw the base. The jade trusses of the bridge, too, popped out of the dawn, its floodlit reflection shimmering across the water. FOB Hood River sat on what was once a waterfront park. It was the operational and logistical hub of the entire Mid-Columbia region. The main employer, too. Our convoy slowed as traffic thickened and then crawled and then stopped altogether, the line to get on-base overflowing onto the interstate.

Captain Hernandez yawned.

“Get much sleep, Captain?”

“No, ma’am. The baby woke up two, three times before I got up to leave. Hungry little guy. Tell me, when do they start sleeping through the night?”

“It takes a while,” I said, “but they eventually do.”

The town of Hood River sloped uphill on our right, broad yellow windows capturing the view, though more and more of those houselights never switched on anymore. Whoever had the means moved east. Ever since Town Hall was pipe-bombed people just didn’t feel safe anymore. That happened despite the nearness of such a massive base with its five-meter-high Hesco walls and thousand-or-so troops and reams of concertina wire and guard towers bristling with machine guns. Begged the

question: how much did all this military might actually protect anybody? Still, I'd be returning to FOB Hood River before sundown to spend the night on a cot in a tent. I never expected I'd be sleeping four out of every seven nights inside of a bunker, but whose career ever goes according to plan? The cooks in the chow hall made omelets for everyone pulling midnight duty and for the rest of us who couldn't sleep.

"There they are," said Corporal Barnes. I was about to text Matt but stopped to stare out at the platoon of Humvees limping their way across the bridge. One had a cockeyed wheel and half its bumper blown off. Even from where we were on the interstate you could see the spiderwebs in their windshields, the smoke stains across their hoods.

*

Terraces of rock stepped into the clouds. White threads of rain-born torrents wound off their green flanks and spilled onto the broken and tumbled basalt below. We rolled at a steady 55 mph. The trip always felt a little less perilous once the sun broke and I could watch the sides of the Gorge panning by, at least for a while. We sped through The Dalles, with its orange-trussed bridge and hydroelectric dam. Muri and one Humvee peeled off, taking the second-to-last exit. I texted Muri a good morning because I knew he'd be just waking up. He replied with a good luck.

I resumed my work: sewer repairs, budget shortfalls, a new zoning ordinance to prohibit illegal squatting. Another email from Mayor Pete discussing an upcoming committee vote to move the county seat back to Pendleton, an hour further east down I-84. Out of the question. A teleconference with the Governor, tedious logistics details for air drops to the Yakama and Umatilla Indian Reservations, their militias still holding their own, even regaining territory previously stolen by the insurgents who wanted access to salmon fishing hotspots. Then came another spray-painted rock outcropping. The Government

Does Nothing For Us. Absolutely Nothing. Why could we not hire someone to cover those up?

“These cams have all been spray-painted,” said Captain Hernandez. The entirety of the interstate was under surveillance, except when the insurgents managed to jerry rig one of those drones you could buy at Walmart and rig it with a can of spray paint and a funny robotic finger to depress the nozzle. “They’ll be out till next week, at a minimum.”

Beyond The Dalles traffic virtually disappeared. We passed the half-sunken remains of the Union Pacific train that had derailed last year, waves lapping at the sides of empty boxcars. Trains could use only the Washington side of the river now. But for how much longer? The Trunk Rail Bridge slid into view next. Its middle section was missing, it had been blown apart and sunken into the river, only twisted fingers of steel reaching through the air like two rheumatic hands straining to grasp one another again. I was still half-listening to the Governor in the teleconference. “—strong intel that the infrastructure through the Columbia Gorge remains a top target. We must—” but I already knew what he was going to say. The carcasses of vehicles, both civilian and military, began to propagate across the shoulders of the highway like roadkill, just pushed off to the side, no time to get a wrecker out here to remove them. We groped our way around the blast crater leftover from a recent IED, then another crater, and another, then a few more hastily filled-in ones. “We must remain committed,” said the Governor. “We must keep moving, keep pressuring the enemy even if they’re people we grew up with, even if they’re family.”

The lead truck slowed and maneuvered around something like the tenth blast crater in a row. Corporal Barnes followed in its tracks. We regained a 45 mph speed and kept moving.

*

“Why’re we stopping?” The windshield filled with brake lights, more than you’d expect on a seemingly empty highway.

“Don’t know, ma’am.” We came to a dead stop. “I can’t see beyond those semis up ahead.” Captain Hernandez touched his hand to the mike on his throat. “Alright, TC’s dismount, drivers and gunners remain in your trucks. Let’s go see what’s going on.” The Captain got out. Three other soldiers linked up with him, everyone kitted in their helmets and vests. They locked and loaded before disappearing into the mingled glares of the sunrise and the red taillights up ahead. It was just Corporal Barnes and me. I slipped my own vest on though it didn’t fit well and the plates were heavy and the velcro scratched my neck. Other vehicles—civilian cars and trucks—began piling in behind us. Locking us in. Trapping us.

It all started coming back to me, flooding in like a waking dream. It had been over a year since the attack on my life but an attack of another kind made it real again, made it now. Those woods were these woods. Thickets of gangly black oaks. Cloaking the multiple ravines the enemy used to ingress and egress. The insurgents knew that if they simply kept shooting at one portion of bulletproof glass at some point it was sure to fail. They prevailed. One bullet made it through, exploding stuffing out of my seat, missing my head by mere inches. Then the enemy broke contact, the sound of their four-wheelers fleeing into the hills. The bark of our .50 cals as they returned fire. Captain Hernandez shouting into two hand mikes at once. Me, just lying on the floor, touching my trembling fingertips to the side of my head, my temple, my ear, my hair—just to make sure it was all still there.

I realized I was doing controlled breathing like when I was in labor with Zachary, twenty hours in that hospital bed, Matt counting my contractions for me. I counted the seconds, minutes, until Captain Hernandez returned.

“Shit.”

“Ma’am?” said Corporal Barnes.

“Nothing, nothing.” I had only forgotten to text Matt. Texting him now. I’m alright, we made it past HR. Smooth sailing so—

“Another crater,” said Captain Hernandez, huffing back into his seat, slightly wet from the rain. He slammed his door shut, locked it. “Big one. Both lanes. Same one as last week. Contractors still haven’t filled it in yet.”

“They’re tired of getting shot at.”

The Captain ejected a bullet, catching it out of the air. “I would be, too. In the meantime both lanes are squeezing onto the shoulder to get through.”

“State patrol up there?”

Captain Hernandez only chuckled and shook his head.

“Figures.”

“It unfortunately does, ma’am.”

We waited, everyone’s mufflers chugging in place. Captain Hernandez peered up the cliffs looming over our righthand windows. He radioed Hood River. “Hot Rocks, this is Charlie-Echo-Six, over.” Garble in his earbud. “Requesting a UAV flyover on the high ground to my south, break. Our position is whiskey-mike-niner-four…”

I tried not to count the seconds ticking by on phone. Other vehicles were inching forward. Why were we still stopped? Not moving at all? I could smell myself I was sweating so bad, forcing myself to breathe in my nose, out my mouth, closing my eyes, unsure how much longer I could continue skating along the edge like this until—“Wake the fuck up.”

The Captain slapped the back of Corporal Barnes’s helmet.

Barnes snapped his head up. “Huh?”

“We’re moving.”

“Sorry, sir.”

It took a minute but we finally made it past the blast crater, its hole so deep and wide we could have fit our entire SUV inside of it. Then we were moving again and all I wanted was to take the next exit, turn around and beeline it back home. I wanted to be there for my husband, for my son. So what if these people wanted to deny election results? So what if they wanted to set up their own shadow governments and threaten, coerce, kidnap or kill their own elected officials? So what if they wanted to build shooting ranges and IED-making academies out in the pathless hinterlands? What difference was fighting them year after year after year ever going to make? Even once we arrived in Umatilla, I wouldn’t be allowed out of the SUV. Our convoy would roll straight into the Municipal Compound, behind the blast barriers, and there I’d sit, stuck, working what I could until nightfall, unable to so much as steal a glance out of my office’s sandbagged windows. I couldn’t walk the streets, couldn’t talk to people, and the people knew it. All they ever saw of me was my tinted silhouette as the convoy drove by. God knows it wouldn’t have mattered. Even if I could meet them where they were, still there’d be that wall of suspicion, that resentment in their eyes. I knew it, heard it nonstop growing up, that bile, that bitterness, that anti-government propaganda tinged with racism, the whitewashing of history, the so-called patriotism of “real” Americans, and so long as the supply of guns remained unchallenged, so long as the schools suffered in these blighted depopulated areas where an eighth-grader in Portland on average possessed a higher math and reading competency than any high school graduate in Umatilla, so long as there remained an endless supply of disaffected white boys willing to shoot up a shopping center or plant a bomb in the road or runoff and join the rest of “the boys” to stick it to the government treading all over their rights, this war, this insurgency, was never going to

end. But it had to, it had to end, the hate at some point had to stop. Because I couldn’t stop. The convoy couldn’t stop. Even as the interstate raised and the Gorge ended and a clear blue sky beckoned and the land smoothed into familiar expanses of tumbleweed and rabbitbrush, dry empty capacious lands, the dual bridges out of Umatilla sliding into view, I let myself hope. I let myself drift, reminding myself of why I could never turn back. Because just above the bridges, beyond the McNary Lock and Dam, maybe another hour’s drive along the river, there was a spot where the sounds of traffic died away, where there was just the wind on the water, in the grass, and the feel of the rounded rocks under your galoshes as you stood ankle-deep in the blue, where my father had taken me when I was young and we had thrown our lines in and waited, waited for what felt like decades, till a fish nibbled and finally snagged upon the hook. I was going to take Zachary to that place, whether it be next year or two years or ten years from now, he needed to know that place, a country, a land where things weren’t violent or contested but resounding in its quietude, abiding in its own mysterious slumber, that waited for us if we’d only waken to hear its singing soul once again, a song of sleeping peace.

New Fiction from Susan Taylor Chehak: “With a Whimper”

This isn’t the first time that man has visited this cemetery, and he supposes it isn’t going to be the last. As a child he was one of the pack of kids from the neighboring sprawl of houses who came here, against all warnings, to scare themselves silly with games of Ghost or Hide-and-Seek or Sardine. They gathered near the hedges where the black angel

spreads her wings, looking down on anyone who dares look up. Her expression might be a face of horror or sorrow or rage, depending on the moon and how dark the night. Later, when he and his friends were older, they crept around in pairs and fell against each other, desperate to become one.

Now he stands alone here, a grimy shadow in his khaki pants and his brown shirt and his black shoes. His wife would have told him to change the shirt, at least. Put on something cheerful, such as the pale-pink one she bought him, but he didn't care for it and only wore it that one time, to please her.

The grave is new. Dirt. Waiting for rain. Waiting for sod to cover it over green. A motor grumbles in the distance. He looks up. It's the big, yellow backhoe trundling down the lane toward him. There was a time when a shovel was all you'd need. He lets fall the roses he's brought and turns away.

*

This is a young woman over here, but you might not know that just by looking at her. Just by looking at her you'd have to make a guess because of how she has her hair cropped so close to her skull. That's how the kids do now—just shave it off and forget about it. Also she's hidden her body inside baggy jeans and an old sweatshirt—pitch black except where it's faded and fraying at the cuffs—so you can't tell by that either. Her face is youthful, though, exposed and shining in the morning light. Pretty little thing. She's got her mask pulled down under her chin, so you can't see the dancing skeletons on it, a wry design created by her younger sister, who is dark and depressed and, for the last few months, eager for the world to just come to its end already, the way the prophets have been promising her all her life it will. "Soon," this sister whispers, gazing into her own eyes. She's had enough, she says

to anybody willing to listen. This girl here isn't like that, though. She's always been known by family and friends as the sunny one—no matter what else might be going on, she's always able to find something to make her feel fine. Right now that's a job to be done and a lollypop burrowed into one cheek while she does it. Banana Dumdum, her favorite flavor, though she didn't choose it, just left it to chance and got lucky, and so it goes.

She's moving along house by house—through a gate, up a walk, up the steps, and then back down to the street again—going door to door in this neighborhood that looks like it's deserted, but how or why is none of her business to wonder. She'll leave a census form and a Dumdum in a plastic bag inside the door or in the box or just there on the porch planks of every house she comes to on her assigned route. That's the job, plain and simple.

Who is this girl? She's not a kid and not a teenager either. You might guess her to be in her twenties. Early twenties, anyway. A college student, maybe? Had to drop out because of the plague, when classes shut down or went on-line and she had no computer of her own, or she had to drop out and move back home to live with her mother and that gloomy younger sister, who have the old house to themselves now since Dad died of alcoholism or jumped out a window or has been institutionalized somewhere. Whatever. It's enough to know he's not around anymore, so the sisters have gone from riches to rags. And the mom? She suffers from anxiety, depression, agoraphobia, OCD, she's a hoarder who hasn't left her house for years and now, with the plague going around, won't ever leave it again, not even the backyard, such as it is. So this girl…this young woman, that is…she's not a girl, she doesn't like being called a girl…this young woman is doing the best she can under the circumstances.

She throws her head back and breathes deep, so now you can see the blot of a bruise on her neck, just there, below her chin,

along the course of her jugular vein. A hickey is what it is. She was at a plague party last night is what, and the guy in whose arms she ended up was moaning as his mouth found her throat and branded it with his mark. She won't tell her mother this or her sister either. She thinks she doesn't care if she gets sick and dies, but she also doesn't believe she's going get sick, and she definitely doesn't believe she's going to die. Not anytime soon, anyway. She knows people who have been going around spreading the plague on purpose. Taking their chances with a single round, spin the cylinder, nuzzle the muzzle, pull the trigger, and…click?

The younger sister has a room in the basement of the mother's house, and that's where she makes the masks. If you put your ear to the grate, you can hear the clatter and whir of the old sewing machine at all hours of the night. But this girl took the attic because it's least cluttered with her mother's growing accumulation of all that she thinks she needs and must save. Because the mother can't get up there is the only reason why. The folding stairs are stuck and have been stuck for years, so this girl, ever resourceful as well as cheerful, comes and goes through the small dormer window on the side where the old oak has grown up taller than the house. She can shinny a rope to the tree's lower reaches, then climb on up the branches to the roof or vice versa on back down to the ground.

You might notice now that she's also wearing gloves on her hands, the floppy rubber kind made for cleaning toilets and scrubbing floors. She found them in the kitchen of the abandoned house where she woke up in the dark only a few hours ago. Where she woke up and rolled away from the guy whose mark she bears. Where she crept downstairs to scrounge in the cupboards with a hope of finding something to eat. Or drink. But there wasn't much there. Cans of soup and something floating in brine in the pantry. Sponges and disinfectants, bleach and scouring powder and the gloves under the sink. The

others were all fast asleep by that time, but this girl has long been in the habit of rising with the sun. Or maybe it was just she's the only one who has a job.

*

That man is at home now. He's right over there, in the house on the corner. The yellow one with the white fence and all the flowers. He's sitting at his desk, where he's been writing a letter to the editor of the local paper. He has something to say about the situation. His situation. The world situation.

"There is a virus," he writes, "and it's going to kill us all." But everybody knows that. This isn't news. Whether you want to believe it or not, which his son does not. The boy called last night. Not a boy, another man, but he will always be a boy to his father. The boy had been drinking. Or something. He wasn't in his right mind, whatever that means. He seems to have some ideas that he picked up somewhere. Crazy talk about a hoax, is that it? The Pandemic. The Plague. The Plan-demic. Here to control us. Here to keep us locked down and desperate. But he can't stick it out. He doesn't have enough food to last the months it's going to take before we're free again. "Do you, Dad? Do you?"

"Dear Editor," that man writes. "Can you tell me what's happening? Do you know what's real and what isn't? My son says this and my son says that, but it all sounds like something somebody made up to entertain us or to scare us or to cause us to…what? Do you know? Because I'm afraid I can't say I know anything for sure anymore."

But that's a lie. He does know one thing for sure. He has firsthand knowledge, that's what he has. And his wife is dead, that's what he knows. She was in a home, her brain already scrambled. He never wanted that for her, but it just got so bad that he had no choice. The children insisted. The boy and his sister. He couldn't care for her properly. That's

something else he knows.

He didn’t get to see her in the end but it doesn’t matter, she wouldn’t have recognized him anyway, and all she’d have to show him would be that quizzical look she’d get at the sight of his face, stabbing him with its emptiness. Her gnarled fingers at her lips, all twisted like twigs from some ancient tree, and her whisper nothing more than a whistle, “Who?”

He hadn’t bothered to answer the last time. Just raised a hand and waggled his own fingers, which made her smile, before he turned around again and walked away.

So you see, she was already gone before she got sick, before she died, so he’s not really in mourning for her now. More like he’s in mourning for himself. She was cremated and then buried over there in the cemetery, in one of the plots they bought for each other a long time ago, when they were young, knowing but not really believing that that would be where they ended up. In the long run. Or the short, depending. He assumed he’d be the one to go first. All of us did. But what do we know? Nothing.

So now he walks over there every morning, before it gets too hot and when no one else is up and about, while it’s still safe.

Yours truly? No.

Sincerely yours? No.

Always? No.

Ever? Almost.

As ever, then. Followed by the trembling scribble of his name.

He folds the letter once, twice, three times. His hands are clumsy. His fingertips are numb. He licks the envelope, seals it, then opens it again. Unfolds the paper, crumples it in his

fist, smooths it on the desktop, folds it once more. His head throbs and his pulse stutters in his ears. He doesn't want to lick the envelope, so he staples it shut, then hammers on the staples with his fist to flatten them, which causes the small frame at the edge of the desk to tip over and fall to the floor, leaving the glass shattered and her face in pieces behind it.

*

Over there, at the end of the block, this girl has paused. She might as well be the only person left alive on earth, one last girl standing there, sucking on a banana-flavored Dumdum with a satchel of official questionnaires slung over her shoulder, in these precious last moments we have left before the end.

Soon she'll turn the corner onto another street, and then she'll be out of sight, and after that there won't be anything left to disturb the frightful stillness that's settling in all around us now, acting for all the world like it might never go away.

While the flowers in the gardens nod their heavy heads, docile and dreamy, with nowhere to go and nothing to do but bloom and die and bloom again. Like that.

New Fiction from Henry Kronk: "We Found Out"

"What do you think?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said.

“Could be an ambush.”

“Could be.”

“But here? The corps is miles back.”

“Looks like it broke down.”

It was true. Steam trailed through the windows in the engine. Driggs could see the shimmer of heat from the stack all this way o without the binos. The tracks went through a wooded stretch, but the high desert loomed o in the distance and vegetation grew sparse. They could see intermittent open stretches along a length of the train. And in those stretches, no cigarettes burned, no bayonets glinted, no enemy moved. Not that Driggs could see.

“Let’s take a look.”

“Let’s report back to Captain first.”

Driggs looked from Cote’s left eye across her freckled nose to her right and back to her left. Cote gazed, unblinking, back. She broke the silence.

“You know about Captain’s and Donwalla’s beef. You were at muster this morning. You were standing right next to me when he leaned in with his pink cheeks and spat in my face. Shouldn’t be wearing my SSI for the 3rd Rangers? Are you shitting me? After what happened? Driggs, the man doesn’t trust us. He doesn’t like us. He has no faith in us. Until we do something about that, we’re on our own.”

Cote had been blessed with the gifts of persuasion. Driggs had been wary of this fact since soldier onlining in Tacoma. Despite the war, one night she had gotten her hands on a bottle of whiskey. When half of it was gone, she then had talked Driggs into climbing one of the base’s mobile towers. From the top, they could see Mt. Rainier in the moonlight and, to the north, the remnants of Seattle still smoldering.

“The Janks could be back any minute,” Cote broke in again. “If we take this back to Captain, he’ll chew us out for not taking a closer look. And then he’ll round up a half dozen more experienced rangers and investigate. And if—if—this freighter is still around when they come back in a couple hours, they’re going to keep all the scotch and cigars they find for themselves.”

Driggs twitched. Cote chewed a twig and stared o at the train. It didn’t resemble any commuters or freights he’d seen. It was black and dilapidated. It looked like the trains from the pictures he’d seen in his history textbook.

Finally, he spat. “Ok, we take a closer look. And then we report back.”

Driggs scrambled down the blu face after Cote. He jumped the last ten feet and skidded through the scree. The two rangers made their way forward, hugging the red pines and stopping every 100 yards to listen and scan. Only hawk calls broke the silence, along with their own footsteps, which were impossible to stifle on the tinder-dry pine needles.

***

Whenever the sirens used to blow and they sheltered in their basement, Driggs’ father would always tell him by the light of their LED lantern about how he took up smoking on the day of November 3rd, 2062.

“It was then that me and just about everyone else in Port Angeles knew for sure that the house was divided against itself,” he used to say. “You had President-Elect Morrison parading across screens and broadcasts, celebrating his 92% landslide victory over the so-called ‘Supreme Commander.’ We thought he was such a plushed-up load of wash—the ‘General’ or whatever else he was calling himself. He really showed us.

Suddenly, everyone realizes we're not hearing a chirp from regions all across the country. The Southwest, the Rockies, the Midwest, the Mid-Atlantic, Alaska, Florida, Maine—they all went dark. Nothing. 404 Error Page Not Found. Then we heard rumors about the transport and information sector sabotage, the round ups, the murders.

I walked to the corner store and asked for a pack and a lighter. Red Robert who owned the place knew all too well I was 14. He didn't say a thing to me. Didn't even look at me. He just kept staring at his screen.

I walked home, sat on the front porch, and I'll always remember this: The Church of Latter Day Saints across the street, they'd put up a new sign a few days before. It said, 'Free trip to Heaven! Details inside.' I hated it and I loved it. I wanted to believe it. I wanted somewhere to escape to. I wanted faith. But all I had was a pack of smokes. I flicked my butts at that sign all afternoon."

***

There in the high desert, twelve years after his father had passed, Driggs remembered the last cigarette he had smoked with painful clarity. When the word got out that tobacco rations had been cut altogether three weeks back, he started measuring his supplies. He took out his three remaining packs from the waterproof pocket in the top of his rucksack. He lined the blank government issued labels side by side. Two were full, and four remained in the third. He took out two darts, lit them at the same time, and resigned himself to two a day for the next three weeks. Maybe by that time, things would change.

Six days and twelve cigarettes in, the Third Rangers made it over the Cascades and down onto the plains. Screening the movement of the main corps, his unit skirted the edge of the forest. Then they were ordered to scout ahead. Intelligence

believed a Jank division sat camped some miles o and were backed up by guerrilla mountain people, no less.

At dusk, the corps was 10 miles back, and dark clouds began to pour over the foothills to the West like slow-flowing lava. Captain Donwalla ordered the rangers to camp. They posted sentries, ate a cold supper, and staked out their bivouacs for the night. Cote had wandered o to piss. When she came back, she told Driggs about a cave she'd found and how there was room for two. And then the rain started coming down by the gallon. Driggs gathered up his roll and followed her through the storm. It was some ways out and it took Cote ten minutes wandering around before she found it again. But a cave it was, and it was dry. The two laid out their rolls and soon were sound asleep.

They woke at first light, collected their things, and headed down the gentle slope. Mist hung just above the treetops. Their fellow rangers' shelters lay among the pines glistening from the rain.

"How about that," Cote said. "First ones up. Guess that proves Donwalla does sleep after all."

But as Driggs stepped beyond the next tree, his captain's eyes met him with a stare. He wheeled about in horror. Donwalla's high-and-tight head was pinned to the tree with a rebar stake. His body was nowhere to be seen.

Driggs ran over to the nearest bivvy and kicked it. No response. Same with the next. And the next. Looking closer, he saw knife cuts through the denier nylon.

"We need to get out of here," Driggs said to Cote, who was slumped down below Donwalla's head with her rifle raised.

"Cote!"

Cote held up her hand, and Driggs clammed up. He caught some

movement at his 2:00. And then Cote's rifle went o and a body fell in the distance.

"Go," she whispered.

Shots responded. The instinct for survival lifted Driggs' feet with the momentum of generations, tipping him onward.

After they reported back to the Colonel, Driggs smoked every cigarette he had left. Their unit, the Third Rangers, which now numbered two, was dissolved and absorbed by the Fourth.

***

They could see the train through the trees now and they began to smell the faint smell of death.

"Are those dogs barking?"

Driggs stopped walking and listened.

"Not dogs … vultures."

They followed the sound and sure enough came upon the bodies of three horses beside the first car. After pausing for a few, the rangers approached.

They hadn't been dead long. Their coats still gleamed and the few carrion birds that had arrived were only just beginning to battle over the choice spots. Driggs could see no apparent cause of death.

"If these horses just died, where's the smell coming from?"

Cote shook her head. A trail of blood ran o toward the train. They followed it across the coupling and around the other side.

A Jank lay slumped against a wheel. He wore a moustache not unlike the one Driggs' father used to grow. His bewildered eyes gazed up into the muzzles of Driggs' and Cote's rifles.

With his left hand, he clutched his right arm. It had been severed o cleanly—surgically—below the elbow. His sand-colored uniform was stained crimson down one side.

“What happened?” Cote whispered.

The dying man raised his eyes.

“Do you have a cigarette?”

“No.” They said in unison.

His mouth went slack. And he lowered his gaze to the horizon.

“What happened?” Driggs said and nudged the dying man’s stump with his muzzle.

He gasped and, in racking breaths: “We—we—we—we …”

“We what?”

“We found … out.”

He used his last breath to say his last word. His left arm dropped and his head swung forward.

“Found out what?”

“Fuck knows. Check him and them.” Cote gestured to a distance away from the train where a half dozen dead Janks lay lined up in a neat row. “I’m going inside.”

Like the horses, none of these Janks bore any visible wounds. Driggs searched their khaki pockets. He found a locket holding the picture of a woman that could be a mother or a wife to the late wearer, a stained embroidered handkerchief, some worn polaroid porn, two journals, a deck of cards, fishing line and three lures, along with the six Jank regulation cantines, carbines, clasp knives, fire pods, watches, bivouacs, and extra rounds. The unit leader, one Captain Harrison, also carried a pair of binos, a compass, a spot device, and one melted

‘government’ issued Jank chocolate bar. Driggs tore open the package and shoved the melted bar in his mouth. He tightly closed his front teeth and slowly pulled the plastic out, trapping the chocolate within.

***

When Driggs was 17, Jank guerrillas blew up the Port Angeles supply stockpile. He and most of the others started walking south towards Olympia. The rumors were that the Mounties at the Canadian border had orders to shoot migrants on sight. Still, some scraped supplies together and set off in boats hoping to land somewhere on Vancouver Island or to venture further north and seek shelter with the Haida.

With his father dead and his mother off running a field hospital somewhere around Fort Vancouver, he loaded up a backpack and headed south alone. He walked from sunrise to sundown and on a little further, lighting the way with his headlamp. The road was full of others like himself.

When the sun rose the next morning, he carried on. Toward noon around Briedablick, Driggs found himself in open farm land, with the Olympic range framing the horizon. The road ran beside a river bordered by blackberry bushes and poplars. Two quads motored up towards him, traveling in the opposite direction. It was two shirtless boys with shapeless torsos, younger than Driggs. As they neared, they slowed, and then stopped ten feet away. One showed him his shotgun.

“You can stop right there.”

Driggs stopped.

“Put your pack on the ground and empty your pockets.”

“I don’t have any money or much of value. I’m heading to—“

“PUT your pack on the ground. And empty your pockets.”

One of the boys' quads had a trailer fixed to it. Driggs saw other packs, suitcases, and miscellaneous gear in the back.

Then all three heard a ping followed by the sprinkling of glass. The left rearview mirror of the quad ridden by the boy with the shotgun had been shot off. A sandy-haired young woman wearing tan waders with a fishing net on her belt walked slowly up from the river bank with a rifle under her cheek.

"The next one is going through your ear if you don't throw that shotgun down."

The unarmed boy towing the load looked to his friend.

"Do it, Jackson."

Jackson tossed his shotgun on to the pavement.

"Good job. Why don't you go pick that up?" Driggs knew she was talking to him. He walked forward and grabbed the gun. The woman now hurried forward to face the boys.

"If it were olden days, I'd say you boys are going to hell, robbing refugees in times like this. But we're past that now. I guess I'll say you better think about how you treat your fellow humans, otherwise you're bound to wind up dead. Get out of here."

The boys fired up their quads without a word and rode them past. At last, the woman lowered her rifle.

"My name's Cote."

"Driggs."

***

"Driggs!"

He turned to see Cote's head poking out the doorway of the engine.

“Come on and check this out.”

He sneezed as he entered the cloud of dust in the engine car. Cote had her undershirt up over her nose. It was hot; fuel still burned in the engine. A fine layer of dust covered the controls, the sills, every surface. It blew like smoke out into the car behind. The only marks in the dust were their own.

“Cote—what the…?”

“What?”

“What’s with the dust?”

“It was windy last night.”

“The windows are closed.”

“The door’s open.”

“This isn’t sand.”

“Whatever. Look at this.” Cote held a piece of a single piece of paper with a dull red seal at the bottom corner. “Can you read it?”

Driggs brought it into the light, but it was so heavily mildewed that the words had been all but completely obscured. He saw marks that looked like ‘□□□□.’

“Not a chance.”

They jumped out and headed to the next car. Driggs struggled to pull the iron latch down, and it creaked along the way. They needed to push together just to crack the door ajar. But the second they had it open, they were hit with a wave of aroma and moisture. Cote and Driggs climbed in to another world.

All was dark and dank; heavy and hard to breathe. Driggs had

to sit down. An aisle ran down the center of the car and, on either side, there were dense rows of lush plants. Their green stretched out, down, and up toward the glass-paned ceiling.

Orange-purple flowers sprang from the gaps in the husky trunks and yellow fruit hung in bunches.

“What on earth …”

Driggs wandered closer. He’d never seen flowers like these. And now that he was close, he could smell the ripeness of the fruit. He picked o a bunch and brought them to his mouth, bit, chewed, and swallowed.

“Cote!”

“What the hell, Driggs?”

“Try this fruit!”

Cote grabbed her own bunch. A second passed.

“Jesus on a jet plane! That’s good!”

“Hehehe, pretty tasty, aren’t they?”

The laugh sounded a guttural baritone and echoed throughout the car. Driggs and Cote froze. In the corner, a dark figure rose from a sitting position in the shadows.

“FREEZE JANK.” Juice ran in a stream from Cote’s chin down on to the stock of her raised rifle.

The shadow raised its hands and spoke. “*Hinene*. There is no need, for I am unarmed.”

“Where is this train headed?”

The figure walked forward. He was tall and wore a black coat with tails. A black, brimmed hat hid his downturned face from view.

“The o□cial documents say Seattle, but its true destination is Vancouver, and on from there.”

“Seattle? But our forces are all the way south to Bend.”

“The present conflict between your state and your opponent’s state does not concern me.”

“Well then how’d you get all this fruit past the Jank inspectors?”

“They’re called chupas, and I have a few cards up my sleeve.”

“Are those cards Verified Greenbacks?”

“Hehehe oh no.”

“Why’d you break down?”

“I didn’t. I received word your forces have pulled up the tracks a few miles north. I just stopped.” He drew these final words out.

“Who are those Janks outside?”

“Part of a platoon from the Army of the Supreme Comander.”

“Why are they dead?”

“Why? Were you family?”

“No, but—“

“Why’s the engine so dusty?” Driggs’ voice cracked.

The figure paused, slowly turning his head. “I like it that way.”

“So, what is this? What—“ Cote paused. Her rifle dipped. “—what are you bringing north? Why are there a half a dozen dead bodies outside? It’s time to start making some sense here pal.”

“Why don’t you see for yourself?”

Driggs’ mouth opened wider. Cote stomped her foot.

“Whatever man. First, I want you to step forward. Driggs, go pat him down.”

When Driggs slapped the figure’s breast pocket, a hollow thud sounded. Out of it emerged an unopened pack of Marlboro Reds.

“Want a smoke?”

The figure raised his head to reveal a pale grin.

***

Outside, his skin looked even paler. Nicotine washed over Driggs in gentle waves. Despite the heat and the black dress, the man did not sweat.

“What’s your name?”

Cote had already finished her cigarette, after dragging furiously with it clenched between her teeth. She still held her rifle raised with both hands. The man o□ered her one more.

“You can call me Jo.”

“Where are you from?”

“Down south.”

Driggs finished his cigarette and took one more. They all smoked in silence down to the filter.

“Ok, let’s see the rest of the train.”

“Yes Private Cote. I have another car of the chupas here.” He gestured inside the following dank container. “Their root can be used to mix a psychedelic tea. Many find it heals a□ictions of the nerves and the mind. It can also serve as an undetectable poison in highly concentrated doses.”

Jo cracked the latch on the car and thrust it e□ortlessly open. Cote and Driggs followed him inside to the close air.

“Chupas have an amazing ability to regenerate if injured.”

He reached out and snapped o□ a green outgrowth.

“And their shoots make for an excellent salad addition.”

He popped it in his mouth.

“Look.”

Driggs and Cote bent close. In the place where the shoot had grown, already another young outgrowth had emerged to replace it.

“I love these organisms for their structure. Human society for centuries now has prized and supported the lone individual, The Napoleons, the Michael Jordans, The Supreme Comandante who overthrew the hold of the technologists that bound him.”

“That’s not us, pal.”

“But he’s still in charge, isn’t he?”

“Down there he is.”

“It makes no di□erence. The purpose of life is to live, to love, and to spread life and love. And with luck, new creations will do the same. Over the years, organisms typically do one thing well. They either love well and spread love, or they live well and spread life. Too often, they destroy life to spread love or destroy love to spread life. They see things as a competition. But these chupas strike a balance. Like the poplar, or the hive, or the rhizome, they have no conception of the individual. They may appear to be single organisms, even being potted here individually for more convenient transportation. But in the wild, they exist as a network. Each grove represents a hub of chupa life. If one

falls ill or suffers damage, others will divert resources to help it rebuild. In potting them like this, I have done them a great injury. I hope they will forgive me."

"So this is what all those Janks got jacked up for?"

"I doubt those men had seen a chupa in their lives."

"Look, Jo," Cote scratched her narrow hip. "These plants are great and all, but we need to get this tour moving so we can make our report to our superior. And I'm also gonna need another of those Reds."

"As you wish, Private Cote."

The next car was refreshingly cool, refrigerated well below the heat outside. The walls were lined with illuminated glass cases filled with glass cylinders. The cylinders were filled with liquid, and through the liquid floated particulate matter.

"What's in those?"

"Other creatures. Well, their DNA at least."

Driggs coughed. He remembered his mother's lab where she collected dead specimens in jars. Always in the evening, after her office hours had ended, his father sent him down there to call her for dinner. She left her work with gravity. Driggs' older brother and sister had died of the measles. His own cheeks and forehead still bore the scars from when he had it. His mother would talk about how humans once knew how to cure and vaccinate against it. But since the Breach, doctors in the Resistance had lost much knowledge.

"What creatures?" Cote still held her rifle pointed between Jo's shoulder blades, though she had lowered it to her hip.

"Some of my favorites. The cuttlefish, the bonobo, the venus fly trap. The three-toed sloth—they're cute. I very nearly made room for the Welsh Corgi too …"

“Why aren’t the chupas in one of those?”

“Well, they can’t bear fruit if they’re just DNA in a test tube, can they?”

In other cars, Jo showed Driggs and Cote an assortment of bins filled with precious gems and earth metals, jagged materials that glinted with sunlight. Another held rows of filing cabinets. In another, they found dusty shelves full of old holy books, all written in honor and glory to the creator.

They walked back outside just before the caboose. Jo turned and said, “I want to tell you about a people I once knew.

When once, they were lonesome, I took them in. They had nowhere to go, no values to live by. I gave them purpose. When once, the yoke wore and wore till it fit too snug, I handed them the axe. I gave them the grinder, the haft, and the bronze point to crown it.

I bade them to rise up against their enslavers in Mizraim, and brought them to the land which I promised unto their fathers; and I said, ‘I will never break my covenant.’ I parted the waters.

When once, and many times more, fires of rival tribes burned too close, I raised the spirit in them and sent rider after rider galloping down the mountainside. I cared for them like children, and in return, they called me father.

They were very much like you—taking up arms, offering their lives to further their cause, even under a commander who thinks you should have perished alongside your comrades and his rival whom he hated. I know they would recognize you both as a brother and a sister in arms in the fight to preserve life and love.”

Driggs felt his vision go warm and hazy. A low buzzing became audible. He realized that he was slowly nodding. Cote fixed

him with a quizzical expression, and he quickly regained his focus. Jo was still talking.

“With them and with those that came before, I built a beautiful society of plants, mammals, fungi, cetaceans, bacteria, Noah, Abraham, Lot, and countless other houses, domains, and families.

But these great men and women have passed. Like rain upon the mountain, they have all passed. As the years went on, fewer and fewer loved me. Some claimed they had killed me. And now, I fear the conflict between your warring factions will destroy all I—all we—have built. I ask that you grant me safe passage. I carry with me only life and love. All I ask is you help me spread it. Go unto your commanders and rally your brothers and sisters with my message. Re-lay the tracks south of Bend and allow me safe passage north.”

The sound of Jo’s voice died away slowly in the dry desert air. Driggs looked from Jo to Cote. He was about to speak. And then—

“What’s in that car?” Cote asked, sucking on another red, pointing with her thumb over her shoulder to the caboose of the train.

“That—that car holds more chupas.”

“Uh-huh.”

The buzzing subsided. Driggs stood up straight and raised his voice. “Why aren’t those chupas with the others at the front of the train?”

“I wasn’t sure if I’d have room.”

Cote looked from her fellow ranger to Jo.

“Go open it, Driggs.”

“It might interest you to know a unit of the Commander’s cavalry will arrive within minutes. I can only delay them for so long. I beg you, make your report.”

“I don’t hear anything except those vultures.”

Cote pointed her rifle at Jo again.

“Open it, Driggs.”

Driggs started walking toward the caboose. Jo looked to Driggs and back to Cote, who kept her rifle raised.

Impossibly fast, Jo crouched to the ground and threw sand in Cote’s face.

“Driggs!”

He wheeled around to see Jo flying across the sand. His knees collided with Driggs chest and knocked him to the ground.

“I thought I could convince you—I thought I could inspire you,” Jo spat, his face growing taunt and drawn beneath his black brim. “But it appears you’re like the others. And like the Amakelites, you shan’t be spared. It is written.”

At that moment a bullet passed through Jo’s head from jaw hinge to jaw hinge. He was knocked sideways o Driggs. Cote sprung forward, running toward the caboose door. Jo rose unscathed.

“NO,” he shouted. Driggs felt his bones vibrate. Cote made it to the door and popped the hinge down with the butt of her rifle. A sound like a shell blast emitted from the car. The door exploded open and Cote and Driggs were lifted from the ground and thrown through the air. Cote struck a tree and landed unconscious among the dry needles.

Driggs landed hard a few dozen feet away and scrambled over to his fellow ranger. But before he could rouse her, he raised

his head to watch the train. A kind of smoke or cloud was issuing from the caboose. Behind it, he saw what looked like masses of limbs and pulsing organs. They were hit with a wave of stench. It smelled like thousands of nameless carcasses left to rot under the sun. Soundless bolts of lightning flashed, followed by a howling gale. Jo stood beside the train, but had inexplicably grown in size. He grew larger still, towering over the train, seeking to contain the cloud with his hat. His enormous bare head revealed tattoos of ancient characters and deep, purple scars.

Fire, ice, toil, and sickness flew from the open caboose, igniting the forest floor beside the tracks. The wind from the train spurred the fire on, toward where Driggs and Cote lay. Driggs hoisted Cote over his shoulder and ran north along the track. Past the train, he crossed the ties and made his way into the forest. He knelt and laid Cote on the ground. After gently lowering her head, his hand came away bloody, and he uncorked his canteen to splash water on his friend's face.

Through the storm issuing from the train, he shouted her name. Her eyes flickered.

"Cote, we have to go!"

Her eyes snapped open, her jaw clenched, and her hand thrust up to catch Driggs' shoulder.

"Help me up."

The rangers ran back toward the blu and scrambled up it. At the top, they collapsed with heaving chests and looked back. The fire had spread impossibly fast. It had crossed the tracks, and approached in their direction.

"Look."

A section of the horizon shimmered.

"What is that?"

“Hell is murky.”

Driggs raised his binos. Three Jank columns marched forward. Refocusing, he saw cavalry units peppering the sparse forest. Driggs looked back to the train. The now-massive Jo still battled amongst the storm that issued from the caboose. A noise sounded at their nine and the two looked up to see incoming Resistance birds.

“Wonder what good they’ll do.”

“Maybe a little more damage than my rifle.”

The two watched as the aircraft rained down missiles onto the Jank cavalry and into the cloud in which Jo was now obscured. Upon contact, the train erupted and flung ash and smoke miles overhead. Below, the fire drew nearer and nearer.

“Cote.”

She looked at her ranger in arms. Driggs held out the half empty pack of Reds, with one protruding in her direction.

“They were knocked loose when that thing had me down.”

“Driggs,” Cote said, lighting up, “you’re one hell of a ranger.”

New Fiction from Gregg Williard: “Zone Rouge”

I got off the bus and a woman kept pace. Skinny black jeans with a fat silver belt of keys.

“I know how you feel.”

“I feel fine.” I was lost. I asked her for directions.

She took out a red inhaler, took a puff and told me where to go, in gulps.

It was not the way I would have taken. After a few blocks it only got less familiar and I went another wrong way that felt right.

Within seconds my old neighborhood was all harrowed mud. Creosote-black timber and dark machinery. I thought of my childhood puzzlement with the phrase “raze to the ground.” Raise to the ground?

I lurched across the field. The machines intrigued. Like booby-traps. Like some people.

A hand-painted sign said ZONE ROUGE. I didn’t speak French, but everybody knew rouge was red. Not everybody knew the Red Zone. I knew it. About another one, Verdun, in the northeast of France, where a year-long WWI battle killed more than 900,000 German and French soldiers. So densely shelled with unexploded artillery and gas shells that it would be uninhabitable for four hundred years. I knew because of my father. He read to me about military history, we watched war movies, read to me war comics and he told me how he played war with his friends. Seeing war technology in ordinary things was in his bones: Krupp toasters, tank treads in earth movers, gun designs echoed in power drills and blowtorches, airplane plastics in radios, jet fins in chassis, airs scoops in car grills. Innocent seeming, now that real machine guns festooned many a man cave. Anyway, there’s always been a Nazi pedigree in everyone’s medicine cabinet, he said. In WWII American bombers were briefed on which German factories to bypass (the American-owned ones). Was there any point in fighting, (or not fighting) now that the peace prevailed? They said it prevailed.

Peace time. And everything was mined. For information. For

market share. For death.

Ahead was a forested area I'd never seen before. The woman from the bus emerged from the dark. I walked on past her into the forest. It was silent and cool. Moss covered everything underfoot. She came up behind me and touched my shoulder. "Every step you take now."

I stopped in mid-stride. Returned my foot to the spongy ground. Turned. "I need to make some money. I'm going to lose my apartment. I can't lose my apartment."

She said, "I know how you feel."

"That's what you said before. It's not a feeling. I'm broke and not making enough to survive. I've got to make some money. If you can't help me then move out of the way."

"Don't take another step. But maybe you won't listen. Maybe I've got the wrong guy."

I was pissed but did as she said. Nothing. "You don't have anybody. Yet. What's the proposition?"

"It's dangerous, but a lot of money. Step where I step."

I followed her back across the mud and sat in the cab of a dozer.

I tugged at dead levers. Tapped gauges. "No key. Not going anywhere."

She pulled out the wad of keys and slid each around the ring, matching them to every machine in the field, keeping rhythm to a litany of functions. Her voice worked a spell, a comb tugged through thick, tangled dreams: "Earth mover, shaker, crusher, compactor, driller, blaster, incinerator, disintegrator, fracker, fracktaler, shifter, sifter, buster, eviscerater, pulverizer, driver, down-loader, switcher, coder, de-coder, up-loader, assembler, morpher, server, pubsmasher, browser,

processor, ransomer, hackers, firewaller, coboler, encryptor, decryptor, infector, defector.”


Original artwork by Gregg Williard.

I said, “Show me a war where we haven’t armed both sides.”

“You want money. Someone has to clear the Red Zone. Children wander in there. You’ll find pieces of them. But most are killed by the gas shells. Slow. Like emphysema. Or poisoned from lead, arsenic, mercury, zinc. Makes the dumb kids.”

“Dead or dumb, huh.” I looked over the punished instrument board. Taped to cracked gauge was a photo of a little girl. I looked away. “Must be prime real estate here. Chernobyl pristine. What will you call it, Rouge Manor?”

She held up the last key in front of my eye. “This is a chance to make a difference. You want to do something good, don’t you?’

I didn’t answer and she squirted her inhaler again.

“What’s the shit in your inhaler? Albuterol? See that timber out there covered in creosote? It’s a medicinal plant that you might try. A bush of it out in the Mojave Desert is one of the oldest living things on earth. ‘King Clone.’ Surprised they haven’t plowed it over for a housing development.”

“Aren’t you the king of mansplainers.”

“I know about patterns. About codes. I can find mines. I don’t even need your damn keys.” I held up my Lishi Pick.

“Use that on my cab and you’re toast.”

“I’m already toast.”

“Then I don’t need you.” She reached over and opened the cab

door. I got out.

She closed the door and started up the machine. It spun in the mud and rumbled into the woods. I waited until it was gone, then followed my footprints in the mud to the street. Twenty steps, there was an explosion. I turned around and traced my footprints back to the woods. Then ran toward the smoke. Maybe I'd end up dead, but I was done with dumb.

New Fiction from Matt Gallagher: Excerpt, 'Empire City'

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Mia Tucker woke before the alarm. She usually did on weekdays. She was a person of routine and that's what routine did. Sleep whispered like a lullaby through the black morning but she pushed it away, sitting up in bed to put her mind in order. If she'd been dreaming, she'd already forgotten what about.

Monday, she thought. Cardio.

A storm had rolled through the city late in the night, leaving the brittle musk of rain. A coldness nipped at the top of Mia's shoulder. How do they keep getting in here? she wondered, rubbing at the mosquito bite. I shut the screen last night.

Jesse hadn't come home. He'd sent a few texts, first saying he wasn't sure when he'd be leaving work, then saying he wouldn't be. All-nighters during Bureau emergencies weren't unprecedented. Mia knew the deal. All part of marrying a

special agent. Even if waking up by herself in darkness brought on a loneliness she didn't trust.

Mia ate a yogurt, then changed into light workout gear and fitted her running leg and sneakers. Downstairs, the summer air smelled of metal and moss. Dim streetlights lined the corners like sentries and the sidewalks had almost dried. A garbage truck on an adjacent block groaned through the still while monitor drones pulsed red in the sky. She stretched her left leg and then her core in front of her building, looking up to watch the flag whip around atop the Global Trade. Sixty stars and thirteen stripes, pale against the dark. It didn't strike her as cluttered, anymore, all those rings and stars in the blue canton.

Mia finished stretching and tapped at her right knee. Her running prosthetic was hard and coiled, like a spring. She appreciated the city most during these early morning runs, because it was empty enough to seem welcoming, even hopeful. It reminded her of the city from her childhood. It reminded her of the America she'd grown up in.

Daybreak always ended the spell.

Cut the crap, Mia thought. These ten miles aren't going to run themselves. Then she took a deep breath, set the digital green of her wristwatch to 00:00, hit start, and began, the joints of her leg cracking with the motion while the socket of her prosthetic did the same. She headed west, toward the harbor.

Mia had run most of her life, discovering as a girl that she was good at it and being good meant respect, and trophies, and approval. It made an object of her body, but it was a functional object, something that mattered to her even before she'd figured out why. She'd pushed herself to be very good at points in her life, competing in college for two seasons before it interfered with ROTC, and later running the city marathon her first year with the prosthetic to prove that she

could. But she'd never crossed into greatness, and for that she'd come to be thankful. Mia lacked the masochism of true runners, the renegade fanatical gene to ignore and ignore all the warning blinkers thousands of years of evolution had instilled in the human brain. Bloody calluses and angry muscles were one thing. Tendons ripping from bone were another.

The baby, or not-baby, entered Mia's mind. She focused on her breathing. Then came General Collins's job offer. She focused on her breathing.

The first scratches of sun were tracing the water. Lady Liberty rose in the distance, droopy torch in her right hand. The whole statue needed repair, though how, and when, had become a political hot potato. Decades' worth of money allotted for national monuments had gone to the Council of Victors, toward honoring the triumph of Vietnam. No one wanted to be the congressperson who redirected funds from that.

A lot of citizens had come to loathe the statue, considering it an eyesore. Mia's father thought it a sentimental leftover. She sort of liked it, the way a person enjoys a musty childhood blanket found in storage. She remembered climbing to the torch on a field trip as a girl, through a staircase of graffiti and rickety metal, seeing the city from an entirely new angle. A snapshot of old American might, sealed in memory.

They'd closed the torch after the Palm Sunday attacks, then the entire island. Students like her adolescent cousins wouldn't ever see Empire City as she had. No one could now. The sad, corroding statue was their normal. It was all they knew. In the meantime, Lady Liberty sank slowly into the island it rested on. Turned out it'd been set on sodden ground.

Mia adjusted her sports bra and glanced at her watch. A mile in, which meant her warm-up was over. She lengthened out her strides.

She turned north along a waterfront path, moving into the bike lane to dodge fallen tree branches and loose rocks. Other than the occasional taxi striking through the predawn and a man in rags watching the city from a bench, she was alone. The wharf across the river jutted out like a broken jawbone, suggesting a past when its docks did more than shuttle around office workers and tourists.

The city changed like a photo album, slowly and slowly and then all in a rush. Repair shops became delis. Parking garages became art studios. In the water a flotilla of coast guard barges that'd been restored as restaurants and pubs drifted to and fro. Steel and glass high-rises gave way to the architecture of the last century, rowhouses and squatty brick apartments. The streets narrowed, a few dotted by tidy cobblestone. The waterfront path leveled off, though Mia kept her strides long. She knew an incline awaited. She wanted to meet it in force.

Sunrise arrived somewhere between miles three and four, stained-glass clouds chipping the sky. Mia passed a vomiting young man in a sport jacket too large for him. Probably an intern for one of the banks, she thought, before turning around to make sure it wasn't one of hers.

"Call in sick!" she shouted. He raised his fist and managed a weak "Defy!" before purging again. The motto of the old radicals' caucus in Congress. Funny, Mia thought.

Another mile on, Mia ran into a short concrete tunnel. The tunnel lay underneath an abandoned railway line. Sunlight filled it with a fierce yellow shine. Around ten feet long, the sides and top of it had been covered in graffiti, dozens and dozens of circles of different colors and sizes. Just

about every inch of available concrete had been tagged, leaving a sort of rainbow mosaic. Each of the circles contained three arrows pointing down and to the left. The job was fresh—Mia could tell by the tint to the spray paint. She came to a stop in the center of the tunnel, her breaths sharp but controlled. She rubbed a hand against a small purple circle. It smeared across her palm.

I know what this is, Mia thought, looking at her palm, then at the purple circle, sifting through her mind to place where. It took a few seconds, but she remembered a course in modern European history, and this shape and question from the final exam. The antifascist sign, she thought. From Nazi Germany.

A gust swept through the tunnel, and Mia smelled storm from the night before. She fought off the urge to shiver. It was going to be a cold summer day.

*

Most mornings Mia turned around and headed home on the same pathway, but the tunnel had spooked her. She pushed east and then south instead, running the sidewalks. The light and the city rose slow, together. A medley of urban noise was beginning to tune and it sounded mostly like construction din. There was order within the mayhem; one just needed to know the refrains. Mia did. She made it back to her apartment building on time, stopping only to remove her running leg before showering and dressing for work. She was back out her front door sixteen minutes later.

The air had turned and smelled of humid dew. Mia decided to walk through Vietnam Victory Square. Under the gaze of the Four Legionnaires sculpture, a couple of kids had waded into the fountain, laughing while splashing water at each other. Across from them, a tour group stood in front of the grand white marble wall with the simple words: “Praise to the Victors/In Honor of the Brave Men who went forth to

Vietnam/1955–1981.” The guide was explaining why the inscription stopped there, despite the insurgency continuing after in parts of the north. He was stumbling through the history and Mia wanted to intervene. Because wars have to end, she thought. Just tell them that.

Coffee-charged angst and white-collar id crackled along the streets, bankers and lawyers and digital communications associates hustling to be at their desks before the workday siren sounded. As she turned onto Wall Street, Mia passed the brownstone Trinity Church she attended every month or so. She’d considered herself an atheist since her tour to Albania, but she still appreciated the ceremony of church and the sense of renewal it allowed for. Her family had fled to America in 1620 for that ceremony and sense of renewal. She wouldn’t give up that heritage for something as banal as not believing.

Then there was Jesse. “Jesus’s heroin needle,” he liked calling Trinity’s Gothic steeple. The church’s adjacent cemetery, where a slew of American founding fathers and Union generals from the Civil War rested? “A yard of goy bones.”

And he’s all mine, Mia thought. Trinity was an option for their wedding, though her family wanted it held in Connecticut. One more decision that she needed to make, and soon.

Mia’s bank was located in the Westmoreland Plaza, a mass of skyscrapers bundled together at the end of the island. As she neared it, a vast, bright fire engine came into view, its lights twirling and flashing like a hallucination. A row of police barricades separated the vehicle from the street, uniformed officers turning away confused citizens trying to get to work. Mia joined the crowd.

“No one’s allowed in the plaza today,” a cop was saying, not for the first time. “And yes, that includes you.” His eyes lingered on Mia’s blouse, and she stared at him flatly until

he looked away. Her grandmother had taught her how to do that on her fourteenth birthday. It worked in Empire City boardrooms just as well as it had in aircraft hangars along the far edges of the world.

“Ms. Tucker.” A man shaped like a square wearing a rumpled dress shirt and overlong tie called to her from a corner of the barricades, close to a large bronze globe. It was the security director of her bank. He looked wired to Mia, even eager. “Ms. Tucker,” he repeated. “The office is closed today. Your father sent out a message to everyone—work from home, as you can.”

“Hadn’t checked my email yet.” This didn’t make any sense. The office, as far as Mia knew, had never closed. Finance didn’t “work from home.” That was for other people, other jobs. “What’s going on?”

“I shouldn’t say,” he said, in a tone that suggested he very much wanted to.

“Mum’s the word,” Mia promised. “I’ll be finding out, anyhow.”

“A threat,” the security director said, his voice low and hushed. “Whole plaza. Homeland marshals got it last night.”

“Oh.” There’d been a few lockdowns in Empire City over the years, for both real and false alarms, but Mia couldn’t recall any of them shutting down a main cog of the Finance District. “Must be some kind of threat.”

The security director looked out the corner of his eye to make sure no one else was listening, then pulled out his cell phone and read.

WITH FIRMNESS IN THE RIGHT AS GOD GIVES US TO SEE THE RIGHT, LET US STRIVE ON TO FINISH THE WORK WE ARE IN, TO BIND UP THE NATION’S WOUNDS, TO CARE FOR HIM WHO SHALL HAVE BORNE THE BATTLE.

MAYDAY, MAYDAY. FROM THE ASHES, HOLY REDEMPTION.

“Mean anything to you?”

Mia shook her head.

“The first part’s from a speech Abraham Lincoln gave. Used to be the motto of the old Veterans Administration. The second part . . . I don’t know. The distress signal or something.”

Mia contemplated that. “There’s a Council of Victors office down here. Some crazy’s angry about the colonies again?” She tried not to laugh but couldn’t help it. “It all needs to be taken seriously, of course. But shut down the plaza?”

The security director shrugged. “Federals think it means something. The Mayday thing, especially.”

“I see,” Mia said, wondering if this was the Bureau’s emergency, and if so, why Jesse hadn’t said anything to her. He worked intel analysis, not counterterrorism. Though he hadn’t always been behind a desk.

Gallagher, Matt. Empire City *(Atria Books, 2020).*

New Fiction Review: Matthew Komatsu On Matt Gallagher’s ‘Empire City’

As *Avengers* was wrapping up last year, I mentioned how excited I was to see the finale to a friend, who responded with a barely suppressed sneer. Granted, it’s the same friend whose Blu-Ray copy of Richard Linklater’s *Boyhood* I’ve had for

nearly six years, never watched, and now that I think about it, *might* have been in the console of the car my wife and I just sold.

“Superheroes? Really?”

The question dogged me for the past year. 2019 marked the end of the seventeen-year *Avengers* franchise, the release of *The Joker* to immediate Academy Award buzz, HBO’s critically acclaimed re-imagination of Alan Moore’s graphic novel *The Watchmen,* Netflix’s superb adaptation of *The Umbrella Academy*, and Amazon’s remarkable superheroes-gone-bad-and-wild series *The Boys*. And it is into this tableau of a fanboy and fangirl paradise in which all our favorite comics and graphic novels are finally seeing the cinematic treatments that seemed impossible at the turn of the century, Matt Gallagher’s second novel, *Empire City,* has sauntered.

Empire City is an alternate history of present times, one that through rich world-building and attention to all the right details, asks us to imagine a world in which the US won (sort of – an insurgency is still ongoing) the Vietnam War through the heroic efforts of something familiar to anyone paying attention to our very real, very present Forever War: a military force of volunteers who, in a unique twist, are comprised of internationals serving in the hopes of US citizenship. The victory in Vietnam has been elevated and lionized so much that a “Council of Victors” would appear to control the national military narrative in its entirety. In this world, the present is, too, an unending global war against terrorism. With a wrinkle however. Our protagonists – three veterans and one civilian – have superhuman abilities.

The abilities appeared after they survived a friendly fire “Cythrax” bombing during a direct action mission gone bad. The protagonists who are veterans call themselves “the Volunteers”

in a nod to our world's all-volunteer military, and are drawn into a conflict brewing in "Empire City" and perhaps across the country, as the social order of over-the-top military veneration is challenged by a growing movement of disaffected veterans organizing around someone who might not be entirely unlike the Volunteers.

Gallagher's three main narrative protagonists have relatively hum-drum abilities as far as superheroes go. Sebastian Rios, a bureaucrat and one-time war journalist who was a hostage at the hit site compound when the Cythrax bomb was dropped, can disappear. Mia Tucker, a pedigreed Wall Streeter who piloted a helicopter on the raid, can fly. And the immigrant soldier, Jean-Jacques Saint-Preux, can move at super-speeds. Which made me wonder why Gallagher would choose such recognizable abilities at all.

The answer of course goes back to my friend's question earlier this year: it's not about the abilities. OK, I'll revise that statement: it's not *just* about the abilities. The superhero phenomenon have always been about investigating what makes us human through a speculative lens. Even in the golden age of comics, when Jack Kirby and Stan Lee and all the old hats realized that giving human characters super abilities, and presenting their stories in graphic format, was a fun idea, they were doing things in their serialized stories to give them gravitas. We all know Superman can fly, that he's a Man of Steel with x-ray and heat vision. So it's not a surprise when he uses those abilities to crush the bad guy. It's the story behind that counts: how does one live one's life given these abilities? What does ultimately tell us about humanity? Marvel's mutant X-men were thinly veiled discussions on the human invention of race; DC's Batman questioned the role of privilege and social order. Time now, superhero tales grant creative permission to carry out discussions that need to happen within society writ large, by attracting us with a wow factor (Check out character A! They can do B!) and sucking a

consumer into a story in which that wow factor fades behind a substantive investigation into very real, very everyday, human dynamics. *Watchmen* – racism in America; *The Boys* – the fundamental question of whether a human would choose to apply their superhuman ability towards good or evil; *Umbrella Academy* – the unique dysfunction of the modern American family: we want to be drawn in as viewers and readers, but we also want something deeper to sink our teeth into.

Empire City succeeds in a similar fashion. Veterans, already totemized in the real world, are taken by Gallagher one logical step further and given abilities that set them apart from the rest of humanity. But that's just the appetizer. What's really happening in the book, as our heroes find themselves thrust into the beginnings of conspiracy set off by the potential presidential election of a retired general officer – one that threatens to unravel a modern social order that entirely revolves around the veneration of military service – is an investigation of our troubled real world. Less than 1% of the US have, are, or will serve in the military. The national has waged nearly two decades of war across the world with little accountability to an electorate willing to write a blank check to it, no questions asked. Veteran has become an identity, a flag around which to rally political and cultural inclinations. War criminals have become public figures and welcome pundits. Given what's happened in the real world, is it so far a narrative leap to consider a veteran with superhuman abilities?

The book isn't perfect; Gallagher's first novel, *Youngblood*, had a tighter story arc, and the effort he takes to build a convincing world in *Empire City* sometimes feels like overkill. But it's a fascinating narrative. I've seen other readers comment on the novel's relevance – the whole thing has a *Man in the High Castle* feel to it. Recognizable as almost being our current reality, but tilted towards frightening. But the novel's relevance will hopefully fade over time, if the

country can come to realistic grips with its military reality. What stands out to me about Matt Gallagher's second novel is that he was willing to do the legwork necessary to give contemporary war fiction a speculative edge, which puts it in territory more closely aligned with Joe Haldeman's graphic novel *Forever War* than it does with *Youngblood,* and enviable terrain if Gallagher is willing to claim it.

When I reviewed *Youngblood* a few years ago, I wrote that it delivered what we needed from contemporary war literature because it shunned the stereotypical war story for something more unique. With *Empire City*, Gallagher has reinvented himself yet again and produced another fresh, and timely perspective on the consequences of war.