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# The danger is to the body: Stories and a novella

Renee Leclair  
*Iowa State University*

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**The danger is to the body: Stories and a novella**

by

**Renee LeClaire**

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

**MASTER OF FINE ARTS**

Major: Creative Writing and Environment

Program of Study Committee:

K. L. Cook, Major Professor

Debra Marquart

Brianna Burke

Julie Courtwright

The student author and the program of study committee are solely responsible for the content of this thesis. The Graduate College will ensure this thesis is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2017

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## PREFACE

While writing and revising the stories and novella that comprise *The Danger Is to the Body*, I steeped myself in the American West. I drank whiskey in Deadwood and almost ran out of gas in Wyoming. I visited the Joshua trees outside Las Vegas and took my mother to a vortex in Sedona. My brother drove with me to Tombstone, where we watched the reenactment of the OK Corral shootout and ate bison burgers at the Crystal Palace Saloon. I studied movies and television shows and read books and graphic novels, seeking out Western themes, tropes, and archetypes, and the subversions of those themes, tropes, and archetypes. I listened for voices I thought deserved to be amplified, and I made note of voices that spoke loudly without saying anything. All of these experiences inspired the locations, people, and ideas in this collection.

My appreciation for the American West only fully developed once I left it. I grew up in Arizona, and until moving to the Midwest three years ago, I had never lived more than a seven-hour drive from the Pacific Ocean. Leaving behind the saguaros and dry heat of the desert and the pine-forested mountains that surround my hometown made me long for elevation and aridity. Being removed from Western culture and surrounded by people who had never heard of Wyatt Earp, who didn't grow up watching John Wayne movies, and for whom gunslingers and outlaws seemed exotic creatures rather than historical figures meant that I was constantly telling Western stories to explain my own life. Describing the Mojave playa, or the way masculinity is portrayed and problematized in the remake of *True Grit*, or even the diversity of Los Angeles, gave me an ownership of the West that I didn't have before I had to articulate its wonders, its contradictions, and how it feels to grow up there.

To write these stories, in addition to returning to the West, I took courses in American West History and natural disaster management. I obsessively tracked the drought plaguing California, and read Vandana Shiva's *Water Wars*. For the first time in my life, I actively sought out classic Western fiction, movies, and music. I read Larry McMurtry and Zane Grey critically, not just to be entertained by the stories but to analyze and deconstruct their appeal, their language, and laconic styles. I watched movies such as *The Way of the Gun* and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* for tropes and archetypes. I listened to a great deal of Marty Robbins, Johnny Cash, and Patsy Cline.

And then I turned to more modern Westerns, to see what they had retained and what they had rejected. I searched out depictions of the West, as in Tarantino's *The Hateful Eight* and Iñárritu's *The Revenant*, in which the characters embody historically accurate racism and sexism, and the creators deliberately used these characters to demonstrate the universal harm of their prejudices. 2016's surprise critical hit and Academy Award nominee for Best Picture, *Hell or High Water*, tells a Western bank heist narrative set in modern times, with the recent mortgage crisis as antagonist. Two of my favorite authors recently published speculative fiction Westerns: Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Water Knife* and Claire Vaye Watkins' *Gold Fame Citrus*, books set in a future American West devastated by climate change. *Westworld*, a new HBO science fiction series (based on the popular film from the 1970s), puts the people of the future into an android-populated Old West setting, and follows them as they enact conscienceless violence on bodies that bleed and die.

These revisionist works helped me conceive of ways to write Westerns that critique aspects of contemporary America, from nuclear waste to pop culture to toxic

masculinity. Richard Slotkin, scholar of the American frontier and author of *Gunfighter Nation*, argues that myths are stories which, through repetition, become metaphors for a society's ideology and morals. The myths either persist because they continue to provide a compelling and relevant explanation of the social and cultural system, or are revised because they fail to continue to serve as a good metaphor. Slotkin suggests that at the core of the myth of the American West is a glorification of violence, both actual (conquest, vigilantism, "frontier justice") and symbolic. Through my writing, I hope to help revise the myth of the West, to turn our narratives away from a glorification of violence and misogyny and fear of the Other, towards respect for the people and environment of a place I love.

The stories and novella in *The Danger Is To The Body* all take place in the American Southwest, and contain many of the elements of Westerns—guns, trains, robberies, Doc Holliday, Wyatt Earp, Bonnie and Clyde. But these stories, I hope, move beyond traditional archetypes and categories of revenge/captive/hero narratives, or deliberately subvert them to expose how the "metaphor," as Slotkin defines it, fails. These are revenge stories and outlaw stories, but they contain very few heroes.

Given that Westerns, as a genre, became popular primarily through movies and television, I also wanted to explore the Western myth as a form of ritualized performance. The characters in these stories are performers. Some of them act on a stage, some engage in public ritual, and others romanticize what they see on film to the extent that they enact it in real life. In "Bonnie, Clyde," the protagonists have internalized movies of outlaw legends (such as Bonnie and Clyde) to the point of actually attempting to follow in their

footsteps. With this story, I wanted to speak in the voice of a young contemporary female outlaw, and let the reader contemplate how the insidious nature of Western outlaw myth (in the form of movies like *True Romance* and *Natural Born Killers*) has shaped her, and to what extent.

The characters in “Crosses to Bear” are women who could be my mother’s friends, or the women I cut cotton for when I worked at JoAnn’s Fabric in high school. It’s a narrative of artmaking (in the form of quilting) and religious devotion, and what might happen when those two things converge. This story grew out of the various moments of realization, in my Catholic upbringing, of the violence within the religion. The horror of my Christian-but-not-Catholic friend upon seeing the sculpture of a thorny cage surrounding an emaciated, crucified Jesus that hung over our church altar was one of the first times I fully realized the disturbing nature of Catholic iconography. In my story, a religious woman has internalized the violence of her faith to the extent that she is unable to perceive it, and views the unfavorable response of others as a mark of lesser devotion. The first person-narrative gives the reader access to the protagonist’s attempts to deceive, both others and herself.

I believe that writing about the contemporary or future West necessitates engaging with climate change (or, as Margaret Atwood puts it, “the everything change”) and its related factors and outcomes, from water scarcity to political, environmental, and physical violence. The title story in this collection, “The Danger Is to the Body,” is a work of speculative fiction in conversation with a sub-genre of Western American fiction, the apocalyptic Western. Works in this genre feature post-civilization landscapes that mirror the arid wastes of the frontier settings in epic Westerns. Cormac McCarthy’s

*The Road*, *The Book of Eli* and the *Mad Max* movies, and Stephen King's *Dark Tower* novel series are popular examples. Apocalyptic Westerns use traditional Western narratives as cautionary tales, where overzealous gunslingers turn cities into ghost towns, and the excesses of the American Dream take a disastrous toll on the environment.

“The Danger Is to the Body” stems from my research on the Yucca Mountain Nuclear Waste Repository project, an enterprise to inter nuclear waste deep beneath a mountain. The project, which launched in 1987, necessitated an entirely new interdisciplinary research field, nuclear semiotics, to develop methods of deterring people 10,000 years in the future (the duration of time the waste will be hazardous) from attempting to access the repository. Nuclear semioticians believe that modern written languages will not exist in 10,000 years, leading to the development of long-time nuclear waste warning messages. An example of truth that seems like fiction, the methods of delivering these messages include hostile architecture (covering the mountain in giant spikes, creating a “landscape of thorns,”), establishing an “atomic priesthood” to pass knowledge down through generations, and cats that glow in the presence of radioactive material. My story imagines the life of a young girl in that dystopic future, complete with glow cat.

This collection also contains several flash-fiction pieces, written in first person plural. They are designed to provide a chorus that gives voice to some of the Western groups of people who were and continue to be oppressed, forgotten, ostracized, and damaged. Here, these voices come from miners, laudanum-addicted prostitutes, and transgendered frontier people.

The anchoring novella of this collection, “The Understudies Earp,” borrows heavily from my experience researching and then visiting Tombstone, Arizona, where reenactors daily revive the myth and history of the town, including its most famous event, the shootout at the OK Corral. I saw this show on my first visit, and I watched it again live last summer, and I am responsible for several dozen views on a YouTube video of the performance. I was concerned for a long time that the novella would seem like it was mocking this community of people, who put an enormous amount of effort into what amounts to a kitschy tourist attraction. But I think my version shows a group of people committed to history and local lore, with a zeal for the mythic West I could never hope to match. Their narrative is a traditional one, but I embed it within the story of a man who has a troubled relationship with his estranged wife, and the kind of deep insecurity that a culture that glorifies masculinity creates for men and women alike.

Another Tombstone performance I witnessed on my first visit, one which beautifully embodied the deluded juxtapositions that populate the American West, was a street performer who I think of as Cowboy Elvis. I didn’t speak to him, but he was wearing what must have been an expensive mash-up of the King’s signature Vegas rhinestoned white jumpsuit under white leather chaps, jacket, and boots, and—of course—a white Stetson cowboy hat. He was tanned and leathery, and had iconic Elvis hair and real sideburns. The ten seconds it took me to walk past him embedded him in my brain, and over a decade later I still wanted to know his story, so I wrote it. The Cowboy Elvis of my imagination became entwined with the OK Corral reenactment, and the result is the story of an amateur actor who secretly longs to not just play but to *be* Wyatt Earp.

My original intention was for the tale of Cowboy Elvis to be primarily satiric. In my early drafts, I thought of my narrator as a buffoon, and I played it for laughs. I figured the story would be short. Then the reenactors made international news when one of their actors accidentally carried a loaded gun into a performance and shot another actor in the leg, as well as grazed an audience member. The incident was widely reported, but the outcome was not. I have since scoured the Internet and can find only a minor report on the Tombstone sheriff's office's Facebook page that mentions the charges against the armed actor being dropped. Suddenly, I discovered I had very different story—one with larger, more tragic-comic (or comic-tragic) implications. Writing “The Understudies Earp” involved considerable research about Wyatt Earp and his brothers, Doc Holliday, the specifics of the OK Corral shootout, and how to play the nearly-extinct Western gambling game, faro. The plight of my protagonist in “The Understudies Earp” demonstrates perhaps my sharpest critique of the traditional masculine, violent Western in this collection.

Richard Slotkin argues that gangster movies, *Star Trek* (space: the final frontier), and comic book superheroes are all just extensions of the myth of the American West and its icons. When I was little and my aunt would babysit, we would often end up watching reruns of *Bonanza*. Five-year-old me was not a fan of *Bonanza*. Everywhere I went I saw cowboy hats and boots, so I was too desensitized to find them romantic, and too young for nostalgia. And the plot always seemed the same—people stealing things, people chasing each other around on horseback, gunshots fired. They were Cowboys-and-Indians stories, and I was more interested in Batman-and-Catwoman stories, and

watching *Star Trek: The Next Generation* with my father. As an adult, I see that these are the same stories, just with different costumes, on different frontiers.

I want to write stories where characters' roles are not dictated by the color of their hat. Claire Vaye Watkins, one of the most notable young fiction writers from the American West, suggests that writing about the West is often incorrectly conflated with writing *for* and *about* men. When writing, I try to keep her call to action in mind: "Let us, each of us, write things that are uncategorizable, rather than something that panders to and condones and codifies those categories." I call these stories "Westerns" not to fit them neatly within a genre or category, but to push back against some of the imposed limits of that genre, to make space for new narratives.

## EPIGRAPH

What is distinctly American is not necessarily the amount or kind of violence that characterizes our history, but the mythic significance we have assigned to the kinds of violence we have actually experienced...

—Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*

Go to fighting, or get away.

—Wyatt Earp

## BONNIE, CLYDE

Though the official record says otherwise, I knew what I was doing. When the lawyers talked to me, I told them I never would have done what we did if you hadn't charmed me, confused me. But I lied. Until we met, I was just waiting for someone like you to come along and propose something like that and mean it.

## Knees

In junior high, we used to roll our uniform skirts. My red plaid pleats stopped three, maybe four inches above my knees—two rolls of the waistband. The school rule was two inches above the knee for uniform skirts and shorts, but this made us feel frumpy, somehow both childish and old. So we rolled our skirts, and hid it under the waists of our polo shirts (also rolled, if we could get away with it—tucked in but pulled back out enough to ruin clean lines, if not). This made us feel more like the music videos we saw on MTV, naughty schoolgirls rather than just schoolgirls barely postpubescent. Teachers who caught us made us roll them down, gave us demerits. My legs were tanned and toned from volleyball practice and riding my bike around the hills in my neighborhood, and I thought they were one of my better features, so I rolled my skirts and got caught, rolled my skirts and got caught.

The skirts taught us to hate the fabric that covered the kneelers in our church, which settled into place with soft thumps of wood on carpet but folded back into the pews with resonant bangs, like heavy doors slamming. We weren't made to kneel on bare wood, but the padding did nothing to prevent chafing from the rough weave. When you were wearing pants you hardly noticed, but girls sixth grade and up were required to wear skirts on Mass

days, and we walked around afterward with knees red, rubbed raw, a sight that wouldn't look indecent to me for many years.

### Introductions

It doesn't matter how we met. It doesn't matter to me at all. Maybe I was hanging out at the Sonic Drive-In and you pulled up in your pickup truck and leaned out the window and let your eyes wander over my body as I sucked a cherry limeade through a thick straw, and we struck up a conversation and went for a drive and the bumps in the bed of your truck pressed into my back as we looked up at stars, bright in desert sky, and then you touched me the way I wanted to be touched by an older, handsome man like you. Maybe we met at the library, in the stacks, where I was looking for a Stephen King novel and you were reading a magazine, and you sat on the floor, magazine in your lap, while I reached over your head for a book, standing up on my toes, and your view must have been tanned legs tanned legs tanned legs, and later my legs would be itchy from rolling around on the grass behind the library and my face would be raw from the stubble from your beard. Or maybe we met at a party, one I shouldn't have gone to, one some sketchy guy at Starbucks talked me and a girlfriend into, but the guys throwing it were the aeronautical engineers, how bad could they be, and the answer was bad, and you were like a gentlemanly breath, a sip of chivalry—in a sea of groping leering boys, you were a man. Maybe none of these things happened, or maybe all of them did. Maybe we met at that Starbucks, maybe we met at the rodeo, maybe the movies. It doesn't matter. I've done all those things with you in my mind, before and after I met you, and none are better than the others, or better or worse than the truth.

## Warrant

It wasn't that I'd never broken the law before. I had a minor shoplifting problem (lipstick, hair dye), but I'd never really gotten caught. I routinely drove fifteen over the speed limit. I sometimes drank at parties, but not often. The tiny rebellions my friends and peers committed—getting drunk, driving drunk, getting high. Breaking things, smashing things, destroying things. Those behaviors made them feel powerful, older, unruly, in control of their own destinies. I looked at them and didn't feel impressed. Not because I was good, but because I was bad, and I was waiting for someone to be bad enough to warrant the effort.

## Lessons

You hated it when I called you older. It's only three years, you'd say, and I'd be forced to once again try to explain that three years was one-sixth of my life, which didn't feel like nothing, but it was also miles and miles between me and you, three years in which you learned to drink and hold your drink and then became legally allowed to drink, three years of voting, three years of working and taking community college courses where I had barely a semester. You had so much to show me, teaching me to drive a stick shift and introducing me to old movies like *True Romance* and *Badlands*—movies about people in love the way we were in love. Helping me see that the world tries to hold you back, but you don't have to let it.

You seemed so much older and wiser than I would ever be. I thought I would never catch up to you.

### More

I wasn't kissed until I was sixteen years old. I was slow dancing in a park with a boy I liked, who was Mormon and hadn't kissed anyone either. We had brought a stereo that ran on six D batteries, which we had to stop at a gas station to buy. I worked hard for that kiss, harder than my friends whose methodologies seemed to be "get drunk" or "be very very pretty." I had to navigate barriers of inexperience and religion and time and place and money and equipment and still I got it. I expected it to feel closer, like a melting of mouths, but it felt like my mouth against his mouth, pushing, trying to connect and resorting to tongues when that failed. I was so nervous about the quality of that kiss that I enjoyed the concept of it more than the act itself, though the later kisses were better.

We progressed eagerly from kissing to doing more – first base, second base, third base, second base in my sister's bed while she was staying at a friend's, third base while his brothers held band practice in the next room. We moved as quickly as our guilt (his religious, mine mostly self-directed slut-shaming with an undercurrent of Catholic guilt) would allow, and then stopped. I was clearly the holdout. We had said we loved each other, had stayed out all night and been punished, had gone to prom. But I just didn't want to. I am not going to say that I was waiting for you, but I was waiting for more.

And you gave it to me. And then some.

### Practice

When we played pool, you stood close to me, hands on my hands, hands on my body, breath in my ear, voice low and growly. Playing pool was an excuse to get close to each other, and for you to demonstrate your skills like a peacock flashing its tail. You were

much, much better than me, but sometimes I won if I laughed and bit my lip while you were trying to make a shot, or leaned far enough over the table trying to make a shot before you got a turn. I was practiced at catching your eye before deliberately bending from the waist, leaning down, down, down. And then there would be your hands, on my hips or waist or the back of my neck, and I could tell by the tension in your fingers that you were going to miss.

But when you took me to the shooting range there was none of that. You kept your distance except when you had to, reminding me to keep my support hand against the trigger guard, nudging my feet hip-distance apart. When you told me to squeeze the trigger, not pull it, there was not a hint of innuendo in your voice. You could have been any instructor telling any student. After we left your hands would be all over me, in the parking lot, on the way to the car, in the car, on the way back to your apartment. I thought that it was just the strain of behaving for the hour or two we spent shooting, finding its release in skin on skin. You were so careful not to touch me while we were shooting handguns, to really teach me in a way that you didn't bother to when we were shooting pool. It didn't occur to me until later that the hunger of your hands outside the range might have been because of the way I looked to you when I was holding a gun.

### Obligations

You came over for dinner just the one time. You got my father to talk at the dinner table, which was an achievement. My mother liked that you pulled out my chair. My sister thought you were hot. My brother thought you were cool. And then every time my mother would ask when you were coming by for dinner again, I would say you were busy, we

were busy, you'd come the next time you were free. I didn't consult you about this. I knew we both felt that you'd passed the test, you'd done the obligatory thing, and now we could do what we wanted with a minimum of fuss. My mother wasn't worried, my father wasn't keeping a careful eye on my curfew, and we could stay in your bedroom and eat delivery pizza and watch *Wild at Heart* or *Love and a .45* or *Kalifornia*.

Every night. All the nights.

### Diamond

You offered to beat my ex up, once. When I told you that he had told the new girl he was dating that I was selfish in bed (in bed—as if we had been lovers, as if it had been more than under-the-blanket fumbling in the TV room), and she told one of our friends who told more of our friends.

When I told you, crying, you immediately said you wanted to punch his fucking face in and kick his ass up into his guts. You sounded so angry. And then you pulled the anger tightly back into yourself, like coal becoming a diamond, and you were hard and cold when you turned to me and asked, “Would you like me to do that? Do you want me to hurt him?”

And I said no, no, I didn't want that. I didn't want you to get in trouble, and it really wasn't worth breaking anybody's face over.

It was enough that you would say that. That you would protect me, defend me, not hesitate to offer to take out my small hurts on someone else's soft flesh. And that you would, not in a fit of rage but in controlled fury, mean it.

## Legs

In eighth grade my class was playing soccer on the playground and the boys had wandered off, leaving just the girls. We were less motivated about it so we were leaning on the fence and talking, kicking the ball back and forth. Some boys at a house across the street, who we had never seen before, who were not on our year-round school schedule and were free to spend their summer days on front porches shouting at pretty girls, shouted at us. We managed to have most of a conversation this way, a few words at a time. We asked them which of us they liked, and they said the girl in the black shorts. Half of us were wearing the navy shorts that were part of our uniform. We finally threw down a note, and one of the boys scrambled across the street to fetch it and then ran back to his porch. We told them to meet us at the bus stop after school.

My mother was picking me and my brother and sister up and she didn't like to wait for us, so I wasn't able to go. I had never had a boyfriend, I had never been kissed, none of the boys in my class had ever been rumored to have a crush on me. I did not think I was foregoing any opportunities by not showing up. But my friend Heather said that when the girls (all the girls, except for me) got to the bus stop, the boys were disappointed that the one they liked wasn't there.

For a week my friends said that the boys weren't even hot, that they were younger than we'd thought, that it was obviously hard to tell how cute someone was from that far away. My friend Melissa said that one of them had mentioned something about my legs. The boys just disappeared—they were never on the porch again—and most of us forgot about them quickly. But I remembered, for a long time, what it felt like to be the one who was picked, the one who was chosen.

## Meaning

Those lawyers made me talk about what we did, over and over, until it lost all beauty and meaning, until it became a collection of details and timelines and objects and blood. I told them—I knew you wouldn't mind that I told them this—that it was your idea, that I had nothing to do with it. Which was true. You weren't sure how I'd react, had agonized over whether or not to tell me, to ask me, to bring me in, for weeks. I thought of movies where the man holds an engagement ring, anxious—his heart should tell him the outcome, but his head won't let him believe. When you asked me, so earnest, all I could do was smile and say yes. Of course yes.

You'd just shown me Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway loving each other on film the way we did in real life, so I knew how to show you I meant it. I told you, "I'll be your Bonnie, Clyde."

## Safe

One of my friends pulled me aside, once, to say that she was worried. Just one friend, just once. And I had to explain that you had never hurt me, that I was fine, that she just didn't know you. I didn't bother to tell her that if you did hurt me, I would immediately forgive you. I knew what went on inside you, inside both of us, and how we were barely managing to contain it all the time. If one of your fists had flown out and my eye had blackened and I had had to invent a better excuse than running into a door, I would have understood. But you never hurt me in anger, not once, not even when you were very angry. At me, at the world, at yourself. You broke lamps and punched holes in walls and drove too fast and shoved a guy on the street once, but you never punched me or slapped

me or grabbed my arm hard enough to leave bruises. I was close enough to you to be safe in the eye of the storm.

### Technique

You said we had to be smart about it. Once we got going, there'd be no going back, we had to get it right the first time. So we practiced. We spent our time at shooting ranges and watching *Natural Born Killers* and putting our hands all over each other's bodies, and all of it was practice. You taught me to shoot a shotgun. I don't think you really thought I'd need to use that one, because you corrected my stance by running your hands up the inside of my thighs. You took me hunting, and brought down a deer with a bow. You had me finish him with a knife. You said I wouldn't need to learn technique, with a knife—you would make sure that I never had to bring anyone down that way. I just needed to know the way to end it.

### Guidance

There's no one else in the world like you. I know that. It's why it almost doesn't matter that I've gotten away with my lies. I'm glad I won't be spending the rest of my life in jail, but what am I going to do with myself? I know that you never would have let me get caught, brought in, questioned, held, if you could have stopped it. We would have gone on forever, until our arthritic hands could no longer squeeze a trigger and we were looking down sights braced on our walkers. But you made a mistake. I'm sure it was you, and I am so grateful for that because I don't know what I would do if I thought it was my fault. But it was you. You got sloppy, excited, you winked at me and lost focus and they got a lucky

shot in. One of the armored ones who didn't go down to our guns so easily. Doesn't really matter who. I only wish that I had been able to take them out before they got to you, or even after. When you fell the blood looked different, looked real—like everyone else's blood was Tarantino-red and yours was the red of a deer bleeding out in the forest. I went to you but you were only a body, and now I wish that instead I had taken that time, the time before I was overrun, to aim for the space inside the helmet.

I told them that I didn't know what I was doing, and that was a lie. I told them that I wouldn't have done it without you, your influence. And that was true. I needed your eyes pulling me in to tell me that this was what I'd been waiting for, for someone to ask me to be this brave, to be this much myself. But I didn't clarify that I wouldn't have done it only because I needed someone to show me, and now, without you to guide me I am lost, I can't find our path.

### Sunset

Sometimes I imagine that you're alive. You come to me and tell me it was all a hoax, that you did this for us and now that we are both off the hook we can do what we want, be who we want, who we are. And you take my hand and we run away. When I imagine this I smile, and if my mother or a friend or my therapist asks me why I am smiling, I tell them I am thinking about my future. I am imagining the possibilities open to me, all the opportunities in the whole wide world.

## CANARIES

We bring the sun down with us into the earth. Not our lanterns (which give us light but are the food that fire damp eats), but our canaries: bright yellow and pocket-sized, they warn us with silence when we are breathing poison. In order to fly, birds are constantly inhaling. A bird shows us the effects of black damp, white damp, stink damp, after damp—all the combinations of poisons that this mine has the potential to hold—long before we, the ones holding their cages, would begin to hunch around the pain in our chests. Our canaries stop singing, faint and fall off their perches, and we run for the surface. We come to work each day knowing an explosion or cave-in could mean our deaths, or that if we keep coming to work over the course of years our lungs may fill with black dust that nothing cures. But we carry vials of oxygen in our pockets, we design special resuscitation cages that get fresh air to the canaries if they faint. We do what we can to thank these creatures that give us a small margin of error in a precarious world.

## CROSSES TO BEAR

Sometimes, I feel like the Lord Jesus is speaking to me through the fat quarters of quilting cotton at the JoAnn Fabric and Crafts in Payson, Arizona. Where others look at a piece of fabric and see a field of tulips that they sew into a nice tame mosaic of spring flowers, I see in the tulip's curve the robes of Simon Peter as he denies Christ before the crowds. A textured brown that even a veteran quilter would probably use to make a tree trunk, I recognize as the perfect shade to highlight the beard of Thomas the Doubter, touching his fingers to the wound in Jesus' side and receiving proof of the Resurrection. Last year, most of the ladies from the circle incorporated the same print of cartoon bunnies holding baskets into their Easter quilts, and only I knew to carefully snip around the fluffy tails and rainbow eggs to amass enough of the background fabric to weave the heavenly blue of Mary's garment, weeping at the foot of the cross as her Son, our Savior, breathed his last.

Which is why it is unconscionable, just *unconscionable*, that they are thinking of giving Abigail Weaver the center booth at the Strawberry Patchers Annual Quilt Show this June.

Today at our monthly meeting, the final booth assignments will be determined, and I pack my quilting bag as if I am headed off to battle. I line up my needles with the sharp ends pointed up rather than down. If anyone other than me reaches into my bag, they'll get a nasty surprise. My spools of thread stand at attention like soldiers, steady and precise. I carefully fold the square I'm currently working on, a scene depicting the Crown of Thorns. I know it's an impressive piece—I chose my fabric well. Jesus' flesh has been carefully carved from a beach print fabric, the texture of the sand and lines left by the water

combining to form the agony apparent on the face of our Lord as He is forced to carry our burden. The blood that runs from the Crown of Thorns and from the lashes Jesus endured from the whip, I cut from Christmas fabric printed with poinsettias, which I thought was nicely symbolic.

I zip my bag closed and tighten the edges of plastic wrap around the plate of gingersnaps I'm bringing for the girls. They go nicely with Lauren Jacobsen's chamomile tea, everyone always says so. I pull my quilting bag over one shoulder and my purse over the other and pick up the cookie plate. On my way out the door I stop in front of my china hutch and pull my lipstick from my purse's front flap pocket. I don't usually wear lipstick, not since my husband Howard passed seven years ago (rest his soul), but today is a special occasion, and I view this lipstick as something like war paint. Abigail always wears too much eyeshadow, but I know that this particular shade brings out my eyes and makes me look slightly intimidating, if I want it to. I trace my lips carefully (this part was easier in my youth, and I'm out of practice, but I have a steady quilter's hand and an eye for precision) and fill them in lightly. I examine the crease in my slacks, pleased with the sharp line I created with my iron, and straighten my blouse just a smidge before nodding in satisfaction at my reflection.

I lock the door behind me (most people in Strawberry don't even bother to lock their doors, but there's no use being a damn fool about it, pardon my language) and set off down my front walk at a march, pleased with my display of determination. My sensible loafers easily navigate the stepping stones I laid myself last summer.

Connie Pribble has been hosting our circle for three years now, since old Winifred Langley passed. Connie has a lovely Arizona room that gets lots of sun all year, and we

can bask in sunshine and warm our arthritic hands without electricity as we stitch and gossip. Connie's quilts are nothing much to brag about, but that Arizona room won her the title of hostess fair and square, and no one has ever contested her place. Fortunately for me, Connie lives only three streets over, so I can walk to most meetings unless we've got snow or the heat is too much. Today is a lovely crisp April day with the flowers just starting to bloom, which suits me. I'll be able to work myself up on the way over.

I stride with purpose, not so fast as to work up a sweat, but enough to get my blood pumping and lungs full of oxygen. I hold the cookie plate in both hands to distribute the weight, bearing it in front of me like a sacrificial offering. My quilting bag feels solid at my side. As I round the corner onto Connie's street, I scan for cars, pleased to see that Abigail's silver minivan is nowhere to be found. But several of the other ladies' cars are parked in the street, and Lauren is just getting out of her sedan as I approach.

"Hello, Lauren!" I call. She waves as she pulls two large handled thermoses from the backseat—her special chamomile.

"How's the new quilt coming, Dolores?"

"It's shaping up quite nicely, thank you," I say, allowing myself to preen just a bit as we head for Connie's front door. "I found the most perfect fabric for the stone of the tomb last week. Of course, it was designer fabric so it was nearly seven dollars a yard—" Lauren's eyes widen at the price and she lets out a low whistle. "But it really is perfect."

"Well, that is just wonderful. I'll be working on my hunting quilt today, and it's coming together—nothing so nice as what some of you ladies sew, mind you. Have you seen Abigail's new piece? That girl is a marvel, I tell you. They're thinking of giving her the center booth this year, you know."

“Is that so?” I say, and force the corners of my lipsticked mouth up. “Well, there are a lot of deserving quilts. It’s going to be a tough decision.”

“Too true. I wouldn’t be at all surprised if Mavis or Janet takes it this year, either.”

We’ve reached Connie’s door, and I raise my hand to knock before replying.

“Yes, we’ll just have to see, won’t we?”

Excuse my language, but I will be *damned* if Abigail weasels her way into such a place of honor. She is one of the youngest members of the circle, at forty-three. Mavis Knight is seventy-eight and has *never* had the center booth. Granted Mavis can’t sew a straight stitch to save her life, but there is an order to things, a way things are done. Janet Orwell’s quilts are more technically proficient than Abigail’s. Abigail’s quilts are popular like those paintings of houses by that Thomas Kincaid fellow—admired by the masses, but not art. Mr. Kincaid does have a way with color, but you’re never going to find him in a museum next to a Rembrandt or an El Greco. And now here is where I will have to put aside humility and speak plainly: my quilts are art. I create original works with soul, with feeling, and maybe just a touch of grace. Abigail creates crowd-pleasers, the quilting equivalent of the summer blockbuster—full of pomp and circumstance, but who remembers them come Oscar season, hmm?

Of course what rankles most is that Abigail was once my apprentice. She’s Mormon and has a passel of children—seven, or maybe eight, I forget. But when they all went off to school and she found herself with an empty nest, I took her under my wing, and taught her to quilt. She learned most of what she knows about quilting from me, but she took my lessons and tamed them. I tried to give her a lion, but she wanted a house cat. She

wanted something soft and pretty that didn't challenge anyone, that didn't move anyone, that might appeal to anyone.

Today I mean to see that someone deserving gets that center table. Or at least, anyone other than Abigail.

When I knock, Connie opens the door with a trilling "Hello!" then takes my plate of cookies and one of Lauren's thermoses and beckons us into her home. "Lovely, lovely day, isn't it, ladies?" she says over a shoulder as we follow behind.

A card table with a grass-green paper tablecloth has been set up just outside the Arizona room, and Connie has put some crackers and cheese out, next to Mavis' fig scones (which are next to inedible, but we all do our part to make it seem as if we've scarfed them up by meeting's end). There's also a carafe of water and I pour myself a glass; I may be doing a lot of talking over the next hour or two. I drink carefully to preserve my lipstick, and move into the Arizona room to select my seat.

I choose the chair that faces the door. It's in the middle of the circle as the door leaves an opening, so I'll be in the center, where Abigail will see me first as she comes into the room. Mavis takes a seat near the door and Lauren comes and sits to my right, nibbling one of my cookies. Connie comes in with Janet, who has brought cranberry muffins. I hear Connie answer the door and soon the Gibson sisters join us—June and Joan, the newest additions to our little group, just moved up from Phoenix with their husbands. They brought their vile Betty Crocker raspberry punch, which stains your teeth like you wouldn't believe.

Abigail arrives last. I hear Connie laughing as she lets her in, and I make sure I am staring at the door as Abigail enters. Connie pops her head in and announces, "Everyone,

Abigail made the most beautiful thumbprint cookies!” and holds the plate up so we can see the maroon and white circles. Some of the ladies ooh and aah and Janet follows Connie out to place a cookie on a napkin—but I keep my focus on Abigail. There are only two seats remaining. Abigail chooses the chair on my left, brushing it off lightly (as if whoever has sat there before her cannot possibly be trusted to have a clean bottom) before sitting.

“Hello, Dolores,” she says, arranging her quilting bag on her lap.

“Abigail,” I reply with a regal nod.

“I love that lipstick on you,” she says, and I smile. “But don’t you know, dear, you’ve got just a bit on your teeth.”

Horrified, I raise my hand to my mouth just as Janet says, “All right ladies, I hereby call this meeting of the Strawberry Patchers to order.”

There is light laughter as everyone settles in. I am trying to rub my napkin against my teeth with as little fuss as possible. Every time I pull the napkin away to inspect it, it comes away clean. Either Abigail was playing a cruel joke, or I’m missing the lipstick and it’s still on my teeth. I lower my napkin to my lap and listen, keeping my lips closed.

“We have a few orders of business today that I think we should take care of before we move on to quilting. First of all, we’re ahead of projections with our raffle ticket sales, thanks largely to the signs that Joe has put up at Mason’s Market. They’ve sold almost a third of the total tickets, so I think we should do something nice for the Market boys, like thank them in our newsletter.”

The quilters nod and make little “aww” noises.

“Second, most of you know that this year is Mavis’ fortieth year with the Strawberry Patchers, and this year’s Quilt Show will be her fortieth show.”

I hold my breath. Maybe it will be as simple as that. Maybe Mavis will be getting the center booth as a place of honor to recognize her anniversary.

“What some of you may not know is that Abigail has spent the last seven months working on a special quilt for Mavis, incorporating a few of Mavis’ favorite themes and in fact a piece of one of Mavis’ first quilts, which was torn by her eldest grandchild during his rough and tumble years.”

There are a few chuckles at this, but I feel as if my heart has stopped beating in my chest. “This quilt will be displayed at the center booth at this year’s show, along with a few of Abigail’s more popular pieces.”

With this, the ladies clap softly but delightedly, and congratulate Abigail in a low overlapping murmur.

So that’s it then. There won’t be any debate or vote at all. It’s been decided. And what a sneaky, backhanded way to earn the spot—by pretending to honor Mavis, who I once heard Abigail describe as “more of a pincushion than a quilter, the poor lamb.”

Connie pulls the quilt in question out of a large duffel and spreads it out so we can all have a closer look. I spy Mavis’ square in the lower left quarter, partly by the somewhat clumsy stitchwork but also because of Mavis’ penchant for appliqued flowers, in this case lilies. Abigail has pulled the lily theme in throughout the quilt, and made some log cabin-style crosses. The quilt has an Easter feel to it, and it’s pretty. Quietly religious. Still, it lacks vibrancy, panache. If you ask me, it’s a bit bland.

But you would never guess this by the way the ladies react. It is as if the Baby Jesus himself once was swaddled inside this quilt, the way they gasp and fawn. Mavis looks so pleased, though, that for a minute I consider holding my tongue, keeping quiet

and letting Abigail win, just to make it easier for everyone. Then I look at Abigail. She is rebuffering all praise with false humility.

“Oh, no, I wish I had been able to spend a bit more time on it, but you know little Matthew has had an ear infection for two weeks now, and I’m afraid I’ve had to steal just a few moments here and there, mostly while everyone else is sleeping, so I could finish this for Mavis.”

The ladies coo in sympathy and admiration, as if they haven’t themselves all had babies with ear infections, husbands with illnesses that kept them up nights, as if they can’t imagine the suffering Abigail has endured to bring us this pretty bit of fluff.

And I can’t take it anymore. Before I even think about it, my mouth opens (just enough to let the words out, but not enough to show my teeth), and I say, almost under my breath, “What about Mavis’ new quilts?”

The room quiets. The ladies know what I’m driving at. As much as I try to be a good Christian woman, I have not done a very good job hiding my displeasure with the accolades Abigail has received for her quilts. The silence stretches out a minute, uncomfortable, before Mavis herself speaks.

“Oh, Dolores, my quilts aren’t nearly as pretty as Abigail’s. I’m just flattered that she included my lily quilt. It looks so nice here, with all the good work she’s done around it.”

“Well,” I say, “either this booth is meant to commemorate Mavis or it’s not. If it is, then I think we should make an effort to include some of her new work. And Mavis, your quilts are special, and don’t let anyone tell you any different.”

I shoot a quick sharp glance left, as if Abigail had been just about to argue.

“Besides, I don’t know that it’s such a good idea to set a precedent that the quilters who have been with us the longest just get shuffled aside. There are several quilters in this group who have never had the center booth.”

I intend to stop there, I really do. But instead I say, “Myself included.”

The silence this time is briefer, but I have long enough to glance around the room and realize that not a single one of these ladies will look at me.

“Dolores,” Lauren finally pipes up from my side, “your quilts are beautiful, you have such an eye for color and shape, and they’re so unique. But they... well, some people find them unsettling.”

The word—*unsettling*—is like a gentle little slap to my cheek. I’m embarrassed, even more than at the prospect of the lipstick that may or may not be on my teeth, to find that my eyes are watery. I can feel my face flushing, and my chin trembles a little.

“I make quilts showing some of the most important moments of the life of Jesus—when He died for our sins, and rose again. I don’t understand what’s *unsettling* about that.”

“It’s just...” this from one of the Gibson sisters, I can’t believe she has the nerve, “...well, there’s just so much blood.”

One or two of the ladies nod. I look all around the circle for a dissenting voice, but no one meets my eyes.

“Well,” I say. I fold the napkin in half, and then in half again, pressing the creases sharp with swift slashes of my fingers, and then hold it tight to my lap like I’m putting pressure on an open wound. “Well. That’s just fine. I can see that you ladies have made up your mind, and if Mavis is all right with it, I don’t suppose it’s my place to argue. But I

just hope that next year, you'll all be a little more open-minded to quilts that are less traditional, perhaps, but show just as much talent. If not more. It's all right to be brave, ladies. Our Lord was brave, and art is brave, and I don't see why our quilts can't be brave. Maybe next year."

I crumple the napkin into a ball and drop it on the floor.

"If you'll excuse me, I need to use the toilet."

I stand up and exit the room without looking at anyone, and walk to Connie's pink bathroom, where fuzzy mauve covers shroud all the porcelain as if making the commode a comfortable seat will distract guests from the very thought of elimination. I turn the knobs to run the water, and leave it running, letting the white noise clear my head of doubting voices, that cacophony of silly women with simple tastes and faint hearts. Once my breath has steadied, I take my time washing my hands, working Connie's rose soap between my fingers and under my nails before letting the water carry it all away. I check the mirror and see that my teeth are lipstick-free.

When I leave the bathroom, the ladies have broken for coffee and are milling about the Arizona room. One of those wretched Gibson sisters has pictures of a new grandbaby and everyone is gathered around. Abigail's quilt has been returned to the duffel and placed next to the refreshments table, just outside the room. It's resting just underneath the edge of the table, and placed above it is a mostly full cup of raspberry punch.

I walk to the table and pick up one of my gingersnap cookies. I pour myself a cup of Lauren's tea. The sugar—which I usually don't take in my tea—is just behind the cup of punch. I reach my arm out for a cube, pausing with the small white lump pinched between my first finger and thumb. And then I drag my arm back, allowing the side of my hand to

brush the cup and it tilts, perfectly, quietly, spilling a stream of red into the duffel. As if it had been placed there for that very purpose. Abigail's log cabin center square is soaked a deep maroon, and the lilies that surround it are flecked with crimson.

I put my tea and cookie back on the table and step back into the Arizona room. "Ladies, I'm so very sorry, I'm not feeling well, and I think I should just head home. Connie, you can keep my cookie plate until bridge next week, if that's all right with you."

The ladies *tsk* sympathetic sounds at me, and their eyebrows knit together tightly enough to hold their obvious relief in check.

"Abigail, congratulations to you. It really was very nice of you to think of Mavis, and everything she has done for this circle." I smile at Abigail, showing all of my teeth.

I put my quilting bag over my shoulder and leave. As I walk home, my feet no longer march but tread evenly, a solid steady pace. I think about bravery, and cowardice, and sacrifice. I think about God and his Son, and how Jesus died for us, imperfect sinners that we are. I think about my quilts. About the pain I depict. About how I believe that that pain should not be hidden, that it should be exposed and not feared. Everyone should know what the Lord has done for them, so that they might earn forgiveness. The Lord forgives all, and as I walk I find it in my heart to forgive Abigail.

My smooth cobblestone walkway welcomes me home, and I unlock my door and let myself in. I carry my quilting bag to my craft room, where my latest creation is spread out at my workstation. Several of my finished quilts adorn the walls. But when I walk into the room, all I see is red. Scraps of poinsettia fabric cover the table around my sewing machine, and the Pieta quilt I made two springs ago draws my eye, the blood of Jesus' lash wounds standing out starkly against the soft whites and blues of the Virgin Mother. Even

my Last Supper seems to have an overwhelming amount of scarlet and carnelian, the wine glasses and robes drenched in it, the rivulets of blood from the Crown of Thorns only drops in an ocean.

Then I blink, and the full palette of my quilting fabric returns. I just appreciate vibrancy, that's all, like Caravaggio or Bartolommeo. There isn't more red here than you could find in the stained glass windows of most Christian churches. I decide to do a little work in the living room, where the light is better, so I take up my rotary cutters and a fat quarter of cotton printed with watercolor irises.

Closing the door to my craft room behind me, I stop at the hall closet on my way to the front of the house. I pull out one of Howard's sweaters, a thick knit in a nice soft green. It's warm in the house but it's still nice to have something soft on my lap while I work. The irises are soothing, and I wonder if they wouldn't also make nice clouds for a Lord-is-my-Shepherd sort of pastoral scene. Abigail tried a pastoral last year, but it came out rather flat. It couldn't hurt to pander just a little, give the ladies a crowd-pleaser. A good artist has a distinct style, of course, but a great artist can also demonstrate versatility. And humility is a virtue, but the Lord says we shouldn't hide our lights under a bushel. I've let this feud with Abigail distract me from my purpose for too long, but she's forgiven now, so I should get back to doing my good works. The Lord's work.

## ANDROGYNES

*Rather than homosexuality per se, the formative notion of this was "sexual inversion." By definition, the male invert was really a female trapped in a man's body and the female invert, likewise, was a male trapped in a woman's body. ...Such notions did not really exist in the 1850's and 1860's, when the western gold rushes drew to them any number of women dressed in men's clothing, and so observers of the time did not assume such women to be anything other than women in men's clothing.*

—Peter Boag, "Crossing Gender Boundaries and Identities on the Great Plains, 1850-1900"

They don't want us to fight in their civil wars, because they think we are women. But we put on pants and pack things into them and put on shirts and bind things under them, and then they see that we are men. We enlist, and pray we don't get sick or injured. After the wars we go west, following freedom and gold.

Those of us who are the kind of women who are expected to wear pants, who have to tuck things back under our skirts, learn to shave closely, and carefully. It's easier if you're a short woman, and better still to be married. Finding a husband who loves you means people will ask less questions.

Sometimes people keep our secrets. Sometimes they rail against us and put women in pants, men in dresses. We know what we are, we try to tell them. We know who we are. Our husbands tell the truth when they swear they believed we were women. We are buried wearing our soldiers' uniforms.

## TRAIN SONG

All of my black dresses are too revealing. I have nothing that doesn't dip low in front, cut high to show my legs, or at the very least pull in snug to mold to my body. I'm combing my closet for cardigans, shawls, shades of deep navy when Karen knocks on my door. I hastily pull on a pencil skirt and button-down from my selection of work clothes, knowing they won't work, but also knowing Karen will be angrier to wait if I answer the door in a robe than if I answer wearing something that is obviously wrong.

I unlock the front door and open it. Karen is holding the screen door open outside by letting it rest against her hip as she uses both hands to text. She takes in my outfit and sighs. "Oh Stella," she says, pushing the screen away so she can step inside. Karen is wearing a sleeveless sheath dress in spotless black, low heels, hair done up in the kind of twist my aunts used to like to put mine up in when I was young. She looks seamless and pulled-together except for the pink tinge to her eyes. She has been crying, but her eye makeup is still perfect.

Karen helps me go through my clothing. We're experiencing an endless summer in Phoenix, so it's hot for November even by our standards. I don't want to wear a cardigan, but it becomes clear that this may be my only choice. I find one that has three-quarter sleeves, put it over a dress that comes to my knees and shows most of my cleavage, and button it carefully all the way up the front. I don't own heels under three inches, so I wear flats.

Karen drives. We know where we are going but she puts the directions in the GPS anyway, mostly for the traffic reports. Karen gets us there exactly when predicted by her navigation system. We arrive at the church with plenty of time to spare.

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When we were in undergrad in northern Arizona, one of the bars near campus (the only bar built along the tracks; all the other bars clustered on a few streets corraling downtown, several blocks north) offered a special they called “train shots.” They’d have a shot of the day—sometimes just Fireball, but sometimes something elaborate like a German Chocolate Cake shot, or a Nuts and Berries, depending on the patrons (volume and demographic) and ambition of the bartender. Every time a train went by, you could buy a shot for a dollar. You had to buy it while the train was going by, and shoot it before the train had fully passed. The bartenders would sometimes mix up batches in a shaker and keep them at the ready, pouring shot after shot as the warning bells started to go off.

I only participated in this once. As a sophomore transfer, I had heard about it for two years before I was legally allowed to drink. But by the time I could walk into the bar, most of my fake-ID possessing friends were over the novelty of train shots and had been forced to find new bars anyway with their new, real IDs. So it wasn’t until my senior year that I convinced a group of my friends to do this with me, one time, and to fully commit to it.

My college town, Flagstaff, sits in one of the busiest rail corridors in the US, and several dozen trains passed through every day. The frequency with which we were stopped by trains in cars or on foot made it seem like more. And they seemed near-constant once you were doing a shot per train at a bar.

We were in rehearsal for a theater department production of *The Grapes of Wrath*. I was playing Ruthie Joad, and struggling with a flaming crush on Caleb Travers. He was playing our Tom Joad, and I was having to spend most of my acting energy trying not to

make eyes at my stage-brother. Karen was playing Agnes Wainwright and fending off the unwanted offstage advances of her onstage paramour, Al, played by skinny and pseudo-punk Brian Bennett. Karen and I invited the cast out for our train shot adventure one night after rehearsal. Brian immediately took us up on it; Caleb gave a vague response that sounded like a maybe. Most of the rest of the cast agreed to try to make it, and Karen, Brian, and I walked over to the bar.

I don't remember if the name of the bar was really "Wrong Side of the Tracks," or if that's just what everyone called it. It was kitty-corner from the Amtrak station, just a small building with a tiny parking lot. The front door was thirty feet, max, from the tracks themselves. When trains went by, the glass in the windows rattled, the conversations became louder. You could still hear just fine—the sound of the train wasn't deafening or overwhelming—but for about two minutes the noise level outside, inside, on the stool next to you, swelled like a rogue wave.

The three of us had just walked in the door when the bells started. We hurried to the bar, along with three or four other patrons, and the bartender (a tan late twenty-something woman with yoga shoulders) began pouring something brown and creamy out of a shaker. Karen held up three fingers, and we were given three one-ounce servings of mystery booze. We clinked our glasses with an ill-prepared "Cheers!" (the toasts would become more elaborate as the night wore on) and threw them back. The shot both burned and ran sweetly down my throat—it was syrupy with a high alcohol content. German Chocolate Cake. Sugar, hazelnut liqueur, lemon, and vodka. Our bartender was making ours with Everclear.

Brian ordered a beer to hold him over between shots and we found a big table near a window. Karen and I started texting people from the play, trying to coax them out, while Brian drank. After about fifteen minutes of this, periodically interrupted when Brian tried to ask Karen a question about the reading for a class they were both taking, or her plans for the weekend, our friends Lara and Marietta showed up. We waved them over enthusiastically, and they had just put their purses on the table when the bells started and people began to rush to the bar. We joined the throng and procured our shots.

Marietta raised one skinny arm in the air, shot in hand. “To the ghost of old Tom Joad!”

“To the ghost of old Tom Joad!” we cheered, and took our shots.

We reclaimed our seats at the table, and Karen was having more success in dodging Brian’s conversational attempts as she and Lara began discussing costumes for the upcoming production of *Much Ado About Nothing*, which the school had decided to set in 1920’s Chicago. Karen was a bit of a jack-of-all-trades in the theatre department—sewing costumes, building props, playing some minor roles. But she really shone as a stage manager. To this day when she’s mad at me I picture her sitting behind a table among a sea of red seats, her face lit slightly from below by a table lamp, tapping a pen on a script.

That night, though, she was loose, unworried, lubricated by hazelnut and Everclear. She leaned in towards Lara as they talked about putting spats on undergrads and I listened, even though I had no investment in that particular production. That fall my world was Steinbeck; Shakespeare would have to wait until spring, when auditions for *Twelfth Night* might make my lack of curves an asset rather than a hindrance, when I might get to play a character over the age of twelve, a love interest—that is, if I could beat out Ariana, the

department darling. So instead of joining in the conversation, I people-watched our fellow train shooters and stole the occasional sip of Brian's beer.

Most of the other patrons—twenty, maybe twenty-five in all now—were students like us, mostly young, maybe a few grad students. Lots of hoodies with the school colors and mascot (Louie the Lumberjack), lots of unwashed hair. There was a table of older guys that looked like the type to work on the ski slope during the season, and a couple who appeared to only be drinking gin and tonics. They must have wandered into the bar without knowing about the special, and didn't seem thrilled with the rowdiness and regular interruptions.

My attention was pulled back to our table when Brian—who'd been doing Zippo tricks to try to show off, snapping the lighter open and lit, dragging it up then down the thigh of his jeans to accomplish the same, flashy methods of producing pointless fire—dropped the Zippo in his beer with a splash.

“Ah, fuck!” Brian said, loudly enough for the bartender to look up.

He tried reaching a hand into his pint glass, but his fingers couldn't reach to the bottom to fish the lighter out of the mostly-foam. Karen was laughing and Lara was trying to pry Brian's fist back out of the glass. Then Karen's eyes moved to the door, and she stopped laughing. Her gaze shot back to the table and met mine with sympathy and apprehension.

I turned, and at first I just saw Caleb. When he walked into a room he captured my focus like he was a model, a movie star, a Greek god. So it took me a minute to notice that his hand was attached to a slender figure with long, long brown hair. A gorgeous figure. Ariana, our goddamn Rose of Sharon.

I pasted a smile on my face and waved at Caleb, ignoring the entity that was Ariana as she moved up beside him, bringing her other hand to his arm and snuggling up a little. They joined us at the table, and Caleb's first words were, "So how many have you guys done so far?"

"Just two," Brian said.

"All right," said Caleb. He walked to the bar and ordered four shots, paying full price, plus a pint of Guinness. He motioned Ariana over, and they each took two shots quickly, Caleb chasing with the beer. Ariana took it from him when he was done and sipped daintily, a hint of foam clinging to her lip and I hated her so much in that moment. After they joined us at the table, I tried not to watch Caleb, the way I tried every night on stage—to either keep my gaze away or look at him without eyes that telegraphed that he was beautiful, that he was adored.

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The funeral service is brief and closed-casket. The mother weeps, the father has trouble getting through his eulogy. After he is done he puts a hand on the casket, and we are all uncomfortable to watch this moment that feels so private. Funerals are for public grief, to talk and share and cry and be held, but there is another kind of grief that comes over you when you are alone, when it is dark, when there is only a single light on in your living room and you have had half a glass of wine and everything seems so quiet, like you might be the only person awake for miles. That is the kind of grief that demands your full attention and time, and you have to sit with it. You sit with it whenever you have a spare moment, until it decides it's done with you. This is the grief that we watch as a father's

hand rests on his child's casket. The body inside is that of an adult, but to the father it is his child, his child who is gone.

The wake lasts much longer, and is awkwardly reminiscent of the college reunion many of us have just attended. We mingle with cups of punch, our dresses and heels and suits very similar (though hopefully not the same) as the ones we wore at the hotel ballroom. Most of us caught up then, put in the time to find out what everyone has been up to in the last decade. I suspect that many people are only here because of the reunion, because these college ties feel so much closer now. They saw it in the paper and couldn't quite let themselves just feel a moment of sorrow and then relief at the knowledge that no one would expect them to travel to attend for someone they used to know.

Brian is sitting with Caleb's wife, a tall but frumpy woman, wide of hip. I don't see any of their children, though we learned at the reunion that Caleb and his wife already had three, and she's pregnant again (rumors abounded that they got married because of pregnancy number one). To Karen's complete shock, Brian had introduced us to his partner of five years, a man named Bill. Brian had noticed the look on Karen's face as she shook Bill's hand, and laughed.

"I may have been overcompensating a little back in the day," he said.

"You should have told her," I said. "Drunk Karen likes making out with gay men. It would have dramatically improved your chances." Karen had slapped my arm—hard—and Bill had snorted into his punch.

Bill comes up behind Brian and puts his hands on his shoulders. I can see him asking Caleb's wife if she needs anything. Whatever she tells him, Karen is there in a heartbeat ready to oblige while Bill stays with Brian. Before the reunion, we hadn't spoken

to any of these people in years. Now, I can't tell if it feels like we are old friends, or like it's a play we are putting on about old friends who have come together under tragic circumstances.

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The night of the train shots, I lost count well before we left the bar. I bought rum and Cokes between shots, glaring at Caleb and Ariana and mostly ignoring the rest of my friends. Karen stuck by me, occasionally trying to force me to drink water. The warning bells begin to run together. I lost the gaps between trains, and it felt like as soon as one finished roaring past, the whistle receding into the distance, the bells signaled another coming down the tracks. I did shot after shot, in unison with my friends but isolated just the same.

Eventually the bartender bellowed for last call. We all waited to see if there would be one more train. Caleb ordered another beer, and between taking long pulls he lowered it to Ariana, who was nestled in his arm, and held it for her to sip at. I didn't think she'd been doing all the shots with us, but she was so tiny that she looked completely smashed anyway, her eyes a little glassy. But she stayed beautiful, of course: her hair still perfectly in place, makeup nearly flawless—just a tiny smudge at the corner of one eye that looked sexy rather than sloppy, like it would on an average girl.

There was no last train, and the bartender called out that they were closing. Everyone began shuffling towards the door. We were the last patrons, fumbling in our booth for purses and phones and scarves, and the bartender caught us before we could leave.

“I’ve got the rest of the shot pitcher, if you guys want to finish it,” she said.

“Otherwise I’m just going to throw it out.”

She was pretending to address all of us, but really she was talking to Caleb, even though he had Ariana pressed to his side. That’s how magnetic he was. He made you want to throw your hat in the ring just in case, just on the off chance.

She poured the remainder into a pint glass, and we passed it around, cheering, as everyone sipped various amounts. Brian tried to show off by taking a huge gulp but ended up almost spitting it on the floor. I took three separate gulps, nearly a shot each. I immediately regretted it; my stomach started to roll as soon as I finished swallowing. Ariana reached for the pint glass but Caleb stopped her. He took it and finished the rest, tilting his head back. I watched his throat work as he swallowed, ripples under tanned skin and stubble. When the glass was empty he turned and gave Ariana a deep kiss, leaving her just a taste of the drink. I turned and pushed my way to the door.

Outside, the air was cool, and I felt a little better. Most of us lived in the cheap apartments just north of campus, so we headed out in a pack. Caleb was nearly carrying Ariana, Karen was making sure I didn’t run into anything, and Marietta and Lara were strolling arm in arm singing something that may have been the “Matchmaker” song from *Fiddler on the Roof*, but it was sung garbled at top volume so it was impossible to be sure. We crossed the tracks—not a train in sight—but as soon as we were over, I felt my throat tighten and my stomach heaved.

“Uh oh,” I said, and stumbled over to some bushes near the Amtrak station.

I tried to just bend over but immediately lost my balance and landed hard on hands and knees. I started throwing up helplessly in the dirt, the alcohol I’d just finished drinking

burning as it worked its way back up. The syrupy coffee flavor was horrible mixed with the rest of my stomach contents, and I started crying. Then I felt hands on the side of my head gently pulling back my hair, and when they had it contained in one hand the other dropped to my back, rubbing in circles the way my mother used to do when I was sick as a child. But the hands felt large, and I wasn't surprised when I heard Caleb start making "shhh, shhh" noises at me. If I hadn't been so drunk and upset I probably would have been horrified, but all I could feel then was gratitude. His hand held my hair gently, and he rubbed my back with just the right amount of pressure—not firm enough to irritate the skin, not so light it would tickle.

My stomach emptied, I struggled to my feet. Caleb helped, one hand under my elbow and the other on my hip to keep me from pitching to the side or backwards. I wiped the dirt from my hands against my pants, and then the back of my sleeve over my mouth. I turned and there was Karen, holding out a stick of gum. I put it in my mouth and chewed, not looking at anyone, just looking out into the black night. Flagstaff is a dark sky city because of the observatory, which means that they place fewer, dimmer streetlights than in most cities, and businesses and homes limit their external light. The stars are almost as visible there at night as they are out in the desert, and you feel the night more than you do in a place like Phoenix, where the city's constant glow gives you the impression that people are awake with you even at one in the morning. In Flagstaff, it feels like everyone else has gone to bed already and you're out wandering the night. When you're young, this can feel exciting, transgressive. It can also make you feel like a chronic insomniac even when you're not, or like everyone else has learned how to be a person and you are the only one who doesn't understand the etiquette of sunset.

But this dark night was suddenly lit by red flashing, as the bells started to go off to signal a train. It wasn't visible yet, but I chewed my gum and stared down the tracks. Then a tiny, soft hand slid along my left fingers and curled around them, drawing me forward toward the tracks.

“Have you ever screamed at a train?” Ariana asked. I shook my head, bewildered. “You wait for it to go by, and then you just scream your guts out and you can't even hear yourself, and no one else can hear you, and it's better than any yelling into a pillow you've ever done. I like to scream my name, sometimes.”

We stepped around the red and white arm that descends to prevent cars from crossing, so there would be nothing between us and the train. Ariana and I held hands and waited, the sound of the approaching train reaching us as it whistled to signal the town. The headlight came into view, and I felt another hand, the one that had just held my hair and hip and brushed across my back in soothing strokes, entwined with my right. I stood between Ariana and Caleb, and as the train drew near enough for us to hear the rail start to shriek, I sucked a huge breath into my lungs and screamed, with every ounce of volume my chords and years of vocal training could muster, drawn out and exaggerated syllables of my own full name, *Estella* (oh how I hated that my name was Estella, and not just Stella, but I screamed it anyway, part of the whole) *Marie Yarborough*. I couldn't hear myself. I couldn't hear Ariana or Caleb. I couldn't hear anything but the train, a loud rushing wind and a grinding of metal and whistles and bells at excruciating volume so close. I heard nothing but I felt both hands, the small soft one in my left and the large smooth one in my right, tighten around mine as we tensed with the effort of screaming, as we held onto each other in the face of this sound and light.

We flung our voices at the train and let the passengers and cargo and metal carry little pieces of our breath and echoes of us away into the dark.

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The wake is wrapping up, but I can't wait any longer. I tell Karen I'm going outside, and head out to the parking lot and pull my cigarettes from my bag. I don't even get one out of the pack before I see Caleb sitting behind the wheel of an SUV. I walk over to the car and rap on the window. He doesn't roll it down, doesn't look up, but he reaches over and unlocks the doors. I go around to the passenger side and get in.

"I need to go for a drive," he says. "Will you come with me?"

I nod and put on my seatbelt. He's still not looking at me so I don't know if he saw my nod but he starts the car. I text Karen, to tell her that I'm with Caleb and I don't know when I'll be back. We don't speak.

I don't say anything at all until Caleb gets on I-17, heading north. "Where are we going?" Caleb doesn't respond, so I say, "I don't care where, I just need to let Karen know."

There's a long pause, and then Caleb says, "I just want to see it."

At first I'm confused, and then my body flushes cold and my fingertips go numb. "Caleb, no."

"I don't mean the train, or that I want to look for blood on the tracks. I just...I know where she did it, and that's where I need to be today. That funeral wasn't real, you know? I can't feel things like that, in front of people. And I need to feel this."

"Caleb, your wife is back at the church."

“I called Brian. He and Bill are going to take care of her and the kids until I get back.”

I stare at him, chewing on my lip until I taste salt. His expression doesn't change, his face is composed, impassive. I can't tell what's going on under there, and I'm not sure he can either. I lean back in my seat and turn to face front. “Okay.”

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To supplement my undergrad scholarship, I worked at a funky clothing-and-jewelry store that catered to the college punks. It was right next to the train tracks, and when a train went by it was almost impossible to hear customers on the phone. I'd been working there a few months when I first heard about flattening pennies. According to my coworkers, if you placed pennies on the tracks, when the train went by it would crush them flat and you could collect distended, thin copper strips from next to the rails afterward; if you were fast enough they'd still be hot. Also according to my coworkers, as children they'd been told that a penny on the rail could derail a train, but they—as children—had done it anyway, placed pennies and then waited, half-terrified, half-gleeful, for approaching whistles.

I fetched a dime from my bag and changed it for five pennies and a nickel out of the register. I went out by myself and lined the six coins up on the rail. When the next train came by, I was ringing up a customer, so I didn't make it in time to see if they were still hot, but the train did pass by uninterrupted. During the next lull I went outside to retrieve my prizes. I could only find three pennies, and they were much farther from the rail than I had expected, even though I felt like I should have known that the train would fling them away. The pennies were irregular oval wafers, nothing like the pennies that came out of the machines at tourist attractions with sea lions and castles and carousel horses printed on

them. These showed the motion of the train, that even passing at regular speed along a straight rail five pennies placed inches apart would be reformed differently from each other.

For a while I placed pennies out on the tracks regularly. I also flattened a few nickels, though I never tried a quarter. All my dimes ended up lost, either small enough to be missed among the railyard gravel or light enough to be flung so far I didn't look for them in the proper place. I collected them in my wallet, then in a dish in my kitchen, thinking to turn them into jewelry or glue a bunch to a flower pot or give them out at the bars. But eventually I quit that job and without any new pennies coming in, collecting them seemed foolish, so I threw them away. They were worth so little before the train flattened them, and then for a while they had the value that any collector puts on their collectibles—arbitrary value, the value of saying that something is pretty and important. And then they were just trash.

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The sun is setting as we drive up the mountain. It's almost two hours to Flagstaff, and Caleb and I spend most of it in silence. Rounding the peaks and emerging onto sudden open valleys at this time of day is beautiful, one of my favorite views, and I try to appreciate it as we drive, but it feels wrong. I spend some of the time looking at Caleb instead, still blond, still handsome, still tan, but now I can pull my eyes away easily. He doesn't shine the same. By the time we hit the high elevations, the sun has set and the gorgeous pinks and oranges have been pulled down behind the horizon with it. We wind up the rest of the mountain in the dark.

Almost to town, Caleb finally starts talking. “She was just so gorgeous. It seemed like she would make it for sure. I didn’t know about myself, you know, but I moved to LA with her anyway. I’m sorry we never looked you and Karen up, by the way, while you were there, but you know how it is, the city is so big, and auditions and all...And that whole first year, it seemed like at any minute someone was going to stop her at a Starbucks and just hand her a script and it would happen.” Caleb takes one hand off the wheel and snaps his fingers. “It never did, for her or for me, but I was fine being a waiter, and doing student films and stuff, but she turned into...she was like an aluminum can. She got so thin on the outside—still the same shape, but it just looked like you could crumple her in your fist.”

“I think she was a little like that in college too,” I say.

“Yeah but...I didn’t see how bad it had gotten, and I didn’t mean to...We were talking about the trains to someone once, about being in college and having those trains there and how once a year or so someone would get drunk and think they could beat the train, but you can’t tell how fast they’re going, they seem so far away and then they’re on top of you. And someone asked if people ever did it on purpose, and I thought I was being funny and, you know, darkly comic, and I said, it’s like being an actor. It’s so easy. You just hit your mark, and then wait for the spotlight to hit you.”

I cover my mouth with my hand and make a little moaning sound. I wonder if I had heard him say that, before, if I might have laughed.

“What I’m saying is...I think I gave her the idea.”

“Years ago,” I say. “Years ago, though. She could just as easily have seen it on the news or a movie since then.”

“We were just together at the reunion. We barely spoke. It was hard to look at her. I think she just got thinner and thinner until she was starting to wear through, and then she did what I told her.”

“I don’t think it was you,” I said. I pause, and then I tell him about after the reunion.

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Ariana came alone. She was still so beautiful, but no longer young. She talked to everyone, near as I could tell, seeming full of life and energy, the social butterfly. When the evening started to wind down, she started trying to recruit people to come out for a drink. Karen and the other early risers declined, but a few of us were up for it. We cabbled downtown and picked one of the old haunts, a hotel with a martini bar on the second floor, featuring a wraparound porch that looked over the little city. Ariana bought every round, trying to keep the party going, but gradually everyone else trickled out, until it was just the two of us remaining. She asked me tons of questions and seemed genuinely interested in the answers, and I wouldn’t realize until the next morning that I’d learned next to nothing about her life since college.

Eventually last call came, and I pulled out my phone to summon a cab. Ariana put her hand on mine. “Do you remember the night we screamed at the train?”

I laughed. I had nearly forgotten. “I haven’t been able to stand hazelnut since.”

“I want to do that again. Do you want to?”

I didn’t particularly want to, but Ariana wanted it badly, I could tell. So I put my phone away and we walked a few blocks down to the tracks.

She crossed them, wanting to be on the south side, where we'd been over a decade earlier. I was realizing how drunk I was, my ears ringing with a low steady buzz. Ariana, again on my left, took my hand, and we waited for a train. It didn't take long. The bells chimed, the bar lowered, the light approached. Ariana's hand in mine squeezed, and I took a breath. The train went by and I sent my name with it, but it was a long train and I ran out of air long before it ran out of cars. I looked over at Ariana to see that her face was red, her lips pursed together so tightly they were white, and there were tears running down her cheeks.

When the train had fully passed, she let go of my hand and wiped her eyes. "Thank you for coming with me," she said. She seemed disappointed, but then rapidly bounced back. We laughed as we stumbled back downtown and got in separate cabs, promising to get together in Phoenix soon.

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Caleb pulls the SUV into the Amtrak parking lot. I can't tell what he's thinking, or if my story made him feel any better. He takes a flask out of the center console and unscrews the top, taking a long pull. He offers it to me, and I take a sip, discovering that it contains bourbon as it hits my tongue and burns its way down. We get out of the car, and as we walk to the tracks, he takes my hand.

We stand and wait for the train. My right hand holds Caleb, my left hand feels strange and empty. I am suddenly very afraid of what will happen when the train goes by, that I will find myself rendered mute, unable to make a sound even though I want to. I squeeze Caleb's hand tightly, paranoid that one of us will suddenly make a dash for the tracks. And I can't help picturing what I don't want to picture—Ariana waiting here, alone

in the dark, with her mind made up or still trying to decide, or trying to talk herself out of it, but when the train comes she has only to take a few brisk steps onto the track, making sure not to trip, and turn to face the light as the whistle becomes more frequent, more insistent, trying to warn, before the light overwhelms her and darkness falls like a curtain.

## LAUDANUM

We find it hard to get hold of guns in this boomtown, so we drink our gin with opium in it and it is very like and not at all like going to sleep. Wouldn't be ladylike anyway, soiled doves though we are, for our brains to mottle the wallpaper—we leave that to the men. Their blood, the blood of their enemies, the blood of the man who cheats at cards, it seems like every night someone's blood is going on the wall. It makes our heads hurt, the boom boom boom of blood being spattered, so doc gives us a tincture and the pain goes away. But soon other things start to hurt, like the space between our legs where we earn our living, or our hearts. We wait for our men, and we drink while we wait, and they are no longer coy about naming it suicide, those doctors, those bearers of tincture of poppy and juniper. Maybe we meant it and maybe we didn't but they aren't coming back and neither are we.

## THE DANGER IS TO THE BODY

*The radioactively contaminated waste should be isolated from the biosphere until the risks posed by possible releases are acceptably small. In order to accomplish this isolation, knowledge of the location and the nature of the wastes must be maintained and passed on to successive future societies. Markers are physical structures (such as earthworks, stone monoliths, and rock cairns) that are capable of carrying the intended message for a long period of time. The message is the means of communicating with whatever future societies may exist.*

— from the Sandia National Laboratories report, “Expert Judgment on Markers to Deter Inadvertent Human Intrusion into the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant” (1991)

Denta wants to be let down. She’s only wiggling her butt and putting her claws into my arm a little, but I know that soon she’s going to start kicking with her back legs, and I’ll have to put her collar back on and she’s going to hate that. I give her head a little scratch and sing her song, but she only shakes her head against my hand, flicking my fingers with her ears.

“Denta,” I tell her, “it’s not safe for you here.” She looks up at me and her ears go a little flat, her tail whipping against my legs. I sigh and take a handful of her scruff as I set her down in the dirt. Pulling her collar from my pouch, I try to keep it out of sight until I’m sliding it around her neck. The ends braid themselves together before she notices, and then she tries to leap away before I can get a grip on the leash. But I know her and I’m faster than her and I’ve got a firm hold already. She wasn’t really trying, anyway. Sometimes she pulls so hard that I can hear a little “kkk” sound in her throat, and I worry that one of these days she’s going to hurt herself. But today she only reaches the end of the slack and then slumps toward the ground, refusing to look at me.

It’s my own fault. Denta’s not a bad kitty at all, but Bia says that I let her run around too often and now she’s wild. Wild is the worst thing a kitty can be, according to Bia, because if they run away, we are lost. But I know that Denta would never run away on purpose. I’m only worried that someone will steal her, or that she’ll get eaten.

Bia sent us out to try to gift something to the priests, so that they'll gift us some water. Our jars are low, and all anyone is talking about is what will happen if they empty before the rains come. This makes me want to put bugs in their ears while they sleep, because we'll do what we always do if we run out before the rains come. We'll be thirsty. I told Bia that if we are all so worried about it, we should try to keep better track of when the rains are scheduled, but Bia only slapped me over my ear and told me to go pick grass. I hate picking grass, because no one will give me a knife yet and so I have to just pull hard until the grass breaks, or the whole thing yanks up out of the ground with its roots hanging heavy at the bottom. Even if you wrap your hands in leather first they get raw by the time you've picked what Bia will think is enough, and Bia does not ever think we have enough grass. We always need more for baskets, more for the floor, more to burn. If I get caught making faces, my hands hurt for a moon and a half.

It's safe to send me and Denta to gift with the priests, because they don't have any use for a kitty. Their gods told them where all the danger is, so they could warn everybody. But if they were better at warning we wouldn't need kitties, so I don't think their gods are very good ones. Or maybe the priests are just too crazy, from living up in the mountain for more harvests than anybody has a number for.

There's a path we are supposed to follow, whenever we want to go see the priests. I don't have to follow it, because of Denta, but I try to stay on it anyway. Most of the time. Except when there's good bugs, or a longear hopping around, and I have to go off the path. I'm faster than the bugs anyways, and the longears would run from a big animal or men, so I know that it's safe to follow them.

Today there aren't any longears, just an itsi spread flat on a rock in a little wedge of shade. I have lots of itsi tails, which I dried in the meathouse and put in one of my hidden jars, because I believed the firehead girl when she told me that the itsi would try to come find their tails because they can put them back on. But Joe Cloud told me that they just grow a new tail, so it's no fun to steal them anymore. Maybe I'll grind them to powder and put them in the firehead girl's bread.

Denta doesn't care about itsi, either. When she was a new kitty, she used to bite off their heads, but I think they taste bad even to a kitty, so now she ignores them like she does Bia. I reach down and give her a pat on the rear so she'll get moving. Denta likes being outside too much to be mad about her leash for long.

My slippers are starting to wear out on the bottom, but there's no holes yet, so Bia hasn't made me sew more leather onto them. But I can feel all the rocks on the ground like I'm almost not wearing any slippers at all, and I can tell the rocks are very hot. That itsi better make sure it stays in the shade or it's going to cook. Denta's feet were made to walk on hot rocks, which is why she doesn't need me to carry her. I tried to make her some slippers once, but she chewed them off right away. Dogo laughed at me and told me not to let Bia see that I'd cut up the leather. Dogo is very old, so I know that when he laughs at me I don't have to be mad about it. He's been around for so long that everything we do is funny to him.

Denta starts up the mountain and I follow her swishing tail. Her leash is twice as long as me when I lay down, but I only let her have about four footsteps of room so that she doesn't forget she can't run. The priests live in big rooms made of rock, and there's rooms for them all around the mountain. If a new family makes a home nearby, the priests

build a new room between them and the mountain. Some people in my family say it's because the priests like gifts and they want to be ready to receive them as soon as possible, but Joe Cloud says it's because they always want to have a room between a family and the mountain.

In my pouch, I carry the things Bia gave me to try to gift. We have some shells from the salt bay, which the priests would have to walk for at least a moon to reach. The shells don't really do anything, but the priests can't get them on their own so they might want them. Dogo gave me a little broken piece of one, which I sometimes tie in my hair. Bia also gave me some firestarter, mostly because it doesn't weigh much. We never know when the priests will need more, because they don't seem to have a fire every night, but sometimes when they pray they light a fire that lasts for days. The thing that Bia thinks they will want most is the sickness medicine. The priests don't need it, because their gods keep them safe. But a lot of the travelers who try to gift with them arrive sick, so for the priests the medicine is sometimes a better gift than water.

By the time I reach the priests I'll be hungry, so I also brought a bread and some dried pig to eat before I come back down. My water bag is only half full, but the priests will fill it for me even if they won't gift us any water. A family who runs out of water because they can't make it to the rains is thirsty because of their greed, but a traveler can only carry so much water with them, and I'm small.

Denta and I climb together, and every so often she looks back at me. Even if she wiggles when I carry her and sometimes she hisses at me if I don't let her get her way, I know she loves me, and I think she worries when it's hot. There's already a big wet sweaty spot on the part of my wrapper that touches the bottom of my back, but Denta never

sweats, even though she's covered in fur. Dogo says it's because the ones who made her gave her special fur, because they knew her life would be spent in the sun. I told Dogo the ones who made me should have given me special fur too, then. Dogo laughed at me.

"Don't be silly, mumbi-owl," he said. "You know nobody made people."

I try to keep my eyes on the ground, so that I can avoid stepping on any especially sharp rocks or poke-plants with my thin slippers, and because if you don't keep your eyes down enough the sun puts spots in your eyes. But even though I try to make them wait, my eyes slink up at the mountain, because I know that soon I'll be able to see the thorns. I've never been past the priests' stone room, so I don't know how big they are, but I heard a boy in my family say once that his dogo told him they are taller than any tree he'd ever seen, and his dogo had been born in the waterlands, before they poisoned, where trees were much taller than they are here. They stick out from the sides of a flat place near the top of the mountain, and they are not made of rock, or wood, or grass, or leather. To me, they look the same color as the smooth parts of Denta's collar, where you put your thumbs when you want the fibers to unweave, and I wonder if, like the bits on her collar, they don't get warm no matter how hot the day is.

I'm looking up to see if Denta and I can see the thorns yet, but there's just some cactuses with their arms up like they're waving. My toe kicks up a loose clump of rock, which rolls clacking down the hill behind us. A longear dashes out from behind a boulder and takes off, running away from the path. All four of its legs leave the ground at once every time it leaps, and its gait is much faster than mine. I can only follow them if I'm quiet and they are hopping along like they don't have anywhere to be. Denta never bothers them. They'll flee from a coyote or a growlcat, but they don't seem to be afraid of kitties.

But the longear lets me know that the path is safe for now, so I give Denta a few extra footsteps on her leash. Her ears perk up and her tail swishes faster. I laugh at her, but she doesn't mind. She knows I laugh like Dogo. And, since I know it's safe, I sing Denta her song. Most of the words to the song aren't words, but some of them are, and the man who brought Denta to my family taught us what the song means. He told us it's to remind us about what happens when kitties change color. Denta is gray, but some kitties are black, or copper, or a mix of colors. But when a kitty looks like the moon shining on grass, you have to run.

I've only seen Denta change color once. We had just gotten her, and my pap was still alive. He took me to visit another family, a half-moon's walk away, because a lady from his close family had gone there before I was born to start a different close family, and he wanted me to meet them. But I never got to, because on our way there we came across some travelers who took all our water, and we had to head up into the mountain to try to find the priests. We climbed for too long without finding a stone room, and that's when Denta changed color. The sun had gone below the desert already, and so when she changed color we saw right away. She glowed, green, like the moon shining on the grass. Her eyes turned the same color, not yellow, like they normally are. My pap picked us both up and started running down the mountain. The priests found us, because they could see Denta even in the dark, and they gave all three of us water and sickness medicine. Denta and I got better right away, and so did my pap, but he got the slow sickness too and was dead before the next harvest.

Denta's song is supposed to be about how you should run when you see a kitty change color, but the only words to the song my family knows are kitty, and burn, and god.

The man who brought Denta made everyone in the family learn it anyway, and told us to sing it to any travelers we met. The song sounds happy, and it says kitty a bunch of times, so it's easy to remember. I think that's why Denta likes it.

I follow Denta around the bend in the path that sticks to the mountain's sheer side, and when I look up again I can see the thorns. "Look, Denta," I say. Denta never cares, but maybe she can't see that far. Denta likes to pretend not to see things, like itsi and Bia, so I never know how good her eyes are.

It's hard not to keep looking at the thorns, but I know my eyes will be spotty if I don't make them behave. So I watch Denta's tail waving like a snake on mud, and how it stands up a little straighter whenever I sing one of the kitty parts of her song.

We climb the mountain until we reach the open space, where the rocks have been cleared away, which lets us know that we are almost to the priests. The ground is steep enough here that the thorns are out of sight, and the open space has been made on purpose. This is the place where travelers can set up camp, if they are traveling a long way. The dirt here is packed down from feet, and the clumps of dry grass that are almost everywhere else on the mountain have been worn away. I stop to drink some water, because soon the priests will give me more. I pour some into my hand and hold it out for Denta to lick up, and when she's done I rub my wet palm all over my hot face. Right before we reach the priests, I'll drink the rest, but if I drink it all now my stomach is going to pop out like a frog neck.

Since we are close, I don't sing any more, and I pull Denta's leash in until she's walking right next to me. I step carefully so that I don't kick any more rocks. Sending me to gift with the priests is a good idea, because they give me better gifts than they do when a

dogo or Bia tries. And if they gift us water, if I am the one they are gifting to, they'll send some priests down the mountain with me to carry the water for me in a wheelcart. This means that no one else in the family has to be taken away from their work to carry the water. But I have to be careful. I'm not old enough to join someone else's close family yet, but Bia puts extra tight wrappers under my normal wrapper so that my body looks skinny up-and-down like it used to, before the last harvest, so that no men want to try to steal me. And even though I tell them that I would be safer if they gave me a knife, there are boys older than me who don't have one yet, so I can't protect myself with a weapon. I have to protect myself by being quiet, and careful.

The priests' room isn't visible yet, but I can see smoke now, just a thin finger reaching up into the sky. That means the priests probably still have firestarter, but maybe they are burning some of the last of it. It's hard to get some of the grasses to burn without it, and as hot as it is during the day, if you aren't always ready to make a fire it can get cold enough to make you shake yourself right out of your bed sometimes.

I watch for longears and listen for clicking bugs, but I don't see or hear any. That doesn't mean that I need to be worried. The priests scare off most of the longears just by themselves. But I would feel better if I saw one now. Denta knows where we are, and she stays right next to me without flattening her ears.

I stop before we turn the last bend, where we would be able to see the stone room. I drink the rest of my water, saving a handful for Denta. The priests would still give me water even if they watched me drink all mine, but Bia says it's better to arrive with an empty water bag anyway. I will wait to eat my bread and pig until after I talk to the priests,

because I will offer them some, even though they won't take it. No one wants my dried pig but me. It's just a part of the gifting.

Denta and I follow the curve of the path cautiously, but there is no one in sight. The big room is at the end of the path. From here, it doesn't look that big, but as we get closer it will grow into something that you could fit many of my close family's room into. Less priests live here than I have fingers and toes, but the priests seem to want more space than the families do. The big room grows and grows, the finger of smoke still poking the sky. When we are close enough that if I held the end of Denta's leash she could still put her paws to their grass door, I hear voices that I know do not belong to the priests. Most of the priests are old, and the ones who aren't old are almost always traveling to spread their message to the families, and try to bring home new priests. These voices sound only as old as my pap was when he died, and they are loud. The priests speak softly, so that you have to stand close to hear them, because they save their voices unless they are warning. But they would never be warning in the big room.

If there are men in there with the priests, when they come out they will head back down the mountain, so I turn and lead Denta around the side of the big room. We loop almost all the way, until we are on the mountain-side, where the priests keep their jars and wheelcarts. I push myself between two carts that are close together. The wheels are big and thick, because they have to be able to roll down the rocky mountain without spilling the water jars, so once I sit down I am hidden. Denta crawls into my lap and lies down, curling her tail around herself. We may have a long wait, and I wish I hadn't drunk all my water. If I'm here long enough to need to eat, the dried pig is going to be very salty.

I can hear the voices of the priests as well as the younger men now, but I can't make out what they are saying. The younger men seem like they might be angry, which means they have traveled far. Everyone who lives around the mountain knows that you will not get good gifts if you speak in anger. They talk, and I pet Denta, and look for longears up in the rocks. Not to see if it is safe, but just for something to keep myself busy.

Finally I hear the grass door scraping back, and the men come around the corner where I am sitting behind the carts. But unless these angry men have been gifted more water than they could need in five moons, they won't need enough carts to come close to me. I can hear jars being put on wheelcarts, but not many. The priests wish the younger men luck on their journey, but not as nicely as they do when they say it to me or my family.

Then the men start to pull the wheelcarts away, but there is something strange about the way the carts sound. I press my back into the stone of the room and listen hard, trying to figure out what is different. When I see the first wheelcart, I realize that the different sound is the wheels, not rolling down their usual path, but up into rocky terrain. The men are going farther up the mountain.

My mouth gets as dry as if I had been sucking on a piece of dried pig. I pull Denta up into my chest, and she lets me. I slowly gather my legs under me, keeping low. The priests would probably not let the men take me, but I have not heard anyone raise their voice to a priest in a long time, and I don't know how many of the younger men there are. The priests might not be able to stop them.

If I stay where I am, the men may just wheel their carts away and never look back to see me, but I think it will be better if I can get behind the big room while they are busy

with their carts. My thin slippers cling to my feet as I slide carefully forward, not making a sound. I lean out just enough to look around the edge of the cart that had been hiding me, and see that in addition to the men pulling the first two carts, there are enough men to pull many more, standing surrounding the priests. A few of the priests face my direction, but all of the younger men face away, so as quickly as I can move without disturbing a single rock, I slip past the far cart and behind the wall of stone.

I carry Denta around the room, pausing at the low side so that I can make sure that all the men are headed up the mountain. Moving to the corner of the room on the down-mountain side of the door, I wait until the voices of the men fade, and the priests return to their room, the door scraping closed behind them. Then I peek around the corner, again and again, as the men become small dark specks climbing up the rock face. I wait until I can't hear them at all, and then I look around the corner a few more times, waiting in between, to make sure that none are coming back. When I try to put Denta down, I see that she has dug her claws into my chest hard enough to draw blood, but she lets go when I sing to her, quietly, a little of her song.

I lead Denta around the corner on her leash, pull the grass door open and lay it aside, and then wait for one of the priests to come to greet me. The one who comes is a priest I've met before. Last time he made me a gift of some cactus fruit in exchange for a small piece of my bread. When he sees me and Denta, he tries to block the doorway.

"Go back down the mountain," he says. "Today is not a good gift day."

He speaks in the soft voice all of the priests use, but one of the other priests joins him at the entrance. This is one of the older priests, who is missing most of his teeth. I have never gifted with him, but he is usually sitting in front of the fire, whether or not there

is any grass burning in it. The toothless priest sees me and Denta, and pulls the cactus-fruit priest away by grabbing a handful of the thick long wrappers they all wear.

“Come in, girl,” says the toothless priest.

I step inside, and Denta follows me. All the priests turn to look, and then they all move toward us. But their eyes are on Denta, and I reach down and pick her up.

One of the priests takes my water bag and brings it to the center of the room, where a number of hides form another, smaller room, smaller than the one my close family lives in. This is where the priests keep their water. He pulls a hide aside enough to enter, and then comes the familiar sound of water being pulled from the earth. No one other than the priests has seen what is behind the hides, but whatever they do to get the water, it makes a sound like singing thunder in your throat. Joe Cloud says there is a hole behind the hides that goes down and down and down to an underground saltless bay, and that the sound we hear is the priests’ gods groaning from the difficulty of pushing the water up, but I don’t believe him. I think that the small room has an old-thing in it, like Denta’s leash, something that will do its job until all our bones are dust in the ground.

The priest brings me back my water bag, and then the toothless priest speaks. “We would like to gift you water today, girl.”

My mouth dries up again, and I am afraid to speak. The priests have never offered the first gift to me. We always offer a gift from the family, and then the priests offer something in return. We almost always want water, so it is usually a matter of how many jars they will gift us. If we need something besides water, we might say, “These grass ropes were woven by the most skilled in our family, who worked until their fingers refused to bend, so that we might bring you a gift of the highest quality.” And then the priests

might give us warming salve for the old people in the family, whose hands have filled with pain as they live through more and more harvests. But we always offer something first.

I open my mouth and the usual words come out. “Our family would gratefully receive your gift of water.” This is what I am supposed to say near the end, before the priests tell me how many jars. Usually when I say that, I’m done with my part. But now I have to keep talking. “Our family has sent me with a gift for you, as well.” I shift Denta over to my shoulder so that I can hold her up with one arm, and get Bia’s gifts from my pouch with my other hand. The priests watch Denta as she hooks her paws over me. “Our family would like you to have firestarter, so that you always have warmth and light.”

The toothless priest speaks quickly. “Thank you for this gift. We would like to give you five carts, with as many jars of water as will fit in them, as well as priests to bear the water home to your family.”

I feel like I may start crying. We have only ever gotten one cart before, and it’s usually not even all the way full of jars. I don’t know what is happening, and I’m scared. “Your gift is most generous, and our family thanks you. We would also like to offer a gift of shells, carried from the salt bay. Our family hopes that you enjoy their beauty.”

I should have gifted the shells first, because they are the least valuable of our gifts. Now, it feels like I can’t stop there, so in addition to the shells, I pull the small box from my pouch. “Our final gift is sickness medicine, still sealed, so that those who do not hear your warnings may receive the gift of your aid.” These are words I have heard Bia and my pap and Dogo say to the priests many times. They always felt like a game, because we were supposed to pretend to be surprised to receive a gift in return. But now I don’t want

any more gifts from them, because my gifts aren't any good, and I don't know why they are gifting us so much water.

"We thank you for these gifts," the toothless priest says. "Your family's assistance with our warnings is a gift, indeed. We are grateful for any gift that might help us warn families and travelers of the dangers of the mountain." The toothless priest stares into my eyes, and then he looks at Denta.

My arm squeezes around her, and she lets out a small sound. He can't have Denta. Not just because she belongs to me, and my family, but because the man who gave her to us said that we could never gift her, or sell her, or trade her, and that if we did there would be no more sickness medicine coming to our side of the mountain. I'm not allowed to gift her to the priest, so I don't have to.

"Our family gratefully receives your gift of water," I say, because it's all I have left to say. Now is when I'm supposed to offer some of my bread and pig, but I'm too scared to eat and I just want to go home.

The cactus-fruit priest reaches out and turns me by my shoulder toward the door. "We will assist you with your water jars, if you are ready to begin your journey down the mountain." I walk outside, and the cactus-fruit priest follows, as well as a very young priest I've never seen before. He must be a new gift from one of the other families.

I'm still holding my gifts, because I'm not supposed to hand them to a priest until the carts are loaded with jars, but I need to set Denta down, so I slide them back in my pouch. I put Denta on the ground and hold her leash so there's no slack at all, but she sticks right beside my feet and doesn't pull. The cactus-flower priest picks up several empty jars. "We have just gifted some other travelers with water as well, so it may take a little time for

us to fill enough jars for you. The new priest will help you put the full ones in the cart.”

The cactus-fruit priest looks at the young priest until the young priest nods, and then the cactus-fruit priest carries the jars back into the big room.

The new priest picks up two of the full jars near the stone wall and puts them into the cart. I start to help him, but as soon as I am close enough he starts talking to me, in a voice that is low even for the priests.

“You need to go back down, now,” he says. “There are men who were here before, and they wanted us to gift them a kitty, or help them catch one of the wild ones that live up on the mountain. When we told them that we could not gift what we do not have, and that we do not catch the wild kitties because our gods forbid it, they threatened to destroy the source of our water. The priests are very frightened, maybe frightened enough to break the rules of our gods and take your kitty from you.”

I look into the new priest’s eyes and see that he is serious, so I pick up Denta and turn down the mountain right away. Our family will be thirsty until the rains come, but at least we will have Denta. My feet take us quickly down the hill, and I’m almost to the bend when I hear one of the priests shout behind me. But the priests are old, and I am fast, and if I have to run all the way home I will, and they will never catch me.

Turning the bend so that we are out of sight of the priests, I walk faster. I follow the sharp curve of mountain that leads to the open space, but I am not listening. I am not paying attention. And when I step into the open space, all of the men who are setting up camp there see me, and Denta.

One of them shouts and points, and I whip around and run. Carrying Denta makes it harder, but I can do it. I run back up the path and around the bend, where the priests are

coming down after me. The first priest reaches out his arms to try to grab me, but I step off the path. Loose rocks slide under my feet but I keep moving, working my way uphill. There are priests everywhere, but not all of them are trying to stop me. I weave around them, jumping on and off the path to avoid their grasping hands, and I am most of the way through when I feel a sharp yank. I have dropped the end of Denta's leash, and one of the priests, a fat priest with fat hands, has grabbed it. I let go of Denta, because the leash and collar are old-things and will not break. Denta will break before they do.

Denta lands on all four of her feet, and the fat priest begins pulling her toward him by her leash. I throw myself at the priest, scratching, reaching for his face and kicking at his legs. Once I am upon him I also bite at him, at any part of him I can reach. He wails and drops the leash, raising one hand to his bleeding face and using the other to push my mouth away. I turn to Denta, but she is running. "Denta, no!" I scream, but she is very frightened and doesn't even stop at the sound of my voice. I chase after her, both of us moving full speed up the mountain.

Like the longears, Denta is much faster than me, but I am hoping that once we are away from the priests, she will slow down and let me catch her. I run as fast as I can, trying to keep her in sight. If I lose her, there are things on this mountain other than the men that could be dangerous for her. And she is dragging her leash behind her, which could get caught on something, trapping her, holding her in place for the growlcats to find.

Denta is far ahead of me when I see the men pulling carts. It takes Denta longer to spot them, but when she does she darts off the path and up the steeper ridge, a small shower of rocks falling down behind her. I follow her. It's harder to get traction off the path, but if the men turn at least I won't be running right up behind them.

I keep moving, but the rocks and bits of grass and uneven ground make it hard to see Denta. Tears are spilling down my cheeks, but I keep my eyes wide open and refuse to sob, because I need my breath to run. When I have gotten far enough from the path that I am sure that no one on it could hear me, I start singing to Denta. I stop running, because I want her to hear my voice, not my feet. I sing Denta's song, the whole thing, over and over, my eyes watching for movement. Once I see something small scurrying across the ground and my heart leaps, but it is only a longear.

I stop to drink some water and quickly eat my bread and pig. I hum while I chew, just in case. Then I start climbing again. I get higher, higher, until I can see the thorns.

The sun will be down too soon. The thorns look much larger than they do from below the big room of the priests, and my path up the mountain is taking me right to them. As much as I like to look at them during the day, I am afraid to walk among them in the dark.

I reach the flat part where the thorns rise up out of the ground after the sun has gone down, but before it is full night. When I'm close enough to put my hand on the first thorn, I can see that it is exactly the same color as the hard parts of Denta's collar, like I thought. When I stroke it I find that it also feels smooth to the touch, and that it does not hold heat like the rocks under my feet still do. I keep walking, and singing.

Near the middle of the group of thorns is a big room, covered in something that looks like what the thorns are made of, but not the same. This material has writing on it, both the old writing no one can read anymore, that looks like scratches or a line of sticks someone has kicked, and our writing. Once a group of travelers passed by where my

family lives, and they carried a small version of this with them. It was copper-colored, like when the rains turn the red dirt to mud, but it shone in the sun, brighter than quartz. They said they had ripped it from the earth and were bringing it past the waterlands, where they said people would find it very valuable. It also had the old writing on it, and the new, and the travelers said they thought the priests had added the new writing, harvests and harvests and harvests ago. The new writing told the story of a man, a warrior, who had fought many battles and been honored by his family. We didn't know why anyone would want to stick that in the ground.

This room does not have much writing on it, and not all of the old writing has our writing next to it. When I get closer, I can read three messages.

**We were once a powerful family.**

**This place does not have any gifts.**

**There is danger beneath. The danger is to the body.**

When I circle around it, I see that one wall of the room has been broken in, and there are stairs leading down into deep black darkness. I turn away from the room, and only realize I am still singing when I see Denta running toward me. I bend down and she jumps up into my arms, sinking her claws in. I cry and hold her to me, a little too tight. I wind her leash up in my hand so that it doesn't drag on the ground. Then there is a sound behind me, coming from the room.

Over my shoulder, I watch a shadow climb the stairs, a shadow that turns into a man. When he steps out into the sun's last light, I can see that his skin is blistered, like he has been burned. He looks down at Denta, and his eyes go wide. I look down at her, and

only then do I notice that she has changed color. As the world around us gets darker, she gets brighter, shining like wet grass.

The man stumbles towards us, reaching out his hands for Denta. I back away, but before he can get close he collapses onto the ground and vomits. He just lays there in the dirt and doesn't try to get up. Keeping as much space as I can between us, I go around and past him, and start to run. Carrying Denta, I dash past all the thorns and start down the mountain, the ground sliding away beneath my feet. I run until Denta stops glowing and turns gray again, and then I stop and put her down. I open my pouch, and take out my water bag and the sickness medicine I was supposed to gift to the priests. The medicine is in a casing that snaps like a piece of dry wood between my hands. Six small blue pebbles of medicine fall out into my palm, and I swallow one with several mouthfuls of water. Then, like I watched the priests do the last time Denta changed color, I pry open her mouth and put a medicine pebble in it. I circle her nose and mouth with my hand and stroke a finger down the fur on the front of her neck to make her swallow. She does, but when I let go of her face, her ears go flat. I drink more water and give some to Denta, who doesn't look at me until after she drinks.

The world is dark now. There is less than half a moon in the sky. But the reason Dogo calls me mumbi-owl is because I can see in the dark better than anybody in my family. That doesn't mean I'm not afraid of the darkness. Something can still eat me, even if I can see it.

We'll have to travel in the dark, though, because I want to get Denta and myself all the way down the mountain before the sun comes up. We can't use the path, so I will have to be very quiet.

I put the medicine and my water bag back in my pouch, and pick up Denta. We start down, around rocks and between poke-plants, and I hurry, but carefully.

When I get back to my family, without any water, I don't know what we will do, and I am scared for all of us. Even if Bia and the other bias and paps and dogos and dogas decide that we will stay, even if the men do not come for us, the priests may never gift with us again. The priests may not even be up the mountain anymore, if the men do what they threatened to do. We will have to find a new home and new priests, or live without anywhere to get water, and be thirsty. Denta and I will have to take the rest of this medicine, and if we move, the man who brought us Denta won't know where we went. The people who live far on the other side of the mountain, the ones who give the kitties to the families, and sometimes give casings of medicine to travelers to trade around the mountain, won't find us and can't help us.

It would be best, for my family, if the men who would have taken Denta burn all up among the thorns. They may not have been the ones who broke through the wall of the thorn room, but they are climbing down into the danger beneath. If they didn't listen to the messages, Denta wouldn't do them any good. I imagine them catching wild kitties up on the mountain and dragging them down into the darkness with them, where the kitties will change color and glow like moonlight on dewgrass, and then the men and the kitties will get sick and never come up out of the mountain. What good is a warning if you carry it into danger?

In the dark, I listen for bugs and longears and growcats and men, as I hold Denta to my chest and bring her home. Even if we have to find a new home, at least we have Denta. My family would never give her up, even if the men burned all our rooms to ash. We

deserve her. We watch for warnings. We listen. Denta belongs to our family, and she will keep us safe.

## THE UNDERSTUDIES EARP

## I

The alarm clock that I had then made a rooster sound, and on the morning of the auditions it crowed before the sun. I slapped at it and rolled out of bed, stubbing my toe on my bedframe, and stumbled into the kitchen in my tighty whities to make coffee. I turned the pot on without pouring the water in at first, only noticing when it started hissing and a burnt smell came from the grounds. Cursing, I opened the top and tipped the water into the already heated chamber, leaning away as scalding drops hopped back out at me.

I made my way to the bathroom to take a piss. When I was done, I reached for the seat to put it down, but then I remembered the empty half of the closet and left it up. I washed my hands and inspected my face in the mirror. For my job, I kept long sideburns with an otherwise clean-shaven face, but as I looked in the mirror I imagined a moustache hiding the set of my mouth, the ends dropping down like a long, stern frown before twisting up into a refined handlebar. Squinting my eyes and tilting my chin up so that I could look down at my reflection with disgust and loathing, I invoked the legendary words of Wyatt Earp.

“Go to fighting, or get away.”

They sounded pretty good coming out of a scratchy morning throat, and I pondered whether there was anything I could do to replicate the rasp later in the day. Stopping at the gas station and buying a pack of smokes crossed my mind. I hadn't smoked in three years, not since Lainie made me give it up, and after she moved out I thought of taking it back up

again. But the cough that had started waking me up in the night had disappeared with my Marlboros, so I'd held strong. It probably wasn't worth risking starting up again, not even for auditions.

I bypassed my regular costume, the Cowboy Elvis—the white jumpsuit with fringe and a rainbow of rhinestones, modified on the bottom into chaps, which I would wear with white jeans, white cowboy boots, and a white Stetson—in favor of my closet, where the black jeans, black Western shirt, and black boots waited for the day. I stripped off my underwear and pulled on a new pair of black Hanes. I dressed with purpose, choosing to feel that each piece of clothing that I put on transformed me, shaped me into a man who could be the stuff of legends, a holder of the line.

When I was clothed I headed to the kitchen to pour myself some coffee. Normally I took milk and sugar, but I'd been training myself to drink it black. Once or twice I'd even tried making it the cowboy way, boiling the grounds on the stove, but I couldn't stomach it that way yet. I promised myself that if I got cast, I'd get accustomed to the bitterness and grit. I poured myself a cup, drinking slowly and deliberately, scalding my tongue slightly but refusing to flinch.

I poured a second cup and took it to my living room window, which faced the rising sun. Pulling open the blinds scattered a coating of dust, and I watched the motes join the rest of the dust in my living room to slowly circle, showing the path of the light. I turned my back on the single armchair (which used to have a matching mate) and the empty space left by Lainie taking the sofa, and looked out over the rooftops of Tombstone. The sandy hills of the desert beyond looked cold; the sun was just starting to creep over the scrub and barely touched the tops of the saguaros.

Finished with my coffee, I returned to my bathroom mirror, and started running lines.

I sat back on my heels and let my upper body slump, swaying slightly, drunk. I was Ike Clanton, prominent member of a local outlaw gang and enemy of the Earps. I'd been up all night playing cards with Virgil Earp, my friend Tom MacLaury, and the Sheriff, after getting in a fight with Wyatt that had to be broken up by Doc Holliday. I was mean, and mad, and feeling whiskey-brave.

"I'll be ready for you in the morning," I said in the voice of Ike. "You must not think I won't be after you all in the morning."

Then I tried Ike hours before the shootout: pistol-whipped by Wyatt, recently treated by a doctor for head injuries, fined twenty-five dollars for carrying a firearm. His brother and friends had shown up to provide him with backup, but the Earps' reputation was fierce, and Holliday's reputation was downright terrifying. Ike was angry, and his reputation was in danger if he didn't see through on the threats he'd made, but he was also hurt and hungover. I put a hand to my head, recalling hangovers of searing pain and the time that a buddy of mine accidentally yanked open the door of his truck just as I was bending over, making me see stars.

I looked in the mirror and tried to make my eyes look pained, desperate. I pretended to grab the lapels of Wyatt Earp as I yelled with panic and anguish, "I don't wanna fight!"

Doc Holliday was never a person that I felt a kinship with. I didn't understand his sideways speech, given everything else that I knew about him. Men of his time feared Doc Holliday. An outlaw once turned himself in because of a rumor that someone told Holliday

the outlaw had slept with Holliday's girl—he would rather face jail time or even hanging than Holliday. But every depiction of Holliday I'd seen (and I'd seen it all—Val Kilmer on film drawing “I'm your huckleberry” as he shows up to kill a man in a duel, but also documentaries and biographies and witness accounts) gave him a dark sense of humor that I found sinister, rather than appealing. I couldn't figure out why a man would behave that way, especially when he was surrounded by men of character, like Wyatt Earp, whose stoicism and skill were enough to make men fall in line.

But at auditions we could be asked to read any of the parts in the reenactment, so I did what I could to channel Holliday's playful cruelty in the mirror. I affected a gentlemanly Southern accent, trying to make my voice a little hoarse to signal Holliday's tuberculosis. A line that always got big laughs from the crowd, who cheered loudly for Holliday every time he stepped into the Corral, was Holliday's response to Ike's claim that he's been spreading rumors about the Clantons: “Why Ike, I do believe I have only ever told the truth about you. You're a drunken fool.” I was afraid that I sounded less like a southern gunfighter and more like Colonel Sanders, but I repeated the line a few times anyway, trying it at different registers, a hefty dose of sarcasm, an implied threat.

That year, auditions were being held for the role of Morgan Earp and several understudies. The man who had played Morgan for the past few years was headed to Tucson to go back to school to be a dentist. Auditions only took place when a role was vacant, and that wasn't as often as people think—playing the part of Doc Holliday or even Ike Clanton was a big honor in town. Even the minor players had clout. I wasn't aiming for Morgan, though. I wanted the understudy role for Wyatt Earp. Wyatt had been played by Gary Broden for fourteen years, and Gary owned the role. He played Wyatt with a cool

dignity that I wished I could even pretend to have, let alone possess in my everyday life. I wasn't under any false impressions about my acting ability. I knew that I wasn't ready to play Wyatt Earp. But I wanted it more than anyone else, and I felt that if I could learn from the best, that I could become the best.

The role I was playing at the time was another impediment to my success. The whole Cowboy Elvis thing started as a joke. Dwight Hanson, who I worked with at Boot Hill Excavation, put together a costume and just started walking around with the other reenactors (mingling with saloon girls and prospectors) because he thought it'd be funny, but the tourists went crazy for him. The bigger of an attraction he became, the less he wanted to keep doing it. But Tombstone is a town where the people in charge have a very keen eye toward increasing tourist revenue, and they wanted Cowboy Elvis to stick around. I'd just done my third round of auditions for the shootout (with two years and then an agonizing four years in between) and once again failed to get cast, so I said I'd take over for Dwight. They made me a new costume, fitted just for me and of nicer stuff than the one Dwight had made himself. I'd been playing Cowboy Elvis for three years.

Rudimentary though my acting skills were, I really did a damn fine job as Cowboy Elvis. It wasn't that I was a particularly convincing Elvis—send me to Vegas and they would have turned me back toward home laughing. I'd also tried being one of the period street performers who walk around in costume to add color to the town, especially on holiday weekends, but I just couldn't figure out how to play them in a way that was different from my own life without affecting an outrageous accent or suddenly becoming a secondary character in a Yosemite Sam cartoon. But Cowboy Elvis was just the right blend for me. Making Elvis more countrified compensated for the fact that my Elvis

impersonation really wasn't very good, and the persona gave me a purpose, a sense of who I was, as I strode down dusty streets in all white, in hat, boots, chaps, and rhinestones.

My tenure as Cowboy Elvis, however, was not one that garnered much respect with the other reenactors. Some thought there was mockery in what I was doing, even though I took it seriously. Dwight made some enemies among the OK Corral performers, and I inherited a bit of that along with the costume. But most of them—including, I hoped, Gary Broden—remembered me from auditions, and knew how sincerely I wanted to be among the historically accurate crowd. Ever since moving to southern Arizona from Chicago at the age of eleven, I'd been crazy about the Western heroes, men like Wyatt Earp and Wild Bill Hickock and Buffalo Bill. Men who provided the only safety in a harsh frontier of chaos and savagery.

By the time I had finished running lines, the sun was good and up, and I had about forty minutes before auditions started. The Episcopal church where they were held was only a five-minute walk from my house, but I wanted to get there early. I decided that one more half-cup of coffee would make sure I was energetic but not jittery, so I filled my mug midway and listened to some Marty Robbins on vinyl while I drank it. I rinsed my mug in the sink, brushed a toothbrush around my mouth without any toothpaste on it—to remove stains and coffee breath but leave a hint of bitterness on my tongue—and picked my keys and cell phone out of a pile of unopened mail on the counter. Before opening the door, I took off my wedding ring and dropped it into the glass ashtray that propped up the box set of John Wayne DVDs on my shelf. I locked my apartment door behind me, and walked down the stairs and into the street.

As it was still before business hours, the streets were almost empty, and I wandered to the middle of my road, the paving of which had been a city council item for years now. But I liked the way the dust kicked up under my boots, the way the unevenness of the surface and the small rocks embedded in the dirt made walking just a little more difficult than it would be on a sidewalk or asphalt. I ignored the buildings to my sides and let my eyes gaze unfocused down the lane, imagining that rather than apartments and a convenience store and shiny-windowed storefronts I was pacing toward endless facades of brothels, boarding houses, saloons. During the height of the silver boom Tombstone had a hundred and ten saloons, for a population of fourteen thousand. It was a town for miners and outlaws, barely held together by sheriffs and posses. I wanted to believe that I would have been one of the few who, surrounded by the constant temptations of drink and cards and women, could still act with civility and restraint. But it must have been so easy to make terrible choices back then. Death must have seemed so close every day, just a stray bullet or a bad season away.

I turned down Allen Street, where I spent most of my days posing for pictures and directing people to the Bird Cage Saloon. Here the vision of Tombstone in my mind more strongly resembled reality—Allen Street is where the preserved saloons still exist. Not exactly in their original forms, which wouldn't call to tourists as effectively as the current ones do, but here there are no convenience stores, no neon. Every sign and storefront is the kind of fake rustic that people expect from an Old West town that hasn't gone to ghost.

Most of the action was on the weekends, but I found that the tourists that stopped by during the week were more enthusiastic about the history, looking for more than just a few blanks exploding out of a six-shooter. I'd gone to part-time at the excavation company

a while back, to free up more time for reenacting. Lainie hadn't been happy about that, but I could easily pay the rent on the apartment only working two or three days a week, and sometimes the tourists gave me tips. This street was as familiar to me as the hairs and sun spots on the backs of my hands, and I could feel the past beneath my feet as I walked.

I passed the Bird Cage and the Crystal Palace, empty at this hour. The church was a few blocks north of the Corral. I nodded superstitiously to the adobe wall that enclosed the former Corral—now the set, false storefronts that provided entrances and exits for the actors, opposite rows of bleachers that held the audience. I'd seen the show dozens of times, in several incarnations—the script changed every few years, to keep it fresh, and if any new research that provided insight into character or action came to light. Medical records for Ike Clayton had recently been found in the basement of City Hall, from when he was treated after Wyatt bashed him with his gun. I imagined the reenactors were already discussing how to incorporate them into a new script. But the changes were mostly minor, new jokes and staging adjustments. The big picture stayed the same, and I could picture Wyatt as I'd seen him many times, walking across the dirt of the Corral with his thumbs tucked into his belt, duster swinging behind him, intimidating with or without the guns. I could watch him all day, but I also wanted to stand where he stood, to look out from under a black Stetson with calm assurance even as everyone around me fell to panic and violence.

Continuing on to the church, I could see that I wasn't the only one who had arrived early. A few fellow hopefuls were loitering outside, holding Styrofoam coffee cups and shooting the shit. I recognized all of them—Tombstone is a small community as it is, but the reenactors drew a specific crowd. Jesse Bascomb and Paul Randall I'd auditioned with

before, and old Ken Prescott used to provide the excavation company's masonry supplies before he retired. I nodded at the men as I approached.

"Morning, Steve," Paul said. Paul was in his late thirties, probably too old to play Morgan, but he'd made a point of letting everyone know that he was gunning for the part. His buddy Jesse was a few years younger but had a lethargic manner that would probably keep him out of the running for a role.

"Looking good, man," Jesse drawled. "You got a bit of a Johnny Cash vibe going on."

"Morning, fellas. Thanks, Jesse. Ken, how's your truck?" I asked. I wasn't sure what Jesse meant by the Johnny Cash comment—if it was a genuine compliment, or if he was trying to throw me, make me rethink my clothing choices—but I figured it was safer to stick to talking to Ken, who had a generous spirit and a genuine passion for history, which brought him out to auditions even though he was plainly too old to play in the reenactment.

"Eh, she won't stop dying on me," Ken said. "George down at the shop keeps swearing he fixed the problem, and then the damn engine won't turn over. I told him I'm not paying out the ears any more for his mistakes, and that I'll tow the truck all the way to Bisbee if I have to to get a real mechanic to look at it. He didn't like that." Ken grinned and took a sip of his coffee. "But I think he's going to get to work on it for serious now. He's a good boy, just starting out. But I'm on a fixed income and can't keep paying for parts that don't work."

"I hear that," I said. "Listen, I'm going to grab some coffee. Is the signup sheet out?"

“Yeah, it’s on the table,” Paul said. “Most everyone’s here, and they said we’ll get started in a few minutes. Good turnout this year.”

“Great,” I said. I didn’t actually want any more coffee, but I wanted to keep moving and have something to do with my hands. The building where we actually auditioned was around the side of the church, a smallish rental hall that generally hosted wedding receptions and prayer retreats. I took the stairs in a few quick leaps. I wanted to get to the signup sheet and see what Paul had meant about a good turnout; there was only one real role available and the usual understudy fluctuation. On a good year as many as a dozen men would come out, but this year I’d expected less. Morgan was a good role, but not a great one. I pulled open the door and found the room within packed with Western shirts. There must have been at least twenty people inside. I couldn’t even see the table that held the coffee and signup sheet.

Trying to make my way into the room, I found myself bumping elbows with tense, coffee-holding men sizing each other up and saying little. I didn’t recognize half the people in the room at first, though on second glance the man nearest the door was Cody from the service station. He’d shaved off the beard he’d had since hitting puberty, down to a long moustache. He was glaring at a man I eventually realized was Arle, my boss’ accountant, who I’d never before seen out of a suit. He was wearing a hideous blue embroidered shirt with pearl buttons and a string tie.

I pushed to the table and found a signup sheet already crowded with next to thirty names. I was still over twenty minutes early, and I could feel myself start to sweat. The men in this room couldn’t possibly be out to audition for Morgan. I mentally cursed Paul and Jesse for not giving me a heads up. They knew this was more than a good turnout.

Adding my name to the bottom of the list, I poured a cup of coffee (leaving it black) and paddled like a dog going upriver back towards the door. No one said anything to me, and the volume in the room was still strangely muted for having so many people crowded around. I opened the door and stepped out with relief. I was followed out by Rob Vickers, who was holding a cup of coffee in each hand, both heavy on the creamer. I stood at the top of the stairs and breathed, and took a small sip of my coffee to give the impression I'd wanted it to drink. Rob was a few years out of high school, a former football player—burly guy. He was working at the hardware store, taking a community college course here and there. He often drank at the Crystal Palace in the evenings, making passes at any young female tourists, and sometimes I'd have a drink with him after a shift. Rob had that shine of former popularity on him, but he was nice to everybody, including me.

Rob was drinking out of both cups, alternating back and forth. “Crazy in there, huh?”

“Do you know what’s going on? I mean, why there are so many people here?” I asked, trying to sound casual and burning my tongue on another feint at my coffee.

“Yeah, didn’t anybody tell you? There’s a rumor going around that Gary is going to retire. Everybody is here because they want a shot at Wyatt’s understudy, because for the first time in forever, it might actually be a good part to have.” Rob related this news with the air of someone who doesn’t have any investment in the gossip he’s sharing. Rob was too young to play Wyatt, he was probably out to try for Morgan, but he also didn’t seem to care much either way. My stomach, on the other hand, had dropped somewhere around my knees.

“No,” I said. “Nobody told me.”

“Well, maybe it’s just a rumor. I haven’t heard it from Gary, myself. But people seem pretty convinced—at least enough to come out to the church on a Saturday morning. Everybody’s acting like they can glare the others into backing out. I think it’s hilarious.” Rob took another sip from each of his coffee cups and then seemed to remember that I was there. “I mean, you know, best of luck to you, though. Break a leg and all.” He quickly drained one of the cups, raised the other to me in a sort of toast, and then went back inside.

The coffee I had drunk that morning felt like it was coming back to a boil inside my stomach. I could taste acid creeping up my throat. I tried to decide if it was too late to go for a pack of cigarettes at the station. Thirty people on the sign-up sheet. Weeks, months—years—of preparation, new clothes, black coffee, and I was going to have to compete for an understudy role with everyone from Arle the accountant to boys fresh out of senior year to who the hell knows.

The doors opened and men started flooding out, which meant that they were going to be starting up soon. I was jostled as several dozen men parted around me to walk down the stairs, but I stood my ground. Rob made his way down holding two fresh cups of coffee. The last of the men left the building and the doors closed behind them. The courtyard was suddenly full; it looked like a business convention for boot salesmen. Now that things were getting rolling, conversation was starting to buzz. Some of the men were walking around and saying lines, getting into character; others were whispering in small groups, and some were making loud showy small talk, seeming to try to convince the others of their confidence and ease. I stood alone at the top of the stairs, my coffee growing cold in my hand.

Behind me, one of the doors creaked open and Hart Breacher, the chair of the Vigilante Society (which organized the reenactments, historical events, and museum) poked his head out. “Paul Randall?” he called.

Paul moseyed from the far side of the courtyard. “Good morning, Hart. How are you doing today?”

I could hear them continuing to talk as they went inside and the door closed behind them. A low murmuring was followed by the laughter of several men, and I knew I couldn’t just stand there and listen, that I would drive myself crazy trying to gauge how well each audition was going. There were many men ahead of me, and each audition would take at least a few minutes, so I could be here for hours before my name was called. This was unprecedented, and I felt oddly alone in the middle of the crowd, like I was the only one who realized that something unusual was happening. Everyone else was acting like this was a normal audition day, a normal Saturday, a normal morning. Everyone else was acting like they had come prepared for this.

I scanned the crowd for Jesse Bascomb. He was still standing with Ken near the front of the church; Cody had joined them, and they were laughing together. I wove through the people milling about and worked my way over to Jesse’s side. He turned as if he’d been expecting me, and smiled.

“You were right about the turnout,” I said.

“Yeah, it’s a real party,” Jesse said.

“Rob tells me that Gary may be retiring.” I tried to put a hint of reproach in my tone, but to my ears it sounded more like a kid on the playground who has come upon a kickball game that’s started without him.

“I heard that.” Jesse’s smile grew wider. “But it’s not confirmed, or anything. Just a rumor, Steve, I wouldn’t get too worked up about it.”

“Lots of people here seem pretty worked up about it. You could have given me a friendly warning, at least.” My temper was starting to climb at the sight of Jesse’s smug grin.

Ken jumped in. “I’m sure he just didn’t want you to be nervous, Steve, especially if it’s just a rumor. All these people could be here for nothing.”

“I don’t know. I heard it from Hannah at the Bird Cage, who says she heard it from Gary himself,” Cody said, oblivious to the tension.

I blew out my breath and looked down at my boots. Black boots today, not white. Gunfighter boots. Raising my gaze back up to the boys, I tried to embody the cool steely feeling I’d conjured that morning in front of the mirror, a gaze that said I wouldn’t be riled by the likes of Jesse and Paul.

“You’re right, Ken. A rumor’s just talk, and talk doesn’t mean much. If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to go over some lines.”

I walked away and found a quiet corner of the courtyard, next to a wooden fence, and I rested my coffee cup on a post and looked out at the street and breathed.

## II

The next few hours were excruciating. I had a knot in my gut that wouldn't let go, the anxiety of the situation holding onto a stomach full of coffee with a tight fist. Man after man was called in. Some were only inside a few minutes, some longer, and I didn't know which was better. Some of the men were quiet as they left, and some were raucous, calling out to friends and neighbors as they passed, clapping backs and laughing. I didn't know if they were putting on a show, or if they felt secure in their performance, assured of their shot at Gary's role.

I didn't feel like I could leave, even though I hadn't eaten and still wanted a cigarette more than anything. My coffee cooled but I continued to sip it, slowly, to try to maintain a slight caffeine buzz and prevent a crash, but it grew sludgy and unpalatable long before I stopped drinking it, and there wasn't more to be had. I worried about drying out my throat. The water was in the room with the people auditioning. It was a system that, to my knowledge, had never needed tweaking, because such a large group had never tried out all at once before. There had never been as long a stretch between start and end that people needed more coffee or water during the process.

By the time my name was finally called, I wasn't feeling so good. The stress was getting to me and my hands were starting to shake. I'd tried to pass the time by going over lines in my head, but I didn't feel comfortable saying them out loud, so I wasn't sure how much it actually helped. When Hart finally opened the door, looked around, and called "Steve Holmes," my chest felt tight and I tripped a little turning to make my way inside.

"Hi Hart," I said as I walked up the steps.

"Hey there, Steve. Good to see you out again this year."

I tried to come up with a winning response. Later that night, while replaying the audition in my head over and over, I would find a number of things to say. “Of course, Hart. You know how much I believe in the work you do here. I’m just happy for the opportunity to try out.” Or, “Absolutely, Hart. I’m feeling good about this year. I’ve been working hard, and I think you all will see my efforts paying off.” Even “Thank you, Hart, it’s always great to see you.”

But what I said at the time was, “Yeah.”

Hart followed me into the room and closed the door behind us. Seated at a banquet table were Chris Huddleston (who played Virgil Earp) and Travis Wilson (who played Ike Clanton), and Marcel Tucker, who had a degree in theater from the University of Arizona and who’d been basically running the production part of things for over a decade. Standing near the refreshment table, pouring himself a cup of coffee (black), was Gary.

I nodded at the men at the table and turned to Gary. My nod to him turned into a slight bow, like the apprentices do to their masters in kung-fu movies. Embarrassed, I turned back to the table and stood in the middle of the room, trying not to put my hands in my pockets. Gary took a seat.

Marcel spoke first. His voice carried in a way that told everyone he’d had training, even in a small room like this—his speaking voice was rich but not deep, a voice that I thought would be good for performing things like Shakespeare, though I’d never seen a Shakespeare play. But when he wanted to he could make it low and rusty, like he sometimes used to coach us during auditions. “Steve. Welcome. We’re happy to see you.”

I tried not to read too much into that. Marcel might be saying it to everyone. But Hart had said it too, so it seemed that they were at least noticing my investment and persistence.

“We’re having everyone read for a few parts today,” Hart said. “As you know, Russ is leaving us soon to go back to school in Tucson, so we’re looking for an actor to step into the role of Morgan. We also have a few understudy roles to fill. So everybody is reading Morgan, and also Billy Clanton, and Wyatt Earp.”

My heart started thumping in my chest—not racing, more like someone was striking it hard but slowly from the inside. That seemed like confirmation, then. Gary was stepping down. I didn’t look in Gary’s direction. “Sounds good,” I said. Marcel held out pages, and I stepped forward to take them. There were three sheets, one for each role. The Morgan and Billy pages I’d seen before. Even when a role wasn’t available, some years they had you read one of the other parts just to give you more things to do. I’d read both before, neither well.

Wyatt’s role didn’t have as many lines as you might think. Morgan had more, and Holliday, and even Ike Clanton. But Wyatt’s role required a presence. My favorite moment in the show was one where Ike is shouting at the Earps, threatening and whining like the cowardly bully he was. Wyatt steps up and says a few words, nothing threatening or even commanding, but the character of Ike immediately shuts his trap and drops his gaze. Wyatt Earp, who has a larger-than-life bronze statue depicting him drawing a pistol on the main road into town, didn’t need jokes or speeches or threats to make him into a legendary figure. The actor playing Wyatt could steal the show just by standing on the stage, letting

his authority come from his name, his stance, his quickness with a pistol. None of these qualities were things I felt like I could convincingly convey at the moment.

Fortunately, Marcel had me warm into it by reading Billy, an easy role that mostly fills in the gaps for the other characters. He tries to keep Ike in his place while also having his back. I read the lines the best I could, not knowing (as I hadn't in years past) what tone to give Billy. I felt the way I did trying to street perform as anyone other than Cowboy Elvis—I read Billy the way I would talk, and I didn't know who would pay to listen to that.

I did a little better with Morgan, I think, even though Morgan is a young character. He's the little brother of the law and the legend, so I tried to portray the real admiration I had for Wyatt and Virgil. I read some lines about leaving Dodge City and what should be done about the Cowboys.

My hands were shaking when I flipped to the pages with Wyatt's lines on them. Marcel had been reading opposite me, for consistency, maybe, and I appreciated not having to read with the real actors. But then Marcel handed his pages to Gary.

There were two pages with one short scene each—the scene where Virgil takes up the badge after the Marshall is shot and killed, and the scene where the brothers confront Ike in front of the Palace Saloon. The first scene was one where Wyatt plays a more reluctant part in the action, trying to discourage Virgil from getting involved. I felt it was important that Wyatt not seem cowardly or uncaring in this moment, so I let every ounce of world-weariness I had ever felt sit on my shoulders as I read lines like, “Third fool I've seen killed. Shouldn't have been wearing a badge in the first place.”

The confrontation with Ike was a scene where Wyatt had few lines, and they were short. The key in this scene, if you'd asked me, was to show that Wyatt's commanding nature had little to do with talk. This was where I felt weakest, but I tried. Responding to Gary's Ike with brief but forceful lines such as "Put up your arms and get out of here" let more of my nerves come through than I would have liked. And then the scenes were over, and Gary put down his pages and turned to Marcel.

I knew when I showed up that I wouldn't blow them away with my reading. I only wanted them to see me as a diamond in the rough, something that could be polished up if pulled from the dirt. My body was too distractingly tight to be able to tell if I had conveyed that. I felt out of touch with my legs, my spine, like a moving mannequin who has to hope his arms are bent at the right angle. So I searched Gary's face for a glint of anything—approval, interest, consideration. But Gary embodied Wyatt onstage for a reason, and his face gave nothing away.

I put the pages on the table and nodded to each of the men in turn. "Thank you, gentlemen. Good luck with your decisions."

"One more thing, Steve," Hart said. "We're asking everyone to draw and reholster a gun, putting a spin on it if they can. This doesn't need to be a show-ready performance, we just want to make sure that anyone we might cast has the basic motor skills to give it a passable shot and improve with practice. You'd be surprised how many people just drop the gun on their own foot half the time."

Travis elbowed Chris and there was laughter around the table, laughter I wasn't privy to. Marcel handed me a set of holsters, and I awkwardly slung them around my waist, struggling with the ties. I had never tried this with a real gun before. As a kid I'd had

a set of play guns that I'd twirled around my fingers until callouses developed, but now I only had a .16 gauge that I used for hunting. My palms were damp, so I rubbed them on my jeans.

Trying to be quick but not careless, I whipped a hand to my hip and drew, making sure I had a good grip on the gun. I pointed it over the heads of the men, for safety. Holding my breath, I managed a single clean rotation of the gun before sliding it neatly back into the holster.

“Good,” Marcel said. “Thank you, Steve. That’s all we need.”

“Thank you,” I said. “Thank you again.” I held just a second too long and awkwardly turned for the door.

I was walking up the steps of my apartment building before I knew it, my body feeling numb like it does when I've had too much to drink and most of my effort is expended in walking an even line and keeping my feet from shuffling. I'd walked past the people still waiting to try out without really seeing them—just an impression of a small crowd of men, like extras in the background of a movie. My key scraped against the lock a few times before finding home. Inside the door I emptied my pockets and put my ring on. Unbuttoning my shirt as I went, I proceeded to my bedroom to change out of my audition clothes, but the sight of my Cowboy Elvis costume hanging stopped me. I sat on my bed and felt a crushing sense of doubt. Even though Lainie had told me so over and over, I never felt like what I was doing was stupid. I loved being a part of the historic scene in Tombstone, and I wasn't ashamed to play Cowboy Elvis. But that was partly because I thought that validation would come someday—that if I could get into that inner circle, the Gary Broden circle, my Cowboy Elvis days would mean that I had paid my dues. But the

costume in the closet suddenly looked clownish, and I panicked as I tried not to feel ridiculous, as I tried to push away the possibility that I had been wrong, or just kidding myself.

I was supposed to go out that afternoon, wander the crowds in costume, but I wasn't sure I could do it. I knew I should eat something and try to keep myself moving, but instead I just took off my boots and laid down on my bed for a while.

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Eventually I got up and called Shelby Marsh, who helped coordinate the reenactors. There isn't really a set schedule for the street performers, and most come and go with the crowds. But I took the work seriously, so I called Shelby to let her know that I was feeling under the weather, and also drained from auditions (making sure to emphasize both, so she knew I wasn't just sulking about a bad audition, or trying to blame an audition on illness), and that I wouldn't be out until Sunday. Shelby told me to have some soup and feel better.

I poured myself a Jack and Coke to warm my belly instead. To shut my brain off for a while I pulled out my *Bonanza* DVDs, letting the Ponderosa Ranch provide the scope of my troubles. The show's theme song to this day takes me back to my childhood. My aunt watched the show while I was growing up in Chicago, but I really started watching it in syndication after moving West. Back in Chicago it had seemed silly—nothing like real life. But being surrounded by the landscape and names and history turned Westerns into something I understood, something I was a part of. Sitting in the chair facing the TV, I practiced twirling an imaginary pistol, drawing and giving it a spin, then holstering, again and again as I let the episodes play, stopping only to refill my drink.

Eventually I got hungry and decided to wander down to Allen, to see if any of the guys were around and talking. I had enough liquid courage in my system to want to hear what might be being said, what might be set in stone already. Changing into blue jeans and a regular shirt, I finished my third, or maybe fourth, Jack and Coke before walking out the door.

Saturday nights in Tombstone depend on the weather. If it's hot, the tourists are drained from the day, the heat leaching strength out with sweat. If it's cooler the sudden drop in desert temperature will likely chase away all but the locals. That night was pleasant, and people frolicked in small groups through the street, chatting and wandering from scene to scene. Several of the bars were hosting live music, and I made a point of avoiding these. The Crystal Palace had aggressive rock blaring out the open doors. Big Nose Kate's had a country group, and people were dancing both in the bar area and outside on the porch. The Four Deuces was blessedly quiet, and positioned at the far end of Allen Street, where more locals were likely to gather.

Upon entering I spied Rob standing at the bar, draining the last of a pint of beer. I made my way over and ordered a drink from Judy, one of the regular bartenders. She always poured strong for me, knowing that I was a short stumble from home and never made trouble. The servers and bartenders at Four Deuces didn't have to wear the revealing saloon girl costumes like at the Crystal Palace, but most kept to a uniform of tight t-shirts and snug denim to encourage tips. Rob winked at Judy as he ordered another beer, but she just rolled her eyes and laughed.

"Hey, Steve," Rob said, one eye on the new view of Judy's stimulating backside. "How'd it go for you today? I didn't see you after you finished."

“Yeah, I went straight home, but I think it went okay.” I took a long pull from my drink. “How about you?”

“I felt pretty good about it.” Rob grinned at Judy as she handed over a new beer. “I won’t be brokenhearted if I don’t get it, or anything, but I think it’d be fun.”

“That’s good, that’s good,” I said, pacing Rob sip for sip. “What about everyone else? Any frontrunners?”

“Oh, you know how those guys are. They either didn’t say anything at all or they were bragging like Hart begged them to take the role on the spot. Sometimes I think this town is full of bullshitters.”

“Yeah,” I say. “But maybe we just all like a good story. This town is definitely full of those.”

“Sure, sure, sure...” Rob said. He’d seen something he liked coming through the door, and was smiling at a blonde and brunette, each wearing a short pair of jean cutoffs. They smiled back coyly, especially the blonde, and settled at the bar a few stools down from us. I knew I’d lost Rob, and looked around to see if anyone worthwhile was at the bar. There were a few familiar faces, but no one who I’d seen that morning trying out. Judy put another drink in front of me, and Rob started making conversation with the blonde across the solitary drinkers between them. It was only a matter of time until he made his way over so I quickly finished my second drink and put some bills on the bar. It wasn’t until I stood up that I recalled that I’d also set out with the intention of finding some food, and that was all I remembered until the next morning.

## III

I woke up sprawled across my couch, facedown and pants around my ankles. My head hurt so bad I could hear the pain, like a piercing alarm in the back of my skull. My mouth tasted like cigarettes and vomit. I couldn't remember getting home, or anything after the Four Deuces. I'd obviously smoked at some point, and I must have kept drinking. I laid there for a while before making myself try to get up, and as soon as I moved my body went apeshit and I barely made it to the bathroom (half-hopping, half-shuffling with my pants still down) before heaving up dregs of syrupy alcohol. Another spell was spent on the bathroom floor before once again attempting to gain my feet. I leaned over the sink and turned on the water. Letting it run, I rinsed my mouth and then alternated splashing my face and drinking small handfuls.

After a few minutes of this, the wet burlap sack wrapped around my brain started to peel back, and I remembered snatches of conversation. A woman's voice—Judy? The blonde at the bar? A man too, maybe a few people. It was like twirling the dial slowly across a patch of radio stations, just incomplete fragments that came and went.

I fished a bottle of aspirin out of the medicine cabinet and downed several with another handful of water. I stripped off my clothes and got into the shower. I could barely bring myself to run a bar of soap across my skin, but the hot spray helped, and I stood under it until the water started to go cold. I was pulling back the curtain and reaching for a towel when I heard my own voice, slurred and despairing. *Forgive me.*

It took me a moment to realize I hadn't spoken aloud, a moment during which I nearly slipped and split my skull on the tub. And then the phone call came rushing back, a

hazy memory surrounded by blackness. I remembered begging Lainie, telling her I loved her. I remembered the other man who had gotten on the phone.

“Fuck. Fucking goddamn shit motherfucker.” I yanked the towel off the bar and ran it furiously over my body and quickly rubbed my hair. In the bedroom I pulled on clothes and shoes, but in the living room I just sat on the couch. My shirt was sticking to my body in the places I hadn’t toweled off very well.

I stood suddenly (a mistake, as the spins immediately upset my balance) and retrieved my pants, and fished keys and wallet out of the pockets. At the table by the door I started to remove my ring, and only then did it occur to me that I’d gone out wearing it the night before. I twirled it around my finger a few times, slid it off, and dropped it in the bowl where it spun to a wobbly rest.

Stepping outside, the dry air immediately began to suck the water from my skin and clothing. I strode down my street, keeping to the side as it would be rude to do my gunslinger’s walk down the middle in the early afternoon. Allen Street was bustling, the street hawkers trying to entice people to the shows and shops. There were several gunfight shows in town, but the one at the OK Corral was the real performance. The others played more heavily for laughs, and even let audience members step in and fire blank-loaded pistols. A man in red dropseat pajamas and a prospector’s hat was giving directions as a horse-drawn coach passed by.

I turned away from Allen and approached the church with worms crawling sluggishly through my angry stomach. Taped to the door was a piece of paper, the list providing the outcome from yesterday’s auditions. As I saw who was approaching the

steps from the opposite side, I managed to refrain from cursing aloud, but a tiny hiss escaped through my teeth like a raccoon defending a dumpster.

“Morning, Jesse,” I said.

“Afternoon, Steve,” he replied with a smug grin that made the skin on my palm feel tight, like it was unnatural for it not to be curling into a fist.

We reached the list at the same time, and read silently together.

**Morgan Earp: Rob Vickers**

**Understudy for Wyatt Earp: Caleb Shaw**

**Understudy for Billy Clanton: Paul Randall**

**Thank you to everyone who tried out!**

While I wasn’t surprised to find my name missing from the list, again, I was still gut-wrenchingly disappointed. The timing was unfair. I didn’t even know a Caleb Shaw. I wasn’t ready to play Wyatt, but who knew how long this Caleb would sit in the role? His face would be on postcards, billboards, newspapers, websites. He would pose for pictures with tourists. He would get a long black duster fitted just for him, and he would grow a moustache that he wore every day, performance or no.

“Aw, Steve, that’s a shame,” Jesse said. “Everybody knows how bad you wanted that understudy role. Better luck next time, right? Whenever that is.”

I wasn’t trying to convey unruffled calm this time. I just didn’t have the energy to rise to Jesse’s digs. So I just nodded and walked away. The whole way home I thought about who Jesse meant by “everybody”—all the faces that would be giving me smug or pitying glances, all the people who might ask me if I got cast and I’d have to tell them I

hadn't. I wouldn't get the pleasure of telling anyone that my time had been well spent, that a grown man with a dream wasn't a foolish thing.

\*

I thought about returning the Cowboy Elvis costume, bowing out completely. I'd gotten it from my closet and tossed it on the bed, not knowing if I meant to put it on or put it in a garbage bag and walk it down to Shelby Marsh at the Historical Society, so she could see if anyone else in town of roughly my size was willing to walk around in it and smile for pictures. But I did put it on, a piece at a time, reminding myself why I wore it. I thought of all the times someone had laughed delightedly at seeing me, about everyone who had asked for a photo or autograph, about the people who'd tried their own (mostly terrible) Elvis impersonations out on me. Someone had given me a twenty once to warble "Don't Be Cruel" at his girlfriend, who had blushed and hidden a grin behind her hands, and everyone could see how much she enjoyed the attention. People liked what I did, the same as they liked the shootouts and tours of the Bird Cage and souvenir sheriff's badges. And I was good at it.

My stomach was still roiling too much for food, but I drank some juice from the fridge, careful not to spill on the costume, before leaving. Wallet stayed at home, house key into a pocket in the jeans under the chaps, ring in the bowl.

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The crowds swelled and shrank with the timing of the shootouts. While a show was going on, the streets were fairly empty, and then suddenly a few dozen people would flood out of a side street or through a gift shop. They laughed and talked loudly, and I could tell the performances were going well. As a show was about to start, the performers would be

in the street posing for pictures, while the hawkers lured people from their paths towards the ticket counter. Gary, Russ, Chris, and Owen Barton (who was playing Doc Holliday) stood in the middle of the street, keeping loosely in character, smiling enough to be charming but not laughing, mostly striking dynamic poses against the backdrop of the dusty street as tourists crowded in around them, wearing t-shirts and shorts and smiling for family members holding digital cameras.

The afternoon passed quickly for me. I took pictures or shot the shit with tourists when they approached, leaned against saloon doors with my thumbs tucked into the front of my chaps when they didn't. But the whole time, I was Cowboy Elvis—I interacted with Tombstone whether or not the tourists interacted with me. I was a character but I was also setting, part of the feel of the place.

It was just before the last show of the day when I saw Hart walking alone down the street. He hesitated briefly between steps when he spotted me walking towards him.

“Hart,” I said. “Can I have a word with you?”

“I assume you saw the cast list,” Hart said, with a set to his mouth that indicated he was trying to be sympathetic but firm. “The cast list is final, Steve, and we feel good about our choices.”

“I’m not objecting to your choices,” I said. Words were coming out of my mouth even though I wasn’t sure what I objected to or didn’t. “But I’ve never heard of Caleb Shaw.”

“He’s fairly new to town,” Hart said. “First time coming out. He does some sort of freelance work that I didn’t quite catch, but he also performed a lot of theater in his high school and college days. Great singing voice. He gave a fantastic audition.”

“I’m not questioning his qualifications,” I said, then paused, trying to piece together thoughts from around my battered brain. “But you know how dedicated I am. I’ve been trying out for nine years now, and I’ve been a fixture here in this very costume for three. I know that I might not have the acting skills you’re looking for right now, but—” Hart put up his hands to stop me, but I kept on. “It’s like with the gun. You just need to make sure that people have the basic skills, right? Not everyone can twirl a gun, but someone who has the ability can learn to do it better, if they’re given the chance. I think that Gary is the best, and if I had some time to work with him—”

“Steve, the list has been posted. We aren’t going to change our minds.”

“Well,” I said, my train of thought trying to turn a corner, “Gary is stepping down soon, isn’t he?”

“It’s not official yet, but yes, he is.”

“Then his understudy is about to become a main cast member, and then you’ll have to hold auditions all over again. What if you made me an understudy to the understudy? I can work with Gary a little, and once he steps down, you can decide if I’m ready to understudy the role myself. If not, you can just hold auditions like you would have had to anyway. What’s the harm?”

Hart looked past me down the street, gnawing his lip. “Let me run it past Marcel and the cast. If nobody objects, I don’t see why we couldn’t try that out for a little while. But actors are very particular about their process, I don’t know if you know. They might not want someone sitting in on rehearsals who doesn’t strictly need to be there.”

“I completely understand,” I said. I didn’t. I’d never done real theater before, but hope was pressing out from inside my chest, filling it like a balloon, and I was willing to agree to anything for a shot at a chance.

“Okay, I’ll talk to them. It might not be today or tomorrow, but I’ll call you once I have an answer for you.”

“Thank you, Hart.” I held out my hand and shook his firmly, as if to seal the deal. Hart walked away and I walked back to the crowds, to be Cowboy Elvis, but now with the possibility that it might be leading to bigger things.

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Hart didn’t call for three days, and I alternated between desperate hope and creeping dread any time I wasn’t sleeping or working. Fortunately, we had an excavation job where I was running the backhoe, which took a lot of focus, and some shovel work was required so the manual labor put me to sleep at night. Otherwise I probably would have bitten every fingernail bloody before the phone finally rang.

But ring it did, on Wednesday evening just after I finished heating up some canned beef stew. Hart got right down to business.

“So Steve. The cast is happy to have you join us, and you’ll be pleased to hear that several of them spoke out in your favor. Marcel has some reservations about bringing you and Caleb in at the same time, so he wants to meet with you first, to go over how he wants it to work. Are you free tomorrow evening?”

I was deeply embarrassed to have to conceal that I’d choked up a little at Hart’s words about the cast. Covering the mouthpiece and clearing my throat before responding, my voice came out lower than usual. “Absolutely, Hart.”

“Great. Marcel can meet with you before or after evening rehearsal, and if all goes well you can join the rehearsal on Friday night, and spend some time backstage this weekend.”

“That’s fantastic news. Thank you so much, Hart. I really appreciate being given the chance to work with everyone.”

“Don’t mention it, Steve. I’ll see you soon.”

I hung up the phone and raised my fist in the air and then—I’m not even sure why, it just seemed the thing to do—punched the cabinet in jubilation, causing the glasses inside to rattle. This was it. I was going to work with Gary, and I was going to get inside the head of Wyatt Earp—or at least as close as a modern man could.

## IV

Marcel arranged to meet with me after rehearsal on Thursday. We gathered at Big Nose Kate's, dead at ten p.m. on a weekday. Marcel ordered a gin and tonic but I stuck with a Coke.

"Steve, I'd like to start by saying that I'm not sure we'll be able to finagle this. We're already bringing in a new cast member and two understudies, and it's always difficult to have extra people underfoot in the space. So we may bring you in, find that it isn't working, and have to ask you to try again at the next round of auditions. Understood?" Marcel refrained from sipping his gin while waiting for my reply.

"I understand," I said. "But I'll do everything I can to make sure I'm not a bother and not wasting anyone's time."

"That's good to hear. I also want to convey that it's very unlikely you'll get much time up on your feet any time soon, even if we elect to retain this understudy-to-the-understudy position. Your role will be largely that of observer, on the sidelines, watching closely but getting very little in the way of action. Can you handle that?"

"Yes, I can," I said. "I know that I'm nowhere near where Gary is, in terms of acting skills, but I wanted the chance to...you know, see how he does it. I've watched the reenactment dozens of times but I want to know the work that goes into it. I think I can learn a lot just by watching, from behind the scenes."

"All right then. That should indeed be possible, if you are as dedicated as you seem. Which brings me to my next point. I want to ask you what, exactly, draws you so to the role of Wyatt?"

“It’s not the role,” I said seriously. “It’s the man himself. It’s not that I want to play the most famous character, or that I want to be the badass. I have deep respect for Wyatt Earp and his contributions to this town. And what you do here isn’t just putting on a live version of some dime-novel tall tale. You use historical information, and we know a lot about Wyatt Earp. We know that he was an expert shot, a good businessman, and dedicated to his brothers. We know that his reputation alone was enough to get criminals to back down from a fight. And sure, there are people who know him because Kurt Russell played him in a movie. But the ones who know the facts know what a formidable person he was. And I think that anyone knows can’t help but admire him, like I do.”

I wasn’t sure I’d ever talked like that about Wyatt Earp aloud before, not even to Lainie, and after my speech, I wondered if it could still make a difference if I did. Laying it all out so clearly like that made it seem like she’d have to understand—like Marcel, Gary, everybody would.

At the time, Marcel’s response didn’t shake me even a little. But now, I wonder if his interpretation of the facts started to reshape my sense of Wyatt, and of the kind of man I thought others should try to be.

“Interesting,” he said. “But you know, of course, that Wyatt was a philanderer, and that he enjoyed beating people over the head with the butt of his gun? We try to portray a rounded version of our characters in the show, but there’s also evidence to suggest that Wyatt and his brothers were engaged in business enterprises here in Tombstone that may not have been entirely on the up-and-up, before this business with the Cowboys forced several of them back into law enforcement. I mention this because it does come up backstage, frequently, and you are correct that we are not interested in telling the dime-

novel tall tale version of these men. We want the audience to have someone to root for, but facts are facts.”

If I hadn't felt that Wyatt Earp was a man who certainly didn't need me to defend him, I might have countered Marcel's cold accounting, may have tried to sort out for myself whether I believed good people could do bad things. But I thought that Marcel was just trying to make sure I wasn't some fanatic who was blind to the truth about his hero, so instead I only said, “Well, nobody's perfect.”

Marcel laughed heartily. “Too right! Yes, we show a band of people in a time where there were no easy choices or decisions, and hope that our audiences, while entertained, perhaps take away a more nuanced grasp of our local history. Because, as you say, nobody is perfect.” He drained the remainder of his gin and tonic. “Steve, you have assuaged my more immediate fears, and I look forward to having you join us tomorrow. You are free evenings and weekends, correct?”

“Yeah, I work part time during the days, but I'm free nights. Weekends I, you know, I walk around in costume, but I imagine that we can figure that out.”

“Ah yes.” Marcel smiled. “Cowboy Elvis. I've seen you out and about. You're quite a crowd-pleaser.”

“Thank you,” I said, flattered despite my recent mixed feelings about that particular use of my time.

“Well, I do believe we can factor that in. And that concludes our business. I am going to have another Tanqueray and tonic and then make my way home. You are welcome to join me for a drink, unless you need to retire early.”

I hesitated, not wanting to say no to a man whose approval I'd just earned. "I do have to work in the morning," I said. "But I'll definitely be at rehearsal tomorrow night."

"Excellent. Welcome to the show, Steve."

I didn't sleep much that night, full of excitement but also growing anxiety. Now that I had been given this opportunity I was afraid of losing it, either to scheduling or inconvenience, or my own lack of skill. Work the next day was difficult. We were excavating a patch of land that just wouldn't go flat. I wasn't on the backhoe, the owner's son was, and we shouted at him as much as we dared and grumbled to each other a good deal more as he went over and over the same dirt without getting the job done. But eventually we called it a day, and I headed home to eat dinner and drink some coffee, to make sure I'd be alert through the next few hours.

The rehearsal location changed up sometimes, depending on availability of the spaces, weather, and what the performers were working on. As several new people were jumping on board, that night Marcel had us all meet at the Corral to work in the real space.

Approaching the Corral from Allen Street, I ran into Rob and Paul, also headed to rehearsal, and Rob let out a rodeo whoop when he saw me. "Steve, you son of a bitch! So happy for you, man. Glad to have you with us." Paul nodded, and I was glad he wouldn't be filling Jesse's shoes and giving me a hard time.

"Thanks, Rob," I said. When I got near enough Rob gave my back several enthusiastic slaps. We three walked the rest of the way together, past the park and up to the gift shop that was gateway to the Corral and cluster of museum exhibits that surrounded it. By the closed door, a man was waiting—I'd never seen him before, so I assumed he was Caleb.

Paul strode up to him and immediately engaged him in conversation without making introductions, and Hart was there to let us in before I could find an opening to

interrupt. Hart locked the door behind us and then led us around back. In the open space next to the metal practice steer provided for tourists to try out their roping skills, Gary and the others waited.

The cast—a group of about a dozen and a half men—greeted us with friendly words and smiles, especially, it seemed to me, Caleb. We ended up standing in a loose circle chatting before Marcel stepped forward.

“Welcome, all, particularly our newcomers. We’ve got scripts for you and we’ll go over the general schedule and flow of the rehearsal period, as well as the ways tonight will be different. Then we’ll all warm up together, and get started. Are there any questions before I begin?” We all shook our heads.

Marcel explained that generally rehearsal consisted of working scenes that had been feeling stale, or hadn’t been getting the laughs they used to, or refreshing on blocking and choreography. But when a new cast member or understudy was added, it was necessary to run through the show with frequent stops instead, to teach the blocking and such but also to help the new people jump into the pace and style of the show.

“I assume that everyone here has seen the performance multiple times. Is that correct?” Marcel asked. Paul, Rob and I all nodded, but Caleb held out a hand.

“I’ve actually only seen it once.”

I probably shouldn’t have taken that personally, but it seemed an insult, not just for what seemed like a real lack of investment on Caleb’s part, but also to those of us who’d been watching for years.

“Really?” Rob, easygoing as always, said. “You must have been a real natural at tryouts.”

“He was,” Hart said, and Owen and Russ nodded.

“I’ve also got an excellent memory,” Caleb said, sounding a little smug.

Marcel continued. “Then you may recall that the narrator of the show—who, in our current incarnation, happens to be Doc Holliday—warms the crowd, provides context and history, and sets the expectation of humor and the self-awareness we strive for. We take the history seriously, but never ourselves.” The cast laughed. “These speeches often involve ad-libbing and asides, so it’s important that the performers stay on their toes. Therefore, rehearsal includes a component of improvisational warmups and games. In addition to being able to cover for ringing cell phones, dropped firearms, and forgotten lines, our actors must feel out the crowd, establish a rapport. This ensures the success of a performance. It also encourages tips, which I hope motivates our newcomers. Ticket sales pay your wages, but a happy crowd pays your tab at the saloon.”

Rob and Caleb laughed. Paul looked somewhat uncomfortable. I didn’t feel like these words were particularly for me. Marcel had stressed that I would be an observer only, so I thought I would have plenty of time before I needed to worry about being able to be funny on my feet.

I was soon proved terribly wrong on that score. Once Marcel had made sure we were all on the same page about rehearsal and his performance philosophy, he began instructing the four of us who were recent additions on how to play the games the cast warmed up with at every rehearsal. One involved yelling the words “zoom” and “zorch” while sweeping our arms and bodies in different directions around the circle; another was a diction game where people competed to say the phrases “hippity hippity hop” and “bippity bippity bop” clear and fast like an auctioneer. I thought that I followed his directions well

enough, but once we began it was immediately obvious that I was not ready to be on my toes for an audience. I couldn't remember which way to sweep my arms when I said zoom or zorch, easy as it seemed. And I lost the bippity-bippity-bop game in a way that kept me trapped on the inside of the circle for an uncomfortable length of time. We also played a game called Go which seemed to simply be about pointing at someone and waiting for them to say "go" before taking their place, but I got overwhelmed and couldn't catch up.

By the time everyone else was supposedly warmed up, I felt like I was already showing what a failure I would be. We transitioned into the actual rehearsal but I was flustered and nervous, even though all I had to do now was sit off to the side with my script and a pencil.

The cast began to run the show from the beginning. Owen (playing Doc) and most of the others were allowed to proceed with their scenes, but any time Russ finished, Marcel would call "hold" and Rob would be called in to walk through the blocking, script in hand. Things didn't always come to a full stop for Gary or the actor playing Billy Clanton, but Caleb and Paul stood off to the side, at the ready. On the last hold before the big shootout, Marcel told us that the gunfight would be a rehearsal—likely several—all its own, and we shouldn't bother trying to learn it that night. For rehearsals, the cast used cap guns (rather than the stage guns with blanks), which were much less impressive but far cheaper and tended not to disturb the neighbors.

The whole time I scribbled furiously on my script—blocking notes for Wyatt (even though I wasn't sure exactly how to record them, so my hurried pencil scratches said things like "walk to front of bar and stop"), but also notes about Gary's portrayal. I underlined words he emphasized and tried to write down his gestures. I also wrote down

things that Gary did even when he wasn't acting. The actors didn't fully exit for this rehearsal, instead retreating off to the sides between their scenes to wait, so that they wouldn't be inside or behind a building when Marcel started speaking. Gary was intensely focused from start to finish, watching scenes he must have seen literally thousands of times. Some of the cast members joked and made small talk while Marcel worked with the actors, but Gary stood alone and paid close attention to everything that was happening. This, I thought, was how someone became Wyatt Earp. This was what I had come here to see.

Our three-hour rehearsal drew to a close just after the gunfight. As the bodies of the Cowboys were still lying in the dirt, Marcel called "hold" a final time and stepped forward.

"That's all for tonight, gentlemen," he said. "A big thank you to our new cast members for keeping focus and doing great work tonight. Our next rehearsal will be Monday, where we'll repeat what we just did this evening. Tuesday and Wednesday only Wyatt, Billy, and Morgan will be called, so the actors can work more closely with their understudies. And of course, this weekend we have performances. The new folks are welcome to come and sit behind the scenes. You won't be right backstage, but you'll get a sense of the movement going on behind the stage and between scenes and performances. Thank you, everyone. You're dismissed."

The cast clapped and I joined them, feeling invigorated, the discomfort of the warmup nearly forgotten.

Everybody began to head for the exit in a large clump. I intended to make my way to Gary, to tell him how excited I was to be working with him, and maybe find Caleb and introduce myself. The actors tended to gather around Gary, so I couldn't get to him, but I

could see Caleb had found his way to Gary's side. They were laughing together. Gary was much more relaxed than he'd been during the rehearsal. I ended up near the back of the group, trailing along behind everyone but Hart, Marcel, and the actor who played the Marshall in the opening scene, where he's immediately shot and killed.

"Steve," Marcel said, drawing up alongside me. "Not to worry about the warmup. Not everyone takes to those games right away. They're important, not just for the improvisational aspect but also to get the energy going among the cast. But I'm sure you'll pick them up soon."

"Yeah, they're not really my strong suit, but I'll practice," I said.

Marcel laughed. "Oh, I don't think there's any need to practice. You'll be doing them at every rehearsal. But I did notice your focus and note-taking during the run-through, and I was impressed."

"Thank you, Marcel," I said. "I meant it when I told you I was dedicated. I'm very excited to be here."

"Yes, that's clear, and we're glad. Will I be seeing you tomorrow for performances?"

"Absolutely," I said. "I told Shelby I wouldn't be out tomorrow, and I'm going to play it by ear on Sunday. I may be backstage in costume, but I'd like to try to manage both, if possible."

"That sounds great," Marcel said, then stepped aside. "Hart, if I may have a word..."

The rest of the cast had already exited onto the street, so I followed, script in hand. They immediately began to disperse in different directions, calling good-nights and see-

you-tomorrows to each other as they went, but I caught up with Rob, who was headed in the direction of my apartment.

“Interested in a beer or three?” Rob asked. “I’m pretty wound up from that rehearsal. To be perfectly honest with you, I wasn’t that serious about this when I tried out, but now that I’m in it I think it’s really going to be great. Plus, I bet it will go over pretty well with the ladies.” He elbowed me in the side, grinning.

“Thanks, but I’m beat. I’m going to go home and sleep—we’ve got a lot of performances tomorrow.”

Rob laughed. “All right, old man. See you in the morning.” He walked off in the direction of the Crystal Palace.

But when I got home, I read and re-read my script. I was fascinated by the stage directions. I’d heard the dialogue many times, but this was my first time seeing things like *Wyatt strides forward and delivers one swift, businesslike blow to Curly Bill’s head. Curly Bill drops to the ground, unconscious.* I also found that I had more to say about that night’s rehearsal, adding additional notes to the margin. “Wyatt turns his back to Ike, as if Ike isn’t a real threat.” “Does Wyatt think of Morgan as someone who needs protection?”

I didn’t fall asleep until after 2 a.m., and I dreamed of sweeping back one side of the long black duster I wore, letting my hand hover over the butt of my gun, my enemies fleeing before me without my ever touching metal.

## VI

Those first few rehearsals stand out so clearly in my mind, but the first weekend of performances I spent backstage has blurred together with all the performances since. The smell of sweat and damp cotton and canvas. The hustle of rushing to make an entrance. The tight quarters, made tighter with the new understudy additions—turning sideways to shuffle past each other in the corridors between fences and set pieces. The panic and cursing of a misplaced prop, intense and momentary.

I do know that I loved every minute of it. I'd never done theater before, and I hadn't paid much attention to the theatrical elements of the reenactments. My focus had been on the living, breathing legends, and the reactions of the audience. But that weekend I caught a fever. I wanted to be in front of the crowds, not just to bring them joy, but to get the accolades. That would be different, better, than walking around as Cowboy Elvis. I wouldn't be scenery as a reenactor. I wouldn't be there to provide color to the historical landscape. I would be there to bring those men once more to life.

When I did go out in costume on Sunday, I felt like I was working a day job, something to pay the bills. I had never phoned it in with Cowboy Elvis before, but it suddenly seemed so much less important than what Gary and the others were doing, and I felt foolish for putting so much effort into it. I walked around, I posed for pictures, I spoke in my Memphis-by-way-of-Santa-Fe drawl. But I wasn't present like I had been before. Instead, in my mind I was backstage with the others, waiting to bring together past and present for a captivated crowd.

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Monday night's rehearsal was familiar, a repeat of Friday where I took more notes and continued to bungle the warmups. But Tuesday was when I began to start to feel like a part of the gang, and like I might one day deserve to step out as Wyatt Earp.

We first met all together—Gary, Caleb, me, Russ, Rob, Paul, and Justin Ernst (our Billy Clanton), as well as Marcel and Hart.

“Good evening, gentlemen,” Marcel said. “What I'd like us to do tonight is break out into small groups, actor with their understudy. Or understudies. You'll eventually start running scenes together, but I'd like you to start by discussing your respective roles, and the men behind them. Each actor knows a great deal about the man he portrays, and they'll give you a biographical rundown. But I'd also like you to ask questions, really try to start to get into what makes these characters tick. And as you go through the scenes, stop often to discuss what is going on with the characters that might not be in the dialogue. Any questions for me or Hart before we begin?” We all shook our heads. “Wonderful. Get started, then.”

Gary started up to the center of the facade, where a fake bar was set back between the fake jail and fake Fly's Lodging. He carried a script. Caleb and I followed obediently behind.

I'd had a little time to say hello to Gary and meet Caleb, but the interactions felt like mingling at a large party. Gary was a challenging person to pull into conversation, at least for me. I know at least some of that was the fact that I was entirely intimidated, and afraid of saying something stupid in front of him. I also hadn't spent the time I should have getting to know Caleb, but I was afraid that he would be either terrible as Wyatt (in which case I'd have to watch and suffer) or fantastic (in which case I might never get a shot at the

role, and would still be watching and suffering, just in a different way). I figured that night would be the night to determine whether we'd all walk away friends, or that Gary would go to Hart and tell him they'd made a terrible mistake, or that Caleb would be so mind-blowing that I would have to withdraw from the scene completely. I was wrong on all counts.

Gary got right down to business. "I'll tell you a bit about Wyatt, and some about his brothers and Doc and the Cowboys, as well. I think it's good information to have. You'll pick up more as you stick around. But I think the most important thing to discuss is motivation. What we know has been corrupted, by peoples' need for a white hat and an interesting story, or just lost to a time where newspapers and diaries afforded most of what we know, and out here those were both pretty rare. What do you know about Wyatt?"

"Not a lot," Caleb admitted. "Mostly what I've seen in the show here, and picked up from the museum exhibits."

I hesitated. "Some." I was underselling myself, but didn't want to look like I was trying to show up Caleb.

"Well, all right then. Wyatt was born in Illinois, but when he was about sixteen, his family moved to California. Wyatt was given his first gun to protect the family from Indians on the way West, and he started honing the shooting skills that he'd become famous for. Wyatt started working as a buffalo hunter and a railroad hand, among other things. His first wife, Ursula, died of typhoid shortly before she would have given birth to their child."

Caleb shook his head sadly, like Gary was telling him the tragic past of someone they both knew.

Gary continued. “Wyatt was heartbroken, and after her death, he started getting into trouble with the law—stealing horses, getting arrested for hanging out in brothels, escaping from jail and having to move from town to town to avoid punishment. He finally settled down in Dodge, and worked as a lawman for a while. His reputation as an expert marksman helped him keep the peace. Wyatt met Doc Holliday around this time, when Holliday gave Wyatt information that led to the arrest of a bandit he was after. Doc saved Wyatt’s life when a gang of cowboys ambushed Wyatt in a saloon. Doc snuck up behind, and put a gun to the back of their leader, who was ready to shoot Wyatt. Then Wyatt and his brothers decided to move to Tombstone. What happened here, I think you know, because most of it is in the show.”

Caleb nodded knowingly. I wasn’t entirely convinced Caleb knew the details that were actually part of the show.

“There was the shootout, and then the Vendetta Ride, where Wyatt and Doc and a few others tracked down the rest of the Cowboys. Once that was done, Wyatt and his brothers decided to leave town. That’s a lot of information to throw at you all at once, Caleb, but I think the important things Wyatt’s history says about him are his dedication to family, his commitment to the law once he got past his rowdy youth, and his positive influence on famous wildcards like Doc Holliday. Steve, is that about your understanding of things?”

I paused for a moment, considering. “Well,” I said, “I think so, yes. Except that I’m not sure I would have talked about his friendship with Doc as a ‘positive influence.’ I mean, I guess it was. For Doc, that is. And Doc did save him, and help him catch that train robber. But I think that Wyatt’s relationship with Doc can also be seen as a weakness for

Wyatt. Not in terms of his character, but Doc was definitely someone Wyatt let get away with things.”

I looked to Gary, to see if he wanted me to continue, but his face was neutral. Speaking a little faster, I kept on, because I did know Wyatt’s history. That was one thing I had over on Caleb.

“For instance, when Doc came to Dodge, he was fleeing a lynching party because he’d just killed a man, and Wyatt chose not to perform his duty under the law. Instead he let Doc stay and start dealing cards. And Doc definitely made things worse with the Cowboys leading up to the shootout here. So, I think they had a great friendship, and an important one, and Wyatt may have made Doc a better man. But I sometimes wonder if Wyatt and the Earps would have been better off if Doc hadn’t joined them in Tombstone.”

Gary looked at me in an appraising way, a way that I’d only seen him look at the other actors during a scene. “That’s interesting. That’s a really good point about Doc. Thanks for that, Steve—I’m going to think about that myself.” Gary nodded at me, and then resumed his lesson. “Now, after Wyatt left Tombstone he continued enforcing the law, running businesses, having children. He died in Los Angeles at the age of eighty, after years of roaming around, chasing gold and doing about every job the Old West is known for. But I think that Wyatt’s life after the shootout isn’t our concern, at least not today. Today, we’re talking about who he was in October of 1881.” Gary turned to Caleb. “So, now that you’ve read the script and been around a bit, tell me a little about what you think drove Wyatt.”

Caleb thought for a moment. “I think he was a man with a strong sense of right and wrong. The Cowboys were thieving and threatening Wyatt and his brothers, and I think that anyone can see that eventually he had to take a stand.”

“How do you take his history into account, when you think about his sense of right and wrong? Wyatt had outstanding warrants to his name in multiple cities while he was working as a lawman here in Tombstone. Does that make your understanding of his character more complicated?” Gary’s questions sounded like a test, but his tone was mild. Caleb seemed at a loss, so I spoke up.

“Well, also, you mentioned, most of his illegal activities were after he lost his first wife.”

“Does that matter?” Gary asked.

“I think it does,” I said. “I think that the decisions a man makes when the woman he loves is gone have to be judged by a different standard, and we know that once Wyatt really got his life back in order, especially after he finally settled down with his wife Josephine, those sorts of charges stopped. Unlike Doc, who was a criminal all his life, Wyatt had a...a phase, is all. It would be like judging a high schooler for stealing beers from his dad’s fridge and sneaking girls into his room. Stealing isn’t right, breaking the rules isn’t right, but sometimes there are... circumstances.”

Gary smiled. “Owen likes to make just that argument, that it’s a matter of moral relativism. Of course, there’s a reason he plays Doc.” Caleb laughed and nodded knowingly. “Well, let’s take a crack at these scenes. Steve, Caleb is going to be doing most of the acting tonight, but we’ll see if we can run you through a few times. You can keep however much you want of what we’ve just talked about in your heads. You’ll find your

own way of playing Wyatt, and I don't want to tell you that my interpretation is the right one. But I've been doing this a while, and I hope you can benefit from that."

Gary and Caleb ran all of the Wyatt scenes, with Gary reading the other parts and me occasionally stepping in to provide the dialogue of a minor character. Gary wasn't as good at the other roles as he was at Wyatt, but I really enjoyed watching him act out the other Earps, even the Cowboys. And it made his complete transformation into Wyatt even more impressive.

Caleb was charismatic, and—I'll admit it—pretty fun to watch as Wyatt, but I couldn't see him trying to show any of the things we'd just been discussing about the backstory. To this day I wonder what Caleb looked like to Gary that first night, if he was just as disappointed as I was in Caleb's more showy version of Wyatt. Marcel called us back before we had time for me to try my hand at any of the scenes, and I was mostly relieved. I didn't feel ready yet, to actually step into Wyatt's shoes—I was still trying to get inside his head.

Marcel debriefed us a little, going around the circle and having each of us say a little bit about what we'd done or discovered. "We'll be doing essentially the same thing tomorrow night, and then we'll be back with the full cast on Thursday, when we will devote some time to breaking down the gunfight choreography. You're dismissed from rehearsal, but I believe Gary has an announcement for you before you go."

This was met with whistles and claps from a few of the veteran cast members.

"For you new fellas, once a month or so I try to host a card game. Faro, in fact—the game that Doc and Wyatt dealt at the saloons while they lived here in Tombstone. If you've never played before—and I would be surprised if you had, as casinos won't put up

tables anymore and it does require some equipment—well, you’ll get the chance. My place, Saturday night, after the last performance. Buy-in is ten dollars, except for Owen. It’s thirty for Owen, because we want him to be able to play for more than ten minutes.”

Everyone laughed.

“I just need my strategy to pay off once,” Owen said, grinning. “Then I’ll take all your shirts home with me.”

The cast dispersed as usual, only I wasn’t trailing in the back, and Gary said goodnight to me before we all went our separate ways.

## VII

The night we started to break down the shootout, even though everyone was still firing cap guns, I felt like I finally got a sense of what the real shootout must have been like from the inside. When you watch it as a reenactment or in a movie, it's either slowed down for dramatic effect, or staged in a way that makes the action more clear. But the amount of time we spent on an event which, in both our reenactment and in real life, lasted only thirty seconds really brought out the chaos of those moments.

The gunfight at the OK Corral was the big showdown between the Cowboys and the Earps. The Cowboys had been threatening the Earps for over a year, and the Earps had been slowly picking them off in posses, sending them to jail or to swing for their crimes. But Ike Clanton in particular was prone to coming into town with a weapon (prohibited within the Tombstone limits—you had to check your gun at a saloon or corral upon entering town) and starting trouble.

The night before the shootout, Ike was playing cards with his friend and fellow Cowboy, Tom MacLaury, but also Virgil Earp and the Sheriff. The game got heated, and Ike started yelling drunken threats at the Earps. In the morning Ike went for his gun. But when he ran into Wyatt and Virgil on the street, Virgil struck him on the head with his gun hard enough that he needed medical attention.

Several outraged Cowboys came into town to avenge Ike, and refused to check their weapons. Eventually the Earps, Doc Holiday, and the Cowboys met in the middle of Allen Street, and bullets started to fly.

One of my favorite parts of the reenactment had always been Ike, once it was clear that a gunfight was about to go down, throwing himself at Wyatt, yelling "I don't want to

fight!” I liked that part not because I enjoyed seeing the villain get what was due him, but because of Wyatt’s response: “Get to fighting, or get away!” Wyatt was there to fight the people who needed to be fought, not for a personal vendetta. He kept his focus on the threat.

That night we got a lesson in who fired and who fell, how many times and when. And I realized that as many times as I’d seen that particular show, I had missed so much. When the shooting starts, it’s hard to tell where to look. The sound of gunshots draws your attention everywhere and nowhere. You might see Virgil get shot in the leg, but then you look over and realize that one of the Cowboys has already fallen. You might keep your eye on Wyatt the whole time and still not be sure which of the fallen can be claimed by him.

Thirty seconds, and about thirty shots fired. The Earps and Holliday walked away with minor wounds, but three of the Cowboys were killed. Today, this is attributed mostly to the gunfighting skills of Wyatt and Doc. A fellow lawman once said that Wyatt was “absolutely destitute of physical fear.”

We spent most of three hours trying to piece together those thirty seconds in a way that made sense. The cast had gone through the motions so many times it was second nature to them, like a dance, and it was hard for them to find their rhythm with the action slowed like that. I remember at one point Justin had to pantomime falling for several minutes, while Marcel directed Caleb and Rob on how to move around the other actors, take cover and gain a shot, without getting in anyone’s way. While I watched I just kept thinking, over and over, how did people do this? How did they live in this world?

## VIII

Gary had a house on the outskirts of town, where he lived with his wife, May—a quiet and plain woman who clearly loved Gary a lot. They’d put out snacks, chips and pretzels and such, and the fridge was packed with cans of Budweiser. Most of the people who showed up brought beer or a bag of chips. I hadn’t brought anything with me, and at first I felt bad but then May made a comment about how all the leftover beer never fit in the fridge so I figured it was all right.

The faro table was set up in the middle of the living room—a sturdy dining table with added leaves put in and the chairs taken away. I think they put something under the legs to make the table taller. In the middle of the table was a big green felt board with the thirteen spades glued to it, in two rows. There was also a dealer box, and something that looked like an abacus with cards glued onto it as well.

We all mingled around at first, drinking and talking. Rob had brought his own koozies, purchased at the gift shop and stamped with the OK Corral reenactment logo. He had one in each hand and appeared to be switching off between Budweiser and Miller Hi-Life. I spent some time talking to Owen, who was funny and kept up a steady conversation almost by himself. Gary started circulating and collecting ten dollar bills from everyone, handing them a stack of chips in return. Every person got a different color. Some chips had been striped white to make enough distinct chips for all the players. Eventually Gary stepped to the dealer’s box, and we all quieted down and gathered round.

“For the newcomers, faro is a simple game to learn. It’s been banned almost everywhere because it became a game for cheaters, both players and the house. It’s unique among card games in that the house is afforded only a very small advantage, so the house

had to start cheating so they wouldn't go bust. And then the players had to start cheating to try to beat the house. Faro is the game that Canada Bill Jones, when told that the house was cheating, famously said, 'I know it's crooked, but it's the only game in town.'" The cast laughed and there were a few whoops and catcalls. "We do host a cheater's game once or twice a year, where folks can try their hand at beating the house less than square. But for these monthly games, cheating is not allowed and it doesn't happen.

"Faro is a wagering game, like craps or roulette. Two cards are drawn per round—one that's a win for the players, one that's a win for the dealer. You place your chips here..." Gary tapped the green felt of the betting board "...on the card you think will be drawn for the players' win. If your card is drawn, well, you win. If your card is drawn for the dealer's win, you lose. The game is played with a single deck, so your odds of winning go up the longer the game goes on, but so do your odds of losing. We keep track of what's been dealt with the case keeper." He gestured to the abacus-looking device. "So there's no need to count cards. It's mostly a game of luck, but it's fair and fast-paced and we like it." The cast cheered again. "So, we can play with as many people will fit around the table at once. If the new people want to hang back and watch a few rounds, that's fine, but you're also welcome to just jump in."

I decided to hang back, fiddling with the stack of orange chips in my hand. Gary did a beautiful dealer's shuffle before housing the deck in the box. Everyone gathered around and started placing their bets, the board quickly crowding with color. Caleb was in the middle of the fray. Gary drew two cards, to a grumble or two, and slid the corresponding beads on the case keeper to indicate they'd been played. He hadn't been kidding about the game being fast-paced. Drawing cards and claiming chips or paying out

bets became more frenzied as the deck was winnowed down. Chips became more crowded on the remaining cards, and the shouts of triumph and defeat grew louder as the odds and bets increased. Then the deck was played through, and the winners scooped up their earnings and everyone went in search of more beer while Gary shuffled.

I stepped up to the table, just off to Gary's right, and put down my stack of chips. Others crowded around me, cracking open beer cans and jostling a bit. The game had looked fast-paced from the outside, but at the table it was total chaos. You had to make quick decisions nonstop, and everything felt constantly in motion. Some of the guys seemed to make superstitious choices, relying on lucky numbers or a gut feeling. Some just tossed their chips around at random. At first I got hung up because I didn't know which way to go. I didn't want to feel like I was just throwing chips around, but I also didn't have much of a gut feeling about anything. Caleb, a few players to my right, made constant pleas to Lady Luck, and cursed her soundly when his bets were taken. After each big win, he'd say something like, "It's instinct, that's all. You just have to feel it."

Eventually I decided on a sort of system. I alternated moving my bet to the nearest free card either to the right or opposite the last card I'd bet on. Which way I went depended on what the other players were doing, if I felt like piling on a bet with everyone else or take the open card. I don't know if I went with my gut, exactly, but there was a kind of flow to it.

When the deck had been fully dealt, I found that I was up a few chips. It amounted to less than a dollar, but the adrenaline rush felt like I'd just won a hundred. I drained the last of my Budweiser and went to the kitchen for another. When I started to close the

fridge, an arm reached out and held it open. Caleb swung the door wide and reached in for a Guinness.

“So,” Caleb said, “how are you liking the game?”

“It’s great,” I said. “I can see why they do this often. I know we aren’t playing for much money or anything, but when you’re playing the stakes feel high, don’t you think?”

“Eh,” Caleb said with a shrug. “I just follow my instincts. Serves me well in life and acting. Seems to be working with the cards as well. I noticed that you tend to crowd your bets in the same area, moving your chips just a little. Got a scheme?”

“Not much of one,” I said. “I just go one over from where I was, and decide which way to go—”

“That seems to be working out okay for you. How would you feel about a side bet? To raise the stakes a little, because you said you like that. Whoever has the most chips at the end of the night takes it. Say, fifty dollars? The Understudies Earp, mano a mano?”

I hadn’t particularly liked the way Caleb had interrupted. I thought the way he kept loudly talking about his luck was a little obnoxious. And I got the feeling he thought I’d have trouble following the “Understudies Earp” bit. He said it in that pretentious way that people do when they want you to know that they’re quoting something but they don’t say what it is because if you don’t know, you’re too dumb to bother with.

“Fifty sounds good,” I said, holding out my hand.

“Aces,” Caleb said, shaking it extra firmly.

We stepped back to the table and played almost every round for the rest of the night. Caleb made a big show of trying to decide where to place his bets, sometimes hovering a chip over a few cards like a psychic waving over a crystal ball. I kept mostly to

the same strategy, sometimes mixing it up to choosing the nearest free face card or the like. I liked playing that way, with a plan and a method that still required me to make the final call, based on what else was happening in the game.

When we came near the end, Caleb's stack of chips and mine were roughly equal. I got a little distracted trying to gauge the level of each a few times. Gary let us know that the next round would be the last, and most everybody got a final beer out of the fridge. As a group we were fairly drunk at this point, and the game only kept getting more raucous. May had retreated to the back of the house about halfway through the evening. A bowl of chips had overturned and people kept walking through it, carrying chip slivers around the living room. The exclamations for both winning and losing involved more and more cursing. But I was focused on the two stacks of chips, orange and red, that grew and shrank in front of me and Caleb.

Finally, we got to the last draw of the round, and I could see that my stack was a little taller than Caleb's. The last draw is known as "calling the turn," and the players who want to bet have to predict the order in which the final three cards will be drawn. Odds are five to one against the player, and it only pays out at four to one, so whether many people are betting on it depends on the mood of the table. Our table was rowdy, and most of the players called out their predictions, placing high bets for their final. I decided to go for it, predicting Jack-Five-Queen, and putting down five chips—my largest bet of the night, but it would put me even with Caleb if he bet at all, and I knew he would.

Caleb waited until everyone else had placed their bets and then paused dramatically. "Five-Queen-Jack," he said, and pushed all his chips save one towards the

betting board. This was met with cheers and one or two honest-to-God howls. All for nine dollars and eighty cents.

Gary drew a five, and I was out. But Caleb still had to get the order on the last two or he'd lose almost everything.

Sliding the next card slowly out of the dealer's box, Gary flicked the edge and held it a moment, grinning and quirking an eyebrow. Everyone else at the table began to yell, and a few began to pound their fists, and then everyone was pounding their fists along the table and it sounded like thunder, or the walls coming down around us.

Gary threw down the card in the center of the table, giving it a bit of a spin so that for a few blurred moments it was still impossible to see which card he'd drawn. But then the card settled and everyone's eyes followed the Q as it slid to a stop, and then the cheering began. I wouldn't have been surprised if they had hoisted Caleb up on their shoulders. They all surrounded Caleb and pounded his back and shook his shoulders like he'd just scored the winning touchdown.

"Luck," Caleb yelled among the din, "was a lady tonight!"

The cheering continued even as everyone cashed out their winnings, with another swell in volume as Caleb cashed out for almost fifty dollars. I hoped Gary, as the banker, wasn't losing money that night. People gathered belongings and beer and surged out the door into the street. The few people who didn't live close enough to walk had wives and girlfriends waiting in cars out front to shuttle them home.

I hung back to walk out last with Caleb. Gary showed us to the door.

"Are you sure you don't want help cleaning up, Gary?" I asked.

“Hell no. That’s a job for the morning. I’m gonna go dive into bed next to May and sleep until noon. Thanks for coming out, fellas. Fun game tonight.”

“Faro has some new fans,” Caleb said. “Thanks for hosting, and I look forward to the next game.”

Gary closed the door behind us and we walked down the cobbled walk to the street. I reached into my pocket and started to pull out my wallet, even though I knew I didn’t have fifty dollars cash on me, but Caleb held out a protesting hand. “No, no, no,” he said. “Don’t worry about paying me tonight. You can just bring it to rehearsal on Monday.”

“Sure,” I said. His tone implied generosity, but really I thought a gentleman would have refused my money altogether. I would still have insisted on paying it, because a bet’s a bet, but the gesture would have been nice. “That was a great final play, by the way.”

“It really was.” Caleb smiled, remembering fondly. “It’s like I’ve been saying all night. Instinct. You either have it, and you can work on your toes, go with the flow, improvise—or you don’t, and you’re stuck going through the same losing motions over and over. Well, good night.”

Caleb walked away, and I honestly wasn’t sure at the time whether he’d meant to insult me.

## IX

Rehearsals progressed steadily. I got better at the warmups (I could remember to yell “Zorch!” while swinging my arms to the left), and I had taken so many notes that the margins of my script were full, so I mostly stopped taking them and just watched. I’d learned Wyatt’s lines and blocking (as well as most of the other characters’) and was focusing on the acting, both by Gary and Caleb. I was watching to see what Gary was doing right, and what Caleb was doing wrong.

After the rehearsal where I’d brought Caleb a fifty-dollar bill, taken out from my bank that day, I’d stopped trying to befriend him. And I also didn’t care anymore if I showed him up when it came to the history. He continued to be staggeringly ignorant about even Wyatt’s history, and I was resentful that he couldn’t be bothered to pick up a single book, or maybe spend some time in the museum exhibits right outside our rehearsal space. He kept saying to Gary that too much of that sort of information only “interfered with the process,” that he wanted to “focus on the Wyatt who existed the day of the shootout.” Bullshit. Lazy bullshit nonsense.

Meanwhile, I continued to provide information and insights that I thought Gary really appreciated. I felt like I was earning his respect by the inch. A few times after rehearsal he invited me to join him and a couple others at Big Nose Kate’s for a drink. Caleb was there sometimes, but not always.

During this time, Rob had also been stepping more and more into the role of Morgan, and he really was great at it. Russ, the departing dentist, had played him as a little brother, looking up to Wyatt and Virgil. But Rob played him with a lot more swagger, and on nights when we had ladies around—the costumers and people’s girlfriends, usually—

he'd ad-lib some asides in their direction, complete with winks and hat-tips. Marcel loved it, and said he couldn't wait to watch the ladies go wild for Rob's Morgan. I felt a little bad for Russ, hearing this and all, but he seemed to agree.

And Russ' time was drawing to a close. He'd be moving soon, and Rob was clearly ready to step into the role. One night at the end of rehearsal, Marcel once again told us that Gary had an announcement.

"I'll be hosting another faro game Saturday after next. And in honor of Russ' nearing departure, I've agreed to his last request—it's a cheater's game." Gary grinned at the yells and whistles that followed this announcement. "Most of you know how this goes. Bring your best cheats. You don't have to cheat, but know that the game will be rigged on both sides. If you get caught cheating, you're out. If the dealer gets caught cheating, he's replaced. Twenty-dollar buy-in, and we'll be using coppers."

"Yeeee-haw!" Owen whooped, and threw his hat in the air.

Then Caleb turned to me, and he smirked. And I knew I'd be spending a lot of time in the next week and a half researching how to cheat at faro.

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The whole time I'd been coming to rehearsals, I'd never once spoken even one of Wyatt's lines. I'd read some other parts, mostly while Gary was working with Caleb, but there had never been time for me to actually step into a scene as Wyatt. But as the cheater's game approached, rehearsals were starting to go more smoothly and Caleb seemed to be looking less to Gary for coaching. Most nights we did full run-throughs of the show or worked specific scenes, rather than any one-on-one work. Then Marcel told us

that our Wednesday rehearsal would once again be Wyatt, Billy, and Morgan only, mostly in preparation for Russ' impending departure.

Wednesday was cloudy and windy, and we all arrived covered in dust. We warmed up together, and then Marcel sent us our separate ways. Gary, Caleb and I left the performance space in favor of an open area near the exhibits, where a scaled-down diorama of the shootout provided both a backdrop and railings to sit on.

"Let's just jump right into each of the scenes tonight, but we can stop to discuss anytime the mood strikes you, Caleb," Gary said.

"Yeah, that works for me," Caleb replied. I didn't like his tone, like he was Gary's partner rather than understudy, like he had an equal say in what we did tonight.

They started at the beginning, with a scene between Wyatt, Morgan, and Virgil, where Wyatt defends his refusal to take any sort of position with the law in Tombstone. Wyatt doesn't make any speeches in the scene, but he hints at a long history of frustration with trying to keep order, his only reward witnessing death after death.

Caleb delivered Wyatt's lines with energy, giving a lively performance, but—if you had asked me—failing to really capture Wyatt. Caleb wasn't reserved enough, was arrogant rather than confident. He also ran through the scene without stopping at all. I said Morgan's lines, just as a body to move the scene along. Gary read Virgil trying to persuade Wyatt to take up the badge, and I don't think it was my imagination that Gary seemed a little impatient with Caleb himself.

Caleb and Gary read through the next two scenes before Gary finally called a halt himself. "So, Caleb, how are you feeling about Wyatt in these scenes? Do you feel like you have a good grasp on how he got to this point, or any questions about his background?"

“You know,” Caleb said, “I think it’s all there on the page. He’s tired of watching people shoot each other. He just wants to run a business. I don’t think we need to weigh that down with a bunch of biography. I mean, we don’t all walk around every day thinking about our whole lives, do we?”

Gary’s face was smooth, almost peaceful, but the fingers of his right hand twitched a little, reminding me of the way gunfighters in movies roll their fingers as they hover over a gun before drawing.

“I see what you’re saying, but our past makes us who we are, and we make most of our decisions based on our experience. Wyatt isn’t ordering a steak, he’s stonewalling Virgil’s attempts to bring some order to Tombstone. That surely makes him think about his successes and failures as a lawman.”

“Naturally,” Caleb said. “But I still think it’s there on the page. He mentions Dodge City, and I think ‘fools getting shot’ conveys his feelings about the people in town.”

“So,” I spoke up without thinking, “you’re saying that Wyatt sees everyone else in town as a fool?”

Caleb appeared to mull it over. “Maybe not everyone, and certainly not his brothers. But I think Wyatt feels like he’s surrounded by people who are less...let’s say savvy, than he is. I mean, at this point Wyatt was already basically a living legend, right? He could count on his reputation to do a lot of work for him. People mostly left him alone when they found out who he was. There’s that scene in the movie where that guy is going to shoot Kurt Russell until he hears the name ‘Wyatt Earp,’ and then he backs right down. So maybe Wyatt doesn’t see why he needs to get involved.”

I was still reeling in horror at Caleb using the film as a reference when Gary turned to me and said, “Steve, why don’t you give these scenes a shot? Caleb can watch and see if he gains any insight from a different performance.”

My stomach flipped, from nerves or excitement or both. I was too surprised to tell the difference. “Yeah, okay.”

“Do you need pages?” Gary asked.

“No, I know all the lines,” I said.

“Great. Caleb, do you mind reading Morgan’s lines?” Gary didn’t wait for Caleb to answer, just handed him the relevant pages.

I stepped away from the rail, towards Gary, trying to see him as a different Earp: Virgil, the older brother. Wyatt loved his brother, respected him, but wouldn’t just defer to him or back down. I knew that would be the hardest part—shutting Gary down, telling him he was wrong. As Wyatt, I couldn’t be talking to him as my hero. I had to talk to him as a brother.

We started the scene, and I tried to settle into my body, keeping still in a way that felt like I could spring into action at any moment. When I delivered the line about “fools getting shot,” I said it with bitterness. Wyatt had to dismiss them as fools, to separate their deaths from the real possibility that he could be shot over a game of cards every time he stepped up to the faro table. I think he also knew that Virgil saw through him, but wouldn’t call him out on it. Virgil pushed, but Wyatt kept the conversation brief and glib, not letting himself be pinned down.

When we reached the end, I took a deep, shaky breath. The only way I can think to describe the feeling is that it was like watching the end of a close football game, where

you're tense and focused and the fact that you're watching it on your TV or from the bleachers is only secondary until the final points have been scored, and then you come back to yourself and feel the metal under your ass or hear a car horn out in the street. The world came back in, but I felt like I had won something. And it was a rush.

Gary smiled at me in a way that felt approving, and in the moment before he turned to Caleb, I almost expected someone to pour Gatorade over my head. "What do you think, any difference in Steve's portrayal? Anything you might be able to use?"

"Well," Caleb said, "Steve certainly plays him more seriously. I'm not sure I agree with that portrayal. I think it lacks some of Wyatt's...fundamental charisma. But I could certainly experiment with adding a touch of gravitas or cynicism to the scene."

Gary nodded his head, looking at the ground. "Tell you what. You seem to have a pretty strong sense of how you want to play Wyatt. Why don't we have Steve run through the rest of the scenes. You can observe, see if there's anything you'd like to add or modify or discuss about Steve's interpretation, and we can give Steve some time on his feet."

Caleb smiled without showing his teeth. "All right. We'll see what Steve's got. And I'm happy to give him feedback. I know he doesn't have much acting experience."

I was immune to Caleb's barbs, because I got to read all of Wyatt's lines. We ran through every scene, some a few times, and Gary gave me pointers and we got to talk about what I thought was going on and what Gary usually thought about onstage. Caleb mostly watched in silence, particularly when we talked motivation, though he did stop the scenes early on to try to give me tips about how to project my voice, or include a dramatic pause. But Gary put a stop to that fairly quickly.

“That’s not what this is about,” he said. “That kind of thing will be helpful for Steve later on, but tonight we’re just focusing on Wyatt, as a person and as a character. And this is as much for you as it is for him, so save the technical stuff for some other time.”

After that Caleb kept pretty quiet.

When our rehearsal time was up, we all came back together for the usual debrief and then headed for the doors. I heard Gary say my name, hanging back a little from the rest of the group. I slowed down to let him catch up.

“What would you say to grabbing a beer?” Gary asked. “I know you have work in the morning, but I think it’s time we talked, just the two of us.”

I probably gave some form of a yes out loud, but mostly I just remember nodding my head until I had to force myself to stop.

## X

The Crystal Palace has a beautiful bar that spans almost the entire restaurant, a replica of the original that would have been there in 1881. Sitting at this bar with Gary next to me felt like I'd been granted a wish before making one. He ordered us each a beer, and we shot the shit for a few minutes. Gary seemed like he had something on his mind, but I was just happy to be getting the time with him.

Finally he set his beer down and turned so he could look at me directly. "You've seen our show many times over the years. You know a lot about the shootout and the Earps. That's right, isn't it?"

"I love the local history. I'm interested in pretty much all of it, but Wyatt is a particular favorite of mine, and I've seen the reenactment more times than I can count."

I didn't feel foolish saying these things. I knew that Gary shared my interests and that he appreciated my love of the show, that he wouldn't think I was a pathetic fan. I'd proven myself enough for that.

Gary picked his beer up and took a long drink. "How do you think Caleb is doing?"

Here I hesitated. I knew Gary wouldn't ask if he didn't want my honest opinion, but my opinion wasn't good. "I'm afraid I'm too biased for you to get a useful answer. It's obviously not in my best interest for Caleb to be an incredible Wyatt Earp who performs for years and years and years." I grinned to pull the punch from the truth.

Gary chuckled a little and nodded. "Makes sense. But I'd still like to hear your thoughts."

I chose my words carefully. "Even though I have a personal stake in Caleb's ability to do Wyatt justice, I think that my commitment to the reenactment is pretty clear by now.

I want it to keep being the amazing show I've been watching for years. And so far, I don't think Caleb is as...invested as he needs to be. He's an entertaining actor, and I'm sure he's performed some roles real well. But I just don't think he understands Wyatt, and he may never be able to."

Gary sighed. "I think you're right."

Sometimes I wonder how well I can actually separate what I feel now from what I felt then. I remember those months so clearly...or at least I think I do. It's especially hard to pinpoint the exact moments my feelings about things changed. But looking back, I can't believe I ever gave Caleb the benefit of the doubt, thinking that he might not be deliberately trying to ruffle me or put me down. And I don't know when I first let myself wonder if I could do a better job than Caleb, if they should just pass him over completely and skip straight to me. But when Gary agreed with me at the Palace, it was at least in the back of my mind, if it hadn't yet worked its way to the front.

Gary finished his beer and signaled the waitress for another for each of us. "He's got something, though. People will watch him on stage. And maybe people who don't know as much as you and I do won't even notice. What's more important, that you get the broad strokes right and make sure that people get their money's worth, or that you're staying completely true and accurate to the history?"

Still facing toward the bar, Gary didn't seem to be asking me so much as talking to himself, but I answered anyway.

"The reason I love this reenactment—and the reason I think most of the others are moneygrubbing garbage—is that I feel like you've always done both. People get their

money's worth, all right, but they're also getting good history. They're entertained, but it's the truth."

Our beers arrived, but I held off, feeling like it was important to be clearheaded until this particular conversation ran its course.

"You're right, but it's not easy." Gary downed nearly half his beer in one go, unconcerned with mental clarity. "We try, but people come and go and some are great and some are just okay and sometimes you have to play for laughs. I've just been doing this so long, I think I'm having trouble letting go. It's important to me to get Wyatt right. But after I leave, the show will be different, and I have to accept that."

I didn't want to change the subject, but I couldn't let the opportunity pass. "Why are you giving up the role?"

I didn't know if the reason was common knowledge among the cast, but it had always seemed too personal of a question for me to ask. Rob speculated frequently, with guesses ranging from Gary getting bored to Gary getting an offer to play Wyatt in a TV miniseries to Gary having terminal cancer, but we only talked about it when we were alone, never in front of a member of the cast.

Gary seemed surprised but not offended. "I guess there's no reason you'd know, but it's not a secret. My brother was in a car accident, and he got hurt pretty bad. He owns a hardware store up in Flagstaff, and he's been having trouble running the business. His wife has been trying to help, but it's just not in her wheelhouse, so May and I are moving up there, and we don't know for how long. Could be months, years, could be for good. Sad as I am to leave, I can't choose playing Wyatt Earp over family. We're settling our affairs

here, selling the house and such, and then that's it. Of course we'll be back to visit. I wouldn't miss Helldorado Days."

Gary smiled and finished off the rest of his beer.

I was filled with sudden panic. Helldorado Days, an entire weekend of events that drew tourists like crazy, was less than two months away. Gary could be leaving at any time, and I wasn't ready to lose him as my mentor. I pictured trying to learn from Caleb, and my stomach twisted.

"Will you be here for Helldorado this year?" I asked, as casually as I could manage.

"The plan is to have the Helldorado performance be my last. I can't think of a better way to go out. You've seen it, I assume."

"Yeah, I'm usually there as Cowboy Elvis. It's really amazing to see the reenactment in the street, in the open. And with a crowd the size you all deserve." I raised my beer in a salute.

"It's an amazing feeling, performing on Allen Street," Gary said, nostalgia in his voice. "We're all so close to the history, but it feels like we're over the top of it, most of the time, and Helldorado is like being in it. It's like history is still happening, and you can walk around inside."

"Well," I said, "I hope someday I'll find out what that's like."

"Oh, you will," Gary said, so assuredly that I felt like I was already leaving my old life—Cowboy Elvis, loneliness, obscurity—behind.

I made myself bring the conversation back to the issue at hand. "So Caleb wouldn't be taking over until after Helldorado Days. Maybe he'll come around by then." I tried to inject a subtle note of doubt in my voice, hoping it would pass to Gary.

“Come around, right,” Gary said. “Caleb doesn’t seem like the type to change his mind. But he’s getting better at every rehearsal, so maybe that will just keep going and he’ll go deeper with Wyatt, add some subtlety.” Gary seemed to consider this, but then his face smoothed, got harder to read, and he turned back to me. “Hell, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be talking to you like this, about someone you’re working with. You’re pretty much the only other one who hears him when he’s talking about the history and his motivation, so I wanted to get your opinion, see if it lined up with mine. But I don’t want to cast Caleb in a bad light for you. He’s doing a fine job so far.”

“Can I ask,” I said, and gathered my nerve, “how did I do tonight? It was my first time reading Wyatt, and I’m sure your feedback would be helpful.”

Gary’s smile was reassuring. “You have a great understanding of Wyatt. I might just say that because you see him like I see him, but I’d swear you know his history even better than I do, and you think of him as a person, not a character. That comes through when you perform. I was hoping some of that would rub off on Caleb, but I think he’s too threatened to be able to use it.” Gary stopped himself. “Sorry, that’s the kind of thing I shouldn’t be saying to you.”

Gary thought Caleb was threatened. By me.

“No, that’s all right,” I said. “My opinion of Caleb is pretty well formed.” I decide to press my advantage. “Tonight Caleb was giving me acting advice, and you told him it wasn’t the time. I appreciate that, I enjoyed the hell out of getting to do those scenes and talk to you about them. But I do have some catching up to do, on the acting front. I know you’re busy, but if you ever have the time to give me some coaching, I’d be honored to learn from you.”

“You know, Caleb’s sort of an exception. We don’t have a lot of people with acting experience who come out to auditions. Mostly we cast people who have natural ability, and they pick things up as they go. I’d be happy to take some time to work with you, if we can find it. And you also might think about asking Marcel. He’d be flattered, first of all, and he’s an excellent acting coach, especially if you can get him alone with you.” Gary signaled the waitress. “One more for the road?”

“Sounds great,” I said. “And thank you, I’ll ask Marcel. And it’s kind of you to agree to share your time.”

“It’s nice to have it appreciated,” Gary said.

While drinking our third beers we made small talk, town talk, and—a new kind for me—theater talk. Observations about hiccups in the show, rumors that Marcel wanted to add Friday performances. I made Gary laugh by telling him about Rob’s newfound determination to woo Judy, the bartender at the Four Deuces. Gary hadn’t read *Lonesome Dove*, and I told him I’d bring him my copy at the next rehearsal. Nothing important. But on my walk home I replayed the whole conversation in my head, several times. Everything we’d discussed felt like new knowledge, important knowledge. The kind of knowledge that turned a dream into a goal.

## XI

I'd known that Wyatt and Doc had dealt faro. I'd seen some pictures. But until we played at Gary's house I'd had only a loose sense of the game. And I didn't know about the cheating. Before Russ' last game, I did my research. I talked to the guys at the *Tombstone Epitaph* office (longest continually running newspaper in Arizona, their employees as crazy about the history as the reenactors). I thumbed through the few local history books I owned, and asked the librarians for help at the library. They found some periodicals for me, and also helped me search online. All the resources mentioned that people found loads of ways to cheat at faro, but gave only a few specifics. Most of the cheating relied on sleight of hand, but as I was not a magician I wasn't sure I could count on succeeding with those. I broadened my search to include cheating at other kinds of card games, but faro is so particular that it didn't help much.

Gary mentioned that we'd be using coppers for the game. I'd asked and learned that for our purposes that meant pennies. Coppers reverse a bet. If you put one on top of your chips it meant you were betting that card would lose. One of the ways people cheated at faro was to attach a horsehair to their copper. If their card was pulled as a winner they could yank the copper away and hope no one noticed. Gamblers could also try to move or remove their bets altogether once a card was drawn. The dealer usually cheated by having a rigged dealer's box, like one with a mirror that let them see which card was up next, so they might try to draw two cards if the top card wasn't in their favor. Marked decks were also common. Since we'd likely be switching dealers, I wasn't sure how the dealers would cheat. Would they each bring their own dealer's box? If they did, it would almost certainly be rigged, and I didn't see how they could get away with it.

Finally I decided to shoot the moon with a gambit that played to both my strengths and my weaknesses, and hopefully, I thought, people underestimating me. I made plans with Rob to go out for drinks at the Four Deuces before the game and left the rest up to Caleb's Lady Luck.

My strategy was twofold: I would not only be trying to cheat my own bets to win, but I'd sabotage Caleb wherever I could.

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After the last performance the night of the game, I went home to change. I put on fresh clothes and then took a bottle of whiskey off the shelf. Pouring a few ounces into a tumbler, I took only a small drink before beginning to sprinkle the rest over my clothes. I dipped my fingers in and splashed it on my neck like aftershave. When only a mouthful was left, I tipped it back but didn't swallow. Instead, I swished it around my mouth and even gargled with it before spitting it out. By then it was time to meet Rob. When I took off my ring at the door, it was tacky from alcohol.

As I neared the Four Deuces, I slowed my walk, in case Rob could already see me. I looked down at the ground and dragged my feet just a little. I spotted Rob as soon as I walked in the door. He waved at me, and I raised my arm in return.

"Hey!" I yelled, too loud. I sat in the stool next to him a little hard, so that the legs scraped the floor.

"Started without me, huh?" Rob said with a grin. "It's okay, I can catch up."

He signaled the bartender (I didn't recognize her, she must have been new) and ordered a whiskey-Coke to go with the half a beer still sitting in front of him.

“Double whiskey and a beer chaser,” I said. I risked making a bad first impression on our bartender by leering at her cleavage a little while I ordered.

“Damn, my man,” Rob said. “You’re going to hit your limit before we even get to the game.”

“Eh, it’s a cheater’s game. I’m trying to keep it loose, you know.” I quickly downed my whiskey and followed it with some beer. This was most of the alcohol I planned to consume that night, so I wasn’t worried.

No doubt egged on by the example I was setting, Rob did a shot of tequila before we started the trek over to Gary’s. I hoped that I wasn’t going to give him a hangover he’d hold against me.

On the walk over I started singing, not too loudly but far off-key. “*Out in the West Texas town of El Paso, I fell in love with a Mexican girl...*” Rob just laughed. We reached the cobblestone steps in the Broden yard just as Chris and Travis were walking up, so I put a little extra shuffle in my step. “*One night a wild young cowboy came in, wild as the West Texas wind...Dashing and daring, a drink he was sharing...*” I pretended to forget the lyrics and grinned stupidly at Travis. I made a mental note to thank Marcel for all the improv warmups we’d done at rehearsal. They were paying off.

Once in the house I headed straight to the fridge and pulled out a beer. Making sure no one else was in sight of the kitchen, I poured the top two-thirds of it right down the sink.

Almost everyone had arrived. I worked my way around the room, pretending to lose my train of thought in conversations, slurring words, and laughing too loud. I started

to think I might pull it off when I heard Rob telling Paul, “He was already a few drinks in when he met me at the bar. We need to make sure he gets home okay.”

I waited for Caleb to go for a drink and followed him into the kitchen. I finished the beer in my hand and belched loudly. He turned from the fridge, saw me, and smiled. “Hey there, slugger,” he said. “Ready for the game?”

“You bet your ass,” I said, poking a finger into the fridge door so that it closed a little before Caleb’s hand braced it.

“Up for another side bet?” he asked. “We can do double or nothing, a hundred bucks this time.” Caleb didn’t even bother to try working up to it, and I knew he thought I was completely shitfaced.

“Get ready to lose, sucker,” I said, then pulled the fridge door away from Caleb. I leaned over it and groped for a fresh beer. Caleb removed the bottle cap from his Guinness, mimed tipping his hat at me, and walked back towards the living room. I poured most of my new beer down the sink, and made sure that I was drinking from it as I followed Caleb, the bottle tipped nearly vertical by the time I rejoined the group.

Gary was gathering cash from everyone—twenty dollars for this buy in. When he got to me I handed him a five, and he had to stop me from putting away my wallet. “Sorry Steve, you’re a few bucks shy,” he said, holding up my bill. I laughed, and then—with difficulty, of course—counted out a ten and five ones. When he handed me my stack of chips I dropped a few on the floor, and Gary stopped me from bending over. He plucked them from the ground and then made sure I had my hand wrapped around all of them before moving on.

I knew that everyone in the room thought I was drunk as a skunk, but I was still taking a risk. If I got caught, drunk or no, I'd be out. I'd need to be very careful, while pretending to be completely off the rails.

Cash collected and chips dispensed, Gary addressed the room. "Gentlemen. Welcome to Russ' last faro game." We all cheered and clapped loudly. "A cheater's game." More cheers and whoops. "The rules are the same as for our regular faro game, but with one important difference. Everyone is encouraged to try to cheat, but everyone—players and dealers alike—forfeits their chips if they're caught cheating. I'll be dealing first, but we have a few volunteers to take over, if any of you boys can catch me." Laughter and clapping. "Now, in order to call out a cheater, you have to see them do it. You can't just claim that a dealer is using a rigged box. You have to see them cheating with it. If you call someone out for cheating and you're wrong, you lose half your chips." Whistles and groans. "There's coppers on the table, but feel free to use any you might have brought with you as well. Any questions?" We did not have questions. "Let's buck this tiger, fellas."

I stepped right up to the table, making sure I was next to Caleb. I fumbled for a copper, and dropped my stack of chips so that they immediately toppled into a mound. And then my real work began.

As far as anyone could tell, it was a miracle that I was managing to get any chips on the betting board. Half the time I put them in the wrong place, or accidentally moved or knocked over someone else's chips. A few times I took someone else's winnings. I also got a new beer between each round. After about the fourth hand, I came back with two. One was nearly empty by the time I reached the table, but I drank the other. I was still plenty sober and getting thirsty.

But every so often, I managed to move my chips off a losing card, or slide them onto a winning card. I mostly accomplished this by drunkenly leaning over the table, sometimes pretending to squint at the newly dealt cards. My sleight of hand was far from slippery smooth, but no one was watching me closely, and I got bolder. Once, I snagged a copper off Caleb's chips when the card was pulled for a loser. He cheered before looking down and seeing that the copper was missing, and Gary took his bet. Accusations flew (mostly good-natured), but no one had seen who'd done it.

My pile of chips grew, but I started sliding them in my pockets, so that my stack on the board remained small. Gary was busted for pulling two cards at once, and Chris stepped in to take his place, with his own dealer's box. Everyone's eyes were glued to Chris' hands as he dealt cards, and I was able to pull chips off Caleb's bets, reducing his payouts. I put his chips in the freezer when I went for more beer.

Near the end of the game, I bumped into Owen (standing next to me and reaching to collect a bet) as a diversion, and slid my chips from between two cards (one of which had just lost) and onto the harmless card. As I looked up, I saw that Rob had seen what I'd done, but he just winked at me and took a sip of his beer.

Finally, we were down to the last cards of the final round. Chris was still dealing. No one had been able to figure out how he was cheating, but we were all convinced that he absolutely was. Caleb's stack of chips was small, but mine looked smaller. Behind the table, my pockets held a respectable handful each. I made a point of not looking at Gary. I'm pretty sure he was onto me, but he was out of the game. Chris asked the players to call the turn. The cheating was done. This part of the game could only be straightforward.

My fellow actors called out their bets and laid down their chips. Caleb once again waited, trying to be last, but I stood, swaying slightly, pretending to be stumped. Caleb evaluated our relative stacks, and pushed in half his chips. “Ten, three, Jack,” he said.

“Steve?” Chris said. “Are you going to call the turn?”

I shoved two of my chips towards the betting board. “Jack, seven...Jack.” I said.

Chris pushed my chips back towards me. “How bout you sit this one out, buddy?”

“Okay,” I said.

Caleb was tense. He needed to win to beat the stack of chips I had remaining on the table. I’m sure he wasn’t happy that I hadn’t been allowed to bet on the last turn. As for me, I thought my heart was about to beat out of my chest. I was having a lot of trouble maintaining my fake drunken stupor, because I had so much adrenaline pumping through my system it was hard not to jitter and fidget, coming off more like a junkie than a drunk. But I let a grin plant itself on my face, and laughed often, usually at nothing anyone else could see.

Chris started to pull the cards. “Ten.” He laid the first on the table, and Caleb pointed at the sky. We could all see the face before Chris got the next card fully turned over.

“Shit,” Caleb said, slapping his palm loudly on the table.

Chris took his chips along with everyone else who’d lost the last turn (all but Paul), and people started calling out to him to tell how he’d cheated. “No, no,” Chris said with a smile. “You’ll just have to see if you can figure it out in six or eight months, the next time someone runs a cheater’s game.”

Caleb pulled in a huge breath, and then turned to me. He held out a hand. “Well, I pushed my luck and I lost. Congratulations to you, Stevie.”

I shook his hand, and then raised my voice. “I appreciate that, Caleb. You know, I just trusted my instincts, followed my gut. And got very...” I reached a hand into my pocket and started pulling out chips, as the room grew quiet and everyone turned to the table. “Very...” My black-and-white striped chips piled up, forming a decent pile by the time my pockets were empty. “Very lucky.” The room was silent. You could’ve heard a card drop on the felt table. “Of course, it also helps that everyone here thought I was drunk.” I turned to Gary and gave a theatrical bow, stepping one foot out in front and sweeping my arms out to my sides.

The eruption of sound—shouting, laughing, cheering, incredulous screaming—could have taken the roof off the house.

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I don’t think I’ve put on a performance like that to this day. Everything came together so perfectly. The cheating seemed easy, feigning drunkenness barely a challenge. But the moment where I pulled all the chips out of my pockets, with an audience’s full attention on me—only months before I would have bungled it. I wouldn’t have been able to find the words. I would have chickened out at the last second and just put my chips down in silence, though even that would have been a sweet victory. Just showing handful after handful of what people failed to see because they didn’t think I was worth paying attention to. But the drama of leisurely revealing my winnings, the bow...that was one of those moments the actors had been talking about, where everything just clicks for you and you hold the crowd in the palm of your hand.

## XII

I woke up Sunday morning feeling damn fine. No hangover, and almost a hundred dollars in my wallet that I had earned with pure guts and cunning. And I had another hundred coming my way from Caleb at Monday's rehearsal. I'd generously made him the same offer he'd made me, and gotten to watch his mouth twist like it was wrapped around a lemon at that. I whistled as I made myself eggs and bacon, and black coffee. I was starting to like the bitterness, the flavor stronger without sugar or cream.

I showered and put on my black jeans with a shirt. I'd told Shelby that I wouldn't be going out as Cowboy Elvis that day, wanting to be able to go where I wanted, depending on whether I'd triumphed or lost in disgrace. Now I'd be able to hang around backstage and, I expected, receive some accolades for my performance of the night before. But the first show wasn't for another few hours, so I had some time to kill.

I followed my gut. It wasn't so much a decision I came to after deliberation, as it was a sudden impulse that felt right. I picked up my wallet and keys and paused by the door, but left my ring on my finger. That day, I believed, was not a day for hiding or pretending.

My destination was only a few blocks away, but I went out of my way to stop in at the market and buy a bouquet of flowers. Not roses, but a pretty fall bunch that had all the colors of a desert sunset. Then I backtracked to a little grouping of duplexes. I'd only been there once, but I didn't have any trouble remembering which door to approach. I smoothed my shirt, fiddled with the cellophane wrapped around the flowers so that every one of them showed, and knocked.

I could hear faint sounds from inside the house, and I waited. There was a peephole, and I assumed that I had already been seen, but I kept my calm, didn't fidget. The door opened, just a few inches at first. The difference between the dark inside and the beaming sunshine outside made it so that I couldn't see anything, but then the door opened wider and Lainie leaned into the doorframe. She was wearing an oversize t-shirt and boxers, no socks or shoes, no makeup. Her hair was ruffled from sleep but still shiny. I used to love how easy it was to run my fingers through her soft hair while we'd sit on the couch watching a movie.

"Hi, Lainie," I said with a smile.

"Steve," she said. "What are you doing here?"

I held out the flowers. She didn't take them, but that was all right. It felt fine to hold them out while I said what I'd come to say. "Lainie, the last few months have...well, they've changed me, not to sound too dramatic. I don't know if you've heard, but I've been working with the reenactors. I'm understudying Wyatt Earp."

Lainie rubbed one eye and shook her head a little. "I thought Caleb was doing that."

I paused, because it sounded like she knew Caleb. But he wasn't worth my time at that particular moment. "Well, he's one of the understudies. There're two of us. But I've been doing really well, and I've learned a lot, and I think that the problems we had, most of them are about the man I used to be. I'm different now, I'm better. And I still love you, so much, Lainie, and I miss you. I'd like to come in and talk, if you have time this morning. If you've got things to do, I can come back later. I know that this is unexpected. But if you

give me a chance, I think you'll see that I can be the man you need now, the man you deserve."

I held the flowers out farther until they almost touched her t-shirt, and she took them from me.

"Steve..." Lainie sighed. "I'm really glad you're doing well. You've wanted to be part of that show for so long, and I'm glad that's come through for you. But I've moved on, and I think you know that." She looked at the flowers and then held them back out to me. "I can't accept these. They're a really nice gesture. I just think you should be giving them to someone else."

"Those are yours," I said firmly. "I bought them for you. There's no one else I want to give them to. If you don't believe what I've said today, then just think of them as the first gesture. I'll make more. I'll make as many as I have to, until you believe me."

"No," Lainie said, and the side of her mouth pulled in that way that meant she was biting the inside of her cheek. "You're not hearing me. It's not that I don't believe you about whatever has happened to you over the summer. It's that it doesn't matter. We're divorced, Steve. I served you with papers."

"We're not divorced," I said. "I didn't sign anything."

"Yeah, well, that's because you won't get a lawyer or meet with mine to reach a final settlement. I don't want anything from you, and I don't think I have anything you want...any assets that you want. So we're pretty much done. It's just not fully official yet."

"And until it is, we can still reconcile."

"I don't want to." Lainie pushed the flowers against my chest, but I made no move to hold them. She let go, and they dropped on the ground between us, scattering loose

yellow petals on her doormat. “I don’t love you anymore. That’s all that matters. That’s all I feel like I should have to say.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Oh, you don’t? You can’t understand why I would stop loving you, after months of horrible fights where you wouldn’t let me go to sleep, and I almost lost my job because I’d be nodding off at my desk, or the time where I tried to leave the apartment just to get away from the fight and you blocked the door, and I had to call my sister and have her bring her husband over and come get me? Or after, you know, begging you to give up that Elvis crap and focus on your job, because I want kids and I can’t have kids in a shitty apartment with a husband who won’t work full time because he’s busy dressing up and playing with the tourists. I know I made the right decision, Steve. If you told me you quit Elvis and got a promotion and bought a four-bedroom house, it wouldn’t change how I feel. It wouldn’t change my memories. There’s nothing you can do, and now you’re going to leave me alone.”

“I’m not going to give up, Lainie.” I pushed, more out of momentum than anything else. I’d come over here with a determination to convince her to take me back, and it kept me talking, saying the things I’d said in my head a hundred times before. But in my head, Lainie had softened, and kissed my cheek, and said maybe we could have dinner some time, and talk about us. I was playing my part, but her lines were all wrong.

“I’m seeing someone.” Lainie spat the words, then seemed to regret them, but her eyebrows scrunched together and she kept on. “I’m seeing a man, and it’s getting serious, and I didn’t want to tell you, maybe because I don’t want to hurt you, or maybe because I didn’t want to have yet another fight with you. But I now I have to tell you, because you

have to know that it's over. When I say I've moved on, I mean I've moved on with someone else, and there's no more room for you in my life."

People always say, "It was like I got punched in the stomach." If you've ever been punched in the stomach, you know that it feels nothing like being hurt by the one you love. That feels like someone has shoved a vacuum hose down your throat and it's sucking your innards out, but slowly. Not just your stomach, everything inside you, and you want to double over to make the feeling stop, but usually you can't because the one who's doing the hurting is standing right in front of you.

"Well," I said, my voice raspier than I would've liked, "it's really fucking kind of you to not want to hurt my feelings, Lainie."

She stepped back and closed the door in my face. Not a slam, she just shut it. I heard the deadbolt engage. I raised my foot and brought it down hard, once, on the bouquet of flowers, feeling the spines of the yellow daisies snap under my heel, and then I turned and walked away.

## XIII

As I'd hoped, the whole cast talked all day about my win, but I couldn't enjoy it. They say that people in comas hear the people who talk to them. That's how I felt—like I was in a coma, and everyone was coming by to tell my nearly-dead body happy things just in case I was in there. Caleb didn't show up to the performances that day. I think he told Marcel that he was hung over. I stayed backstage through all the performances. Even though I didn't actually have anything to do there, watching the routine whirl around me soothed me a little.

And then that day slowly slid into all the next days. I worked as many hours as my boss would give me, and I rehearsed, and Caleb gave me a hundred-dollar bill that I still carry in my wallet. On nights when no one wanted a post-rehearsal drink, I went home and watched movies. I found it easiest to sit with Sergio Leone's spaghetti Westerns, in which gunslingers like *The Man With No Name* rarely felt the need to speak. I must have watched *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* a dozen times.

Rob took over as Morgan Earp and was swarmed by pretty young things everywhere he went—but Rob had lost interest in chasing out-of-towners. He'd finally convinced Judy to go out with him, and told me that being chased by nubile tourists took all the fun out of it. In addition to working at the Four Deuces, Judy part-timed as a tour guide at the Bird Cage, and she sometimes joined us for drinks still wearing her corset and bustle. I liked Judy a lot, but seeing the way she now looked at Rob sometimes put a buzz in my brain that forced me home to drink alone.

Marcel agreed to give me some acting lessons, and Gary found a few hours to spend with me as well. I worked hard, I gave it my all, I pushed through the pain like I was

a marathon runner in the last mile. My body did the things I told it to, the things I had trained it for, but my mind had pulled away to save itself.

I quit being Cowboy Elvis. I turned in my outfit to Shelby Marsh and told Hart I wanted to focus on the reenactment. I shaved my sideburns and started growing a moustache. I boiled my coffee on the stove and barely noticed the grit.

A little less than a month before Helldorado Days, Gary officially told the cast that Helldorado weekend would be his last show. He and May would be moving to Flagstaff the next week. After that rehearsal, Marcel told me that he and Hart wanted to have a meeting with me and Gary.

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We met at Café Margarita for lunch. I sat between Marcel and Hart and across from Gary. The waitress took our orders for burritos and nachos and Coronas, and brought the beers right away. When they were set down on the table, Hart turned to me.

“We want you to know, Steve, how impressed we are with the work you’ve been doing. Everyone in the show can see the effort you’ve put in—you keep putting in—and Gary says you’ve been great as Wyatt. I guess we can tell you now, Gary was one of the people who vouched for you for this whole understudy-to-the-understudy thing.”

I looked at Gary, who raised his beer to me. By then I saw myself as part of the cast, part of Gary’s circle, maybe even his friend. But knowing that he had put in a word for me back at the very beginning, that he knew who I was and somehow believed in me, put a lump the size of a chicken egg in my throat.

Marcel continued for Hart. “You’re also becoming a better actor every day, and you’re committed to it. Asking to work with me, and Gary, to improve your skills has been beneficial for you, but also gives us further evidence of your dedication to the show.”

I’d spent hours standing with Marcel in the rehearsal space, before rehearsal or between performances, doing things like trying to envision that my voice was a paintbrush and I was using it to paint strokes along the bleachers and back wall, so I could learn to control my projection. He’d shown me ways to improve my gun-twirling skills, and I’d practiced at home, bringing him increasingly swifter and smoother draws at each of our meetups. Some nights, sitting in my apartment practicing those flashy pulls with complete focus until I was exhausted let me get a full night’s sleep.

They were all three looking at me, so I cleared my throat.

“It means a lot to hear that from you, all of you. I’ve put everything I’ve got into this, and...you know, you just have to hope it’s worthwhile, but to have you tell me that you’ve been paying attention and can see me improving...well, it means a lot. I know I said that already, but it does.”

Hart smiled, and took in a deep breath. I could tell that he was about to give me good news. He turned his glance briefly to Gary and Marcel, to include them in the telling.

“We brought you out today, not just to compliment you—though you deserve it—but because we’ve come to a decision, one we think you’re going to be pretty pleased with. Steve, we want you to officially take over as Wyatt’s understudy, once Gary leaves.”

Gary, Hart, and Marcel watched me and waited, clearly expecting me to all but leap out of my seat with joy. They were holding their beers, maybe waiting to raise them with me in a toast. But the moment Marcel had said they wanted to meet, not just Hart and him

but Gary too, I had started to convince myself that they were going to tell me that I had surpassed Caleb, that they realized I could do a better job, and that they wanted me to play Wyatt. Why else, I had asked myself, would they set up a whole special meeting, with Gary but not Caleb? They could have told me I was the new understudy at rehearsal. To actually meet with me must mean that it was more, that it would take time, that it couldn't be done with the rest of the cast around. I suppose that until I heard Hart say "understudy" I'd been pretending that nothing was for sure, that I shouldn't get my hopes up too high. But that had only been a sort of false modesty I was forcing myself to maintain. I'd been sure. I'd been so sure.

I put my elbows on the table and leaned in towards Gary, my eyes focused intently on his face. "Gary. You know that Caleb can't do Wyatt justice. You know it. You told me so. And you know that I can. You know that I'm the right one for the role."

Gary's eyes widened and his mouth opened a little, and for once his face was completely readable. Not only was he surprised by my response, but he disagreed with me. "We...well, we talked about how Caleb may not be taking the history seriously enough, but I also told you that I thought he was great on stage. He's better than I was when I first started playing Wyatt. I told you the audience would love him. You heard me say that, too, right?"

I had, but of course I had immediately pushed it to a dark and cobwebby corner of my mind. "So, you've all decided that a flashy performance is worth more than someone who really understands Wyatt, who can bring a truer version of him to an audience." The words were so bitter coming out of my mouth I could just about taste them.

“Caleb is the better actor,” Marcel said, with both disapproval and disappointment in his eyes. “You’ve come a long way, Steve, but you’re not ready. Caleb is. We want to give you the extra time you need to get ready, as part of the cast. Yes, as an understudy, but we’re saying we see your potential, and we want to help you realize it.”

Hart seemed genuinely dismayed, and confused, and I felt a twinge of guilt at my reaction. When I’d come to him in the street after auditions and asked him to let me understudy Caleb...if you had told me then that I’d be offered the understudy to Wyatt Earp only months later, I’d have gone out and bought a lottery ticket to try to take advantage of the stroke of outrageous luck I was having. But I didn’t know Caleb then—hell, I didn’t really know Gary then—and I also didn’t know what I could do. I didn’t know I had it in me to fool an entire room of actors and cheat the rug out from under them.

The table was silent for a few moments, and then Gary leaned away and crossed his arms over his chest. “I’m sure we’re all sorry to hear that you don’t think Caleb will be good enough, but that decision has been made, Steve. We’re not going to discuss it with you. Now, what you need to decide is if you can put aside your feelings to understudy Caleb, or if we are going to have to hold another round of auditions before I leave.”

My skin prickled, and my senses were alert like a deer who has just caught wind of a hunter he let get too close. All of a sudden, I realized I was very close to losing everything. Cody (the guy who worked the counter at the service station) had taken over as Cowboy Elvis. My wedding ring made my garbage disposal make a terrible grinding sound whenever I tried to turn it on. I hadn’t been able to pick up extra hours at work to go back to full-time, because the boss said we were heading into the slow season. I had put everything into the reenactment—my last, only egg. So I told myself that if I could play

Wyatt Earp, I could manage to slap on a smile for Caleb at rehearsals and performances, even if my guts felt like they were twisting around a knife.

“It won’t be a problem,” I said. “Of course I accept your decision, because I respect all three of you. I’m sorry for my reaction. I hope you see that it’s only because I’m loyal to the show, and making sure we’re doing it the best we can, doing it right. And if I think I can do better, I need to put my money where my mouth is and show you, at rehearsals.”

Hart sighed in obvious relief—that we weren’t going to keep having this conversation until our nachos arrived, that they wouldn’t have to hold auditions in the next few weeks, that I was going to be a team player, maybe all of the above.

“Good. That’s good, we can work with that. And now, we want...we still want to congratulate you. We’re proud to have you understudying Wyatt, and hope you’re proud to be, to be part of the show.”

Some of this had the sound of a speech that had been meant for a different set of circumstances and was being shoehorned into the ones in which we now found ourselves. But we all raised a beer, and the sound of glass meeting glass reached my ears like a car accident happening down the street.

## XIV

It was easier than I thought it would be to settle into being Caleb's understudy, because the rest of the cast was so enthusiastic and supportive towards me. It was obvious that Gary, Hart, and Marcel had kept what I'd said at the restaurant between us, because no one seemed to even consider that I might be disappointed. Caleb was clearly gloating on the inside, but couldn't show it without looking like an asshole and a diva and a jackass, so it wasn't too bad.

But rehearsals started to transition into Caleb taking over more and more, and I could barely get through watching him in a scene with a straight face. My mouth wanted to pull down at the corners, my eyes to squeeze up into a wince or roll back into my skull. I couldn't even see a single good thing about his performance. His ignorance covered everything else like a powerful stink.

Fortunately, as Helldorado weekend got closer, Marcel had Gary resume most of the rehearsals, to be sure that his farewell performance was Gary at his peak. The rehearsal schedule for the few days leading up to the weekend included some late-night runs out on Allen Street, from eleven p.m. to one in the morning, so that tourists wouldn't get a free show. We couldn't use any of the guns for those, but everyone would get to move around in the actual performance space before the big Saturday afternoon reenactment.

Gary announced a faro game for the night of his final show. I decided I would go, to say farewell and pay my respects to Gary, but I wouldn't play. There was no way I was topping the night I cheated my way to victory, but I also didn't want to run the risk of Caleb suggesting another side bet. Not because I was afraid I'd lose, but because I knew

he'd be smug and pompous, and I wasn't sure I'd be able to keep from throttling him on the betting board.

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On Thursday morning before that Helldorado weekend, my phone rang before the sun was fully up. I fumbled around for my lamp but only managed to shove it off the nightstand and onto the floor, where it thankfully failed to break. I snagged a hand around the charger cord and reeled the ringing phone in like the world's smallest lassoed steer. I poked at the screen to answer it without looking to see who it was, and mumbled something into the general direction of the mouthpiece.

“Steve? Are you there?” It was Hart, and he sounded panicked.

“Yeah, here I am. What's going on?”

“Gary's brother got taken into the hospital a few hours ago. Gary is on his way up to Flagstaff now, and he's almost definitely not going to make it back for the show this weekend. I just got off the phone with Caleb. He's going to step in, but I wanted to make sure—you're going to be there, right? This weekend? You're going to be at the show?”

Hart's words were like a pail of ice water dropped on me. I was wide awake, but my skin was cold. “That's terrible news,” I said. “But of course I'll be there. What do you need?”

“Oh, I don't even know. Marcel and I were thinking...I'm not even sure what we were thinking. Maybe Caleb will need your help with something backstage? Or other people might. It's going to be chaos, I just know it. You're so great at rehearsals, you always pay attention and you understand the show, and we just think your presence will help. You'll definitely be there?”

“I wouldn’t miss it, but I’m glad to be able to help. Don’t worry, Hart. I’m sure everything will be okay.”

My ability to assure Hart—I sounded so calm—amazed me, as my heart was pounding, my mind racing. Everything in my body seemed to be about to take off in a different direction.

“Thank you, Steve. This is a big help for us. We’re going to be rehearsing all night tonight, in the Corral and then in the street, and then most of the day tomorrow. How much of the rehearsal can you be at?”

“I’ll be there tonight, for sure. I need to check with my boss first. He’s not super happy with all the time I’ve been taking off, and he might have a half day’s work for me tomorrow. If he does, I need to pick up the shift. But I can be there for at least some of tomorrow.”

“Great. Great. Great. Good. Okay, then I’ll see you tonight. Thanks again, Steve.”

“You’re welcome,” I said, but I think he’d already hung up.

## XV

Those rehearsals were brutal for me. Even when he wasn't running scenes, Caleb was performing. He was playing the role of the White Knight, dashing in to save the performance in distress. I was the only one who seemed to be mourning the fact that we'd never see Gary play Wyatt again. Everyone else just kept telling Caleb what a great job he was doing, that he was incredible to be stepping in for Gary at the last minute—and on Helldorado of all weekends. Caleb basked in the praise like a fat walrus on a sunny beach, and said obnoxious things like “It's the training, you know. Years and years of performing—something always goes wrong, and once you're seasoned enough you can roll with just about anything theatre can throw at you.” And “The show must go on.”

I managed not to throw up, but no one congratulated me for that.

I hung in for all of Thursday night's rehearsal—four hours on our weekend stage, and then three hours in the street. We didn't wrap up until after two a.m., and Marcel couldn't stop voicing his concerns that Caleb wasn't getting enough practice with the guns. I hoped he would drop one on his foot during the show.

There was no work for me on Friday—we were suffering through a heat wave, and it was too hot for shovel work—so I showed up for all of that rehearsal as well. We worked from mid-morning until late in the evening, with a long break for lunch to get us out of the highest sun, and a long break for dinner so everyone could guzzle coffee and change out of sweat-soaked clothing. I was mostly helping out with props and costumes. The stage assistants were so focused on Caleb that everyone else was getting short shrift.

During the dinner break, I had to run home to change. I couldn't remember another October that scorching. We were topping a hundred and ten, and I could have filled a water

glass by wringing out my shirt. Once I had dry clothing, I met everyone at Big Nose Kate's. The restaurant was packed. The tourists had already been arriving for the weekend, and there were evening events all over downtown. I hoped someone had called ahead to put a few tables aside for us. Caleb had really had his heart set on Big Nose Kate's for dinner, and the cast and crew treated this like he was making a request for his last meal.

Inside, I saw that we did thankfully have a few tables waiting. The restaurant wasn't much cooler than outside, but at least the ceiling fans were moving the air around. I took a seat next to Rob, who was already holding a chicken wing in one hand and a jalapeno popper in the other, with a paper napkin tucked down the front of his shirt. He turned as I sat, and gave me a tired grin.

"Hey, man. Welcome to the feast. Marcel won't let us order any booze, but he promised to make it up to me in appetizers."

I laughed. "I think a beer would just about kill me right now. I plan on drinking enough water to fill a camel, and then I'll let some food paddle around in the shallow end." I looked around the table. "Where's Caleb?"

"He's around here somewhere. I guess he wanted to come to Kate's because a friend of his just got engaged, and there's a party for them. Though why they want to do that here, tonight, is beyond me. If I ever get engaged, the party will be in my bedroom, and the wedding will be in Vegas. Anything to avoid being surrounded by all these tourists, man."

I waited to see if Rob would think that one through, but he was busy filling his now-empty left hand with mozzarella sticks.

Caleb circled around the table and made his way to Owen, who was sitting across from Rob. Owen handed Caleb a glass of water, which he downed in a few swallows. “Did you find your friends?” Owen asked.

“Yeah, they’re on the other side of the restaurant, so I may be running back and forth a bit. Thanks for agreeing to come here, everybody. I’m really glad I’m getting to be here for the happy couple. My friend Brian just popped the question, and he’s grinning like an idiot. And Lainie looks beautiful.”

I had been drinking from a cold water glass, and hearing Lainie’s name coming out of Caleb’s mouth froze every muscle in my body. The water kept pouring, and soon it ran out of my mouth, down the sides of my face, and soaked into my shirt and then pants. It probably would have begun to fill my boots if Rob hadn’t put out a hand to lower the glass for me. I looked at him, and could see sympathy and pain on his face.

But I had to be sure. “Did you say Lainie?”

“Yeah, Brian’s been dating her for...well, not that long actually, but when you know, you know, right?”

Caleb met my eyes, and unlike all the other times before when I hadn’t been sure he was trying to get me, I could tell he knew exactly who Lainie was. Maybe he hadn’t brought us here to see my face when I found out, but he was at least enjoying it as a delicious bonus.

“Lainie Holmes?” I persisted.

“No,” Caleb said, and my breathing resumed for a brief moment. “Lainie Reynolds.”

“Oh, right,” I said. “That’s her maiden name.” Turning stiffly, I scanned the other side of the room, where a large group of people was mingling, clustered around where the happy couple must be sitting. I couldn’t see Lainie.

Rob grabbed my arm and pulled me up. “Come on.”

He steered me to the bar and ordered two double whiskeys on the rocks. When they arrived, he handed them both to me. Without hesitation or thoughts of rehearsal, I took several large swallows from one, nearly choking on a chunk of ice. I watched the far table, but people came and went in the same number so the people who were seated stayed hidden. When I finished one of my whiskeys, Rob ordered me another.

Finally the crowd parted, like a curtain drawing back, and I could see not only Lainie but the man who had his arm around her. He looked nothing like me. Blonde and tan, with very white teeth, and a tribal tattoo on his bicep. Lainie was laughing. She looked so happy. I hadn’t seen her look like that in a long time.

As I drained a whiskey glass, rough globes of ice crowding my upper lip, she looked over at the bar, and I could tell the moment she saw me. Her smile slid off her face, and her eyes lost the brightness they’d just had. She turned her head away sharply, snapping it towards someone talking to her, and laughed again, but without conviction. The man next to her—Brian—seemed to notice. He stroked her shoulder with the hand of the arm curled around her, and said something to her. She turned and leaned in to his ear, and then his head rose. He took in the room, his eyes taking a moment to find me. He seemed to know who I was on sight. His lips pressed together a little and he looked away immediately, calling out to a man standing at the end of the table. The man moved to join them and blocked Lainie and Brian from my sight.

Rob handed me another whiskey, and I sipped steadily. My head was beginning to buzz. I'd done far too much sweating that day to be drinking like this. But stopping didn't feel like an option.

I kept my eyes on the table, so I didn't see Caleb until he was right next to me.

"Everything okay here?" he asked Rob, not looking at me.

"We're good," Rob said. There was a note of aggression in his voice that I don't think I'd ever heard before.

I didn't know where to look. My body kept trying to keep Caleb in profile, away from my back, which meant turning away from Lainie's table. One of my glasses was empty, and I tried to put it on the bar behind me by touch. I could feel it tilt off the edge, but Rob reached out and scooped it back up onto the wood. Caleb watched me with a pitying smile.

"You asshole," I said to him. My speech was already starting to slur.

His eyes widened but so did his smile. "Whoa, whoa, Steve. Where is that coming from?"

"You know. You fucking know. You knew I would come and they would be here."

"Who?" Caleb said, his forehead wrinkled in confusion.

"Don't fuck with him, man," Rob said, shaking his head at Caleb. "Come on. You should have told him why you wanted to eat here, so he could have chosen not to come."

Rob was a good person. It wouldn't occur to Rob that Caleb had done this on purpose.

Caleb showed surprise at Rob's confrontation. "I heard that Steve and Lainie used to go out, but I didn't realize it would bother him so much, or of course I would have told him."

“We’re married,” I said, too loudly. “We are still fucking married, and if you know that Brian guy, you know that. You’re an asshole.”

Caleb sighed. “I didn’t realize you were still married. Brian mentioned that Lainie’s ex was having some trouble moving on, and I thought it might be good for you to see her with Brian, see how great she’s doing.”

“Oh, see how great she’s doing without me? Is that what you want me to see? Is that what you think I need?”

I tried to turn to face Caleb more fully, but my hip caught one of the swivel stools, and it fell to the floor with a sharp clatter. Rob bent to pick it up, and Caleb spared me a quick smirk before making his face a mask of confusion and concern. However the rest of the cast might have felt about Caleb’s acting, I think they all would have agreed he was phoning in that particular performance.

“I’m sorry. I really thought it would help,” Caleb said.

“Fuck you,” I said, enunciating carefully but mushing the words a little anyway.

And then there was Brian, concerned friend and fiancée, stepping up to Caleb.

“What’s going on over here?” He had the kind of muscles you get from a gym membership, rather than actual labor.

Caleb took a half step, as if to prevent me from lunging at Brian. “It’s my fault. I brought the cast here on our break, so I could see you and Lainie, but I didn’t realize this would be such a problem for Steve.”

Brian nodded, accepting Caleb’s words. He made eye contact with me and raised his chin a little before speaking. “Steve. Lainie has told me everything about you. I know you didn’t come here on purpose, but I think it’s time for you to leave now.”

“Ha!” I yelled. Heads turned. “I’m not going fucking anywhere. I’m having a drink with my friend. You assholes can do whatever the fuck you want.”

I drank from my remaining whiskey glass, and I wanted one of them—either one, it didn’t matter—to make a move. But Rob stepped between us, and pushed me onto the stool I’d just knocked over.

“Fellas. Steve is upset, and this is an ugly situation. If you will both just go back to your tables, I’ll make sure there’s no trouble.”

From my barstool vantage point, I could only see Rob’s back, but then Brian and Caleb peeled off in different directions, returning to their admiring fans on each end of the room.

Rob turned me so that my back was to Lainie and Brian, and ordered me more whiskey, and a glass of water that he forced me to drink between sips of liquor. I don’t know how much time passed, but Hart was telling Rob that they needed to get back to the space, and Rob was telling Hart he’d be there in a minute, but that I would be going home for the night.

Judy appeared, my eyes focusing on her just as she stepped up to Rob to kiss his cheek, and I could have cried at the easy intimacy. “Hey, I got your text. Is everything okay?”

“I need to ask you a favor,” Rob said. “I need you to stay here for a while, with Steve. His ex-wife is at the other end of the restaurant, having an engagement party.”

“Oh, damn it,” Judy said, and patted my knee.

“Steve isn’t ready to leave yet, but I need to get back to rehearsal. I’ll come back here as soon as we’re done, if Steve still wants to be here, but can you just watch him, and make sure that guy Brian stays on his side of the restaurant?”

“Yeah, I can handle that.” Judy glared across the room. I don’t know if she knew who Brian was, but she directed disapproval at the entire crowd.

Then Rob was gone, and Judy was sitting next to me, keeping me in whiskey. She was better at getting me to drink the water than Rob.

“I hate him,” I said.

“I know. I hate him too.”

“He gets everything. Why can’t I have just one thing? Why can’t just one person see that I’m better?”

“I think you’re great.” Judy handed me a new glass of water, directing it smoothly to my mouth.

The restaurant was starting to clear out. People were clustering with us around the bar, or making their way back to their homes or hotel rooms, or continuing the night at the next bar down. I was staring at the ground when a pair of blue high heels stopped in front of me.

“Is he okay?”

“He’s fine,” I heard Judy say. “He’s doing *just* fine.”

I half-swallowed a belch and looked up. Lainie stood in front of me, looking concerned. I swayed forward, and she put out a hand to tip me back, pressing gently against my chest. I looked down at her hand. Even her palm against my shirt felt familiar. A diamond at least twice the size of the one I’d bought her flashed up at me.

“Get away,” I mumbled.

But she leaned in, and she looked me over, and she made a face I’d seen before, the face that said I’d had too much to drink and now she’d have to deal with me. “Steve, are you okay?”

“Get out of here, Lainie. Get out. I mean it.” I shoved her hand away from my chest.

“Hey, watch it, man.” Brian stepped up and pulled Lainie slightly behind him. And then Caleb appeared, taking Lainie’s other side, playing protector.

“Fuck off,” I said, my words directed toward whichever of the three of them I could get.

Brian put his hand on my chest, the same place Lainie had just put hers, but whereas Lainie might really be trying to help me, Brian was trying to hold me back. The glass of whiskey in my hand went flying, breaking on the floor halfway down the bar, as I lunged for Brian. Judy reached out and caught a handful of my shirt only to be dragged a few feet in my wake. Caleb jumped in, grabbing my arm, and I pushed with every ounce of drunken force my angry body possessed. Brian got pushed away a little, but mostly I caught Caleb, hurling him away from us. He landed on a table, which tipped over, taking him to the floor along with a few rounds’ worth of empty pint glasses.

Judy planted herself in front of me, which stopped me from following Caleb to the ground. She got right up in my face and said my name a few times, loudly, until I looked at her. She looked sad. I turned to Brian, who looked furious, and Lainie, whose wide eyes made me feel like Judy knew me better than she did. I would never hurt Lainie. But if it

wasn't for Judy, I know I would have gotten as many punches into Caleb as I could before people could pull me off him.

Caleb got up, broken glass falling from his clothing as he straightened. He put a hand to the back of his head and kept it there, and it was only when I saw Caleb posing like he was center stage with a spotlight on him that I noticed the rest of the restaurant was dead silent and staring at us.

Pitching his voice the way Marcel had taught us to do, so that he could speak in a normal tone and still be heard from one end of the restaurant to the other, Caleb said, "I knew you were an angry person, Steve, but this is just uncalled for."

I let out a shocked laugh. I couldn't help it. "Okay, mister fucking actor man. Like you know anything about it."

My blood was pounding. The restaurant was still overheated, and a drop of sweat ran down my neck. I didn't feel drunk any more.

"Oh, I know you, Steve," Caleb said. "I've worked with guys like you for years. Guys who wish they could be the star of the show, but who are barely good enough to be extras and understudies. I know it burns you up, that you've got a better man standing here in front of you." Caleb gestured to Brian, though his chin raised in a proud way that I don't think was deliberate. "But it's time to be gracious, Steve. It's time to step aside, and let the good men take care of things."

I don't know what I would have done then, except that it would have gotten bloody. I hadn't realized that Caleb's presence meant rehearsal had ended, until Rob reached out and grabbed Caleb's shoulder, spinning him away from me and toward the door.

“That’s enough,” Rob said. “Caleb, go home. We have a show tomorrow. Brian, I’m sorry about all this, but it’s not Steve’s fault. He didn’t know you would be here, and this is a bitch of a situation to put someone in. I’m going to get him home now.”

Brian nodded at Rob, then put his arm around Lainie and turned her away from me, as if I were a horrible monster she shouldn’t even have to look at. Caleb turned to leave, hand still placed dramatically at the back of his head, and they followed him out. Most everybody left in the restaurant continued to stare while Rob settled the tab and talked to the bartender about damages. Judy stayed next to me. She found a napkin and dabbed at the sweat on my forehead.

Then my temporary sense of sobriety passed. The next thing I knew Judy was gone, and Rob was taking some of my stumbling weight as he walked me home. He managed to get me inside my apartment before I got sick. He waited me out while I emptied my stomach, made me drink two glasses of water, and then got me into bed.

When I woke up the next morning, I was barely hungover at all.

## XVI

My phone rang, and I sat upright in bed so fast my back cracked. Adrenaline flooded my system—I was sure I'd overslept, that I was late for the show, that they needed me and I wasn't there. But it was only eight in the morning. I still had plenty of time.

I was alert enough this time to see that it was Marcel calling before I answered. "Marcel?"

He sounded near tears. "Steve, oh thank fuck. Oh thank you Jesus. Steve. Caleb is sick. There's something wrong with him, he's at the hospital. I'm told he hit his head, and he's concussed, and he's disoriented and vomiting and they're keeping him under care. Steve, we need you. We need you to play Wyatt today, Steve."

I waited a moment, to see if I would feel guilty. Caleb must have gotten the concussion when I shoved him, so it was my fault. But the certainty that Caleb deserved it kept the guilt at bay. What I felt when Marcel told me I would be playing Wyatt was relief. I think I had been afraid that I was going to die, that Lainie's engagement on top of Caleb's Helldorado performance would be enough to kill me, that I would just give up and stop breathing. But Marcel was handing me the best reason I'd ever had to get out of bed.

"I'll be right there," I said.

\*

The backstage area for the Allen Street performance was our usual stage. People could still tour the exhibits outside, but we were closed off from the public until we would go out to take our places. That morning it looked like a battlefield hospital with no blood. People were running back and forth—no one walked, everyone dashed like they were

hustling to amputate a limb. Tables were stacked with costumes and props and bottles of water, organized but not tidy.

When I walked in, there were no cheers, and not even any visible relief. I had shown up, but the day was by no means saved. But Marcel rushed up to me and shook my hand vigorously.

“Thank God you’re here. You know the lines. You know the blocking. Right? You know those things.”

“I do,” I said to Marcel, with confidence as authentic as I could muster. “I haven’t walked through the show in the street, but I’ve been paying attention this week. It’s going to be okay, Marcel. But I do think we should run the shootout as many times as possible. That’s where I’m likely to get tripped up.”

Marcel still had my hand and looked like he was maybe considering adding a wet smack on the lips. Then the core cast swarmed around me—Owen, Chris, and Rob, my stage brothers (Wyatt would include Doc Holliday among his brothers). Travis and Justin were there to represent the Cowboys as well.

“Dear boy,” Owen said in his Doc Holliday voice, “I do believe that today we shall all be tested.”

Everyone laughed, but most of the laughter was either too quiet from strain or too loud from nerves.

“I can do this show,” I said. “I’ll give it everything I’ve got. Most of you haven’t ever seen me even read Wyatt, but Marcel and Hart and Gary” (I put extra emphasis and a pause around Gary’s name) “cast me as the understudy for this role, so we’re going to get

through this. I may need you to guide me a little, push or pull me where I need to go, because I haven't rehearsed in the street. But I know the scenes, and I know Wyatt.”

There was a pause, and then Rob gave a full-volume, from-the-diaphragm “YEEEEEEEEEEEEEE-HAW!”

Everyone laughed again, and this time it felt closer to real. I was clapped on the back and given encouraging “You can do this!” and “We've got your back!” sentiments, and then I was whisked away to try on black dusters.

We found a coat that fit me reasonably well, and some fake facial hair about the right shade to add to my not-yet-full moustache. We drilled the shootout about fifteen times, and then called a break. Marcel pushed water on us constantly. It wasn't even nine a.m. and the day was pushing a hundred degrees, looking to be even worse than the one before. We all downed at least a bottle, and then Marcel led us out into the street. We weren't in costume yet, so we could wander the area we'd be performing in without gathering too much unwanted attention.

Owen, Rob, and Chris walked me through the space. The biggest issue with performing in the street was that the exits and entrances were longer than normal. It was hard to time them so that you'd be arriving at the moment you needed to without having to stand around, because you would be among the audience. And while it wouldn't be the end of the world if I was a bit early, it would be problematic if I was late, breaking the rhythm of the show, losing the energy and momentum the other actors had built. But I thought I had a pretty good sense of the timing. I'd watched closely more times than I could count.

We returned to the Corral, where Marcel handed us more water and we ran some of the scenes. During the shootout, I'd mostly just yelled at Ike my favored “Get to fighting,

or get away!” line, but everyone was busy with their own choreography and not paying attention to me. So those run-throughs were the first time most of the cast saw me as Wyatt, and I think they were impressed. Maybe because they didn’t expect much—but maybe because I brought something to the role that they appreciated.

We took yet another water break. The heat was making everybody irritable, and it was good to get a breather. Someone found a roll of paper towels and we blotted our faces, necks, even hair and lower backs as dry as we could. And then we ran the shootout a few more times and dust stuck to our sweat-covered faces. Next they started getting me into costume—pants, boots, spurs, shirt, tie, vest, duster, holsters, hat. Last came the moustache. When the costumer turned me to the mirror to show me the final result, I wouldn’t have recognized myself, if I hadn’t pictured myself just this way every day for years.

Marcel had us run the shootout in costume until I was confident that the change of outfit didn’t pose any problems. Normally before a performance, the actors would be out in the street, taking photos with potential audience members, but on Helldorado weekend we were kept out of sight until showtime, so that the first time anyone saw us was when we stepped onstage in character. We milled around and continued to drink the water Marcel pushed on us, paranoid about dehydration. Then we all started taking the inevitable resulting trips to the bathroom, bitching about having to take off our holsters each time because of the historically accurate pants. I wasn’t even nervous.

Finally, we were taken to the props table to get our guns. This was done last, as close to performance time as possible. In just a few minutes, I would be performing Wyatt Earp, for the first time, in front of a huge crowd. I had an easy, floating sense I

remembered from my and Lainie's honeymoon in Baja, where we laid on the beach drinking alcohol out of real coconuts. I hadn't realized until that moment that I hadn't felt that way since.

Then two things happened, one right after the other.

The first was that I checked my gun, and something seemed off. I opened the cylinder on the revolver and held it up to get a look at the rounds. They didn't look right, so I shook them out into my hand. We used real guns and black powder blanks for the reenactment, because they were loud and actually gave off smoke when fired. The blanks looked like regular rounds, except they had a hollow where the bullet would be. These didn't have a hollow. I hesitated, wondering if someone had bought dummy rounds by mistake—they'd have a metal tip, but still wouldn't fire a projectile without powder. But this definitely looked like there were actual bullets in the casings.

I was turning to Rob to ask him to check his gun, already looking around for a stage assistant, when the second thing happened. Hart came through the gate that shut us away from the exhibits, and he was followed by a pale-but-standing Caleb.

"No," I said, but not even Rob heard me because of the loud cheer that immediately went up.

Everyone leapt into action, the cast hustling to talk to Caleb, the props and costumes people frantically gathering up his clothing. Marcel brought Caleb two bottles of water. Caleb looked tired, and he had a bandage in the crook of his elbow, but otherwise he seemed fine.

"They wanted to keep me a little longer, to keep an eye on my brain, I guess," Caleb said, and everyone but me laughed, "but I told them I had somewhere to be."

“What happened?” Chris asked.

Caleb looked right at me. His fake reluctance was a lot better than his fake concern had been the night before. “Well, as you might have heard, Steve and I had a bit of a run-in last night. His ex-wife was at the restaurant, and Steve got a bit hyped up, and I had to step in. I’m sure he didn’t mean to hurt me, but I cracked my head pretty hard on the floor after he shoved me.”

The group fell silent. One of the props people standing near me actually took a step away. I was looking up from under my eyebrows like a dog who knows it’s misbehaved, and when Hart finally caught my eye, I wished I’d just stared at the dirt instead. There was no way I was going to persuade them that their wounded hero, who’d left the hospital to show up to save the day, had been asking for it.

I didn’t see Rob. Maybe if I had, if there had been one person there who looked at me like I was still the same person they’d been rehearsing with for months, that they’d known for years, things might have gone differently.

Marcel clapped his hands, and we all looked to him. “Folks, we’re lucky Caleb made it, and we have a show to put on. Let’s get to work.” The cast and crew all started moving at once, like ants at a picnic, swarming to put Caleb together in time.

I stood off to one side, and it took a while for anyone to get to me. Caleb and I didn’t wear the same size, so they didn’t need most of the costume pieces I continued to wear as they made Caleb into my double. A holster with guns appeared from somewhere and fastened around Caleb’s hips. The first person to approach me was one of the costumers. She seemed a little sheepish as she came to fetch the hat—the only part of

Caleb's costume that had made it onto me. She brought it back to Caleb and he put it on, and Marcel announced that we were ten minutes from showtime.

I had run the gunfight dozens of times that day, so I had a really good sense of which guns were aimed at Wyatt. When Marcel gave the ten-minute warning, a few of the performers cursed and started taking off their holsters so they could use the bathroom one last time, then made for the props table to leave their guns. When Justin (who, as Billy Clanton, was opposite Wyatt during the shootout) put his guns down and walked away, I took my own guns—which no one had made the effort to collect from me—over to the table, still holding the handful of rounds.

I want to say that I was pretty sure they were dummy rounds. I want to say that I don't even remember what I did next. But Caleb's voice in my head said "It's instinct, that's all. You just have to feel it." It echoed around and around as I pulled Justin's guns from his holsters and loaded them with the rounds from mine. And I have a crystal clear recollection of wiping the casings on my shirt first, and keeping them wrapped in cloth as I slid them into the chamber.

The actors returned, and I wandered away from the table, leaving all the guns where they should be. Hart finally approached me. He didn't mention the fight, but the cheer he put in his voice didn't match his face.

"Steve, thank you so much for being willing to fill in. You have no idea how grateful we are. And it must be a weight off your chest that Caleb made it! No one wants your first performance to be one you're unprepared for. We want you to step out on that stage confident and ready to amaze."

I would have, I thought.

“Just doing my job,” I said with a sunny grin. Hart gave the kind of over-jolly laugh made by heavysset cartoon characters, clapped me on the shoulder twice, and walked away to join the rest of the cast.

The costumers helped me change back into my own clothes and take off the fake moustache, though it left a gummy residue that left me twitching my lips like a rabbit. Leaving the Corral, I didn't meet anyone's eyes on my way to the street, to get a good spot for the show.

Allen Street was crowded, but I managed to work my way up pretty near the center. The sun beat down, but no one hung back in the shade. Bodies pressed together so close they made the desert air almost humid, and I could feel the heat radiating off the people near me, and building up between us. The sounds of conversation and laughter, and parents yelling at excited children as they chased each other up and down the boardwalk, faded to a silent anticipation as Hart stepped into the open road.

“Howdy, friends! Old friends and new friends, we're so glad you could all be here today with us, to celebrate Helldorado Days.”

Hart drew out the word Helldorado, and the audience whooped and clapped.

“We like to keep the past alive in Tombstone, and this weekend, you get to participate in our fascinating history. In case you didn't know, we had kind of a famous shootout around these parts a while back.”

Hart held for the expected laughter, and was obliged.

“They called us the town too tough to die, and today we're going to show you just what they meant by that. So without further to-do, ladies and gentlemen, the Vigilante Society of Tombstone proudly presents...The Gunfight at the OK Corral.”

Hart gave a short bow to acknowledge the cheers that met his announcement, and then the audience hushed as Hart retreated into the crowd, and we all waited for the show to start.

Owen stepped out and gave an abridged version of his usual speech. The crowd was already plenty warm, and the quick jokes didn't play as well in such a large space. Then the performance began for real, and we watched the actors approach. I was sickly pleased that Caleb appeared weak—his voice softer than usual, his breathing rough. His eyes were a little puffy, and he moved slowly, for his version of Wyatt. Gary and I played him more still, but Caleb was always strutting a bit with his thumbs in his belt. That day he moved carefully, his feet stuck to the dirt. He made every entrance, though, and the scenes went well enough.

As the shootout approached, my heart started to pound, but I didn't feel panicked or even worried. We didn't aim our guns directly at each other during the gunfight, because blanks still fire a paper was and can be dangerous. There wouldn't be anyone behind Caleb and the others, because the audience was lined up on both sides of the street but weren't allowed to stand in it. It didn't seem like anything could go too wrong—and, from the audience, what happened would be out of my hands. I was only a spectator.

In my mind, I visualized a bullet (because, try as we might to point the guns away from each other, there's a lot happening in the shootout and rounds sometimes go wild) hitting Caleb in the calf, where Virgil Earp was hit in the real shootout, or maybe in the hip, like Doc Holliday. Caleb would scream and fall, his pretense at being a stoic hero fully revealed. He wouldn't be able to finish the show. Maybe he wouldn't be able to perform for weeks, or months. Thank God there was an understudy.

As Ike Clanton, Travis yelled, "I'll be after you all in the morning! You mustn't think I won't be after you all in the morning!" and then stumbled away. Next would be the scene where he comes after the Earps with a gun in hand, and is pistol-whipped and carried off to the doctor. And then his Cowboy brethren would come to avenge him, and the fighting would commence.

I nudged my way between the two women standing in front of me so that I would have an unobstructed view of the whole scene. They whispered angrily at me for a few seconds, but the show continued, and they quieted down.

The walk to the shootout is the longest entrance of the Allen Street show. The Earps and Holliday are in full view for a long time. The entrance isn't timed so that they arrive and immediately begin the confrontation. The crowd watches these four gunslingers tread to what they know will be a bloody battle. They walk down the middle of the street, hands ready to reach for iron at any moment.

Caleb, Owen, Rob, and Chris approached from the far end, striding purposefully but without hurry to where the Cowboys lay in wait. They spoke dialogue I had heard hundreds of times. Travis threw himself at Caleb, and Caleb stumbled over my favorite line. "Go to fighting, or get away!" Caleb tried to shout authoritatively, but he sounded more like a grumpy woken sleeper than a hardened marksman. And then the gunfire started.

Unlike the rest of the crowd, I knew exactly where to watch. I knew the shootout backwards and forwards by that point, knew which gunshots meant that Billy Clanton had fallen, which meant that Doc had just grabbed for his hip. The sound of gunfire bounced off the wooden buildings that lined Allen Street, and the crowd gasped, but I wasn't part of

the crowd. I wasn't watching the reenactment, only one actor. For those thirty seconds, I didn't take my eyes off Caleb. I stared at his face, his limbs, waiting for a leg to go out from under him, or pain to cross his face as steel fired along his skin somewhere.

But then there was silence. The shooting was done, and he remained standing. At first I felt confused and disappointed, like I'd been watching a movie where the bad guy just walked off and then the credits rolled. Then I came back to myself, and I wasn't watching a movie. I was watching people I considered my friends. And I'd just potentially put them in harm's way. The relief that washed over me lasted until one of the women I'd pushed past to get a better view gasped, and then someone across the street screamed.

The three Cowboys were in the dirt, quiet, unmoving, and unbloodied. They were stage-dead, and would need to walk themselves off in a minute. Except they wouldn't do that, because Rob was on his face in the dirt across from them, but he was surrounded by a growing pool of his own blood.

For a moment I thought he was dead, but then he moaned and tried to put a hand under his upper body to lever himself up. It wasn't that bad. He'd been grazed in the lower back, and it must have hit an artery or something because he was bleeding like a sonofabitch, but we'd stop the bleeding and get him some stitches and he'd be fine. The show had come to a grinding halt, and I was sure Hart was having a revenue-related heart attack, but Rob was a young, strong guy, and he'd probably recover pretty easily.

This was the story I told myself in the two seconds it took me to realize that Rob was having trouble pushing himself up because he was unable to move his legs.

People rushed to Rob—not the entire crowd, but too many—and he soon disappeared from my sight entirely. Voices shouted from every side, but we were so close

together that I couldn't match the voices to any specific people in the crowd. Someone near the middle of the huddle was screaming at everybody to get back, to give them space. A woman was loudly calling to be let through, that she was a paramedic. None of the voices were familiar, or from anyone I knew.

The people surrounding Rob made way for me once they saw my crying face, and I dropped to my knees beside him, kicking up a small cloud of dust that made him cough. I took his hand in both of mine, and sobbed as I said, "I'm so sorry, Rob, Rob I'm so sorry," over and over.

Rob wasn't screaming but he also couldn't talk. He was making these terrible honking groans, broken up by hard gasps for air. I held his hand and apologized until someone, a stranger, put his hand on my shoulder and said, "Stop it, dude, you're freaking people out."

So then I was quiet, but I didn't let go of his hand until they made me, to put him on the stretcher.

## XVII

There were no performances for the two following weeks. Aside from the legal issues, it was decreed that it would be “in bad taste” to perform so soon after the accident, no matter what the tourists expected. And, as Rob would most likely be confined to a wheelchair for the rest of his life, there was no Morgan to perform.

Caleb repeatedly tried to quit. Marcel and Hart kept talking him back, and then he would quit again. Justin didn’t quit. He just didn’t come to rehearsals, ever again. Paul took over as Billy, but he never got very good at it.

So the other reenactors in the town banded together to put up a version of our show, until we were back on our feet. The guy they got to play Morgan wasn’t too bad. He took over the role for a year or so.

The live rounds were found to have come from a box that one of the costumers had apparently—against all our regulations—found on a table and put into the armory, though no one knew where the live rounds box came from in the first place. Our props people not only checked the guns and ammunition, but no one would have brought live rounds onto the set. Yet there they were.

The costumer figured out that she was the source herself, and immediately turned the box in to the police. She was in hysterics from the moment she walked through the door to the police station, and kept crying until someone promised her she wasn’t under arrest. Rob assured her and the investigators that he wasn’t interested in pressing charges or suing anybody, and the costumer was young and pretty and sincere, so that was that.

The sleepless nights I spent thinking about all the people who knew that I had shoved Caleb hard enough to give him a head injury the night before, that I would know

which guns were pointed at him during the shootout, that I had access to the guns before the performance—those nights I consider a drop in the bucket of my punishment and penance.

Marcel and Hart finally approached me, after Caleb had quit for the umpteenth time, to ask me to take over as Wyatt, but I told them that I couldn't. So they held auditions, and were in the position of trying to cast Wyatt, plus understudies for Wyatt, Billy, and Morgan. The auditions went so poorly that Chris was recast as Wyatt, and they had a newcomer step into Virgil instead. The show was rough for a long while. And we'd made national news, so our audiences dipped for a bit, until they were sure we weren't going to accidentally shoot any more people in front of them.

I volunteered backstage. I didn't want to leave the show completely. I was really good backstage, and I got them to put me in charge of props. I worried that people might get suspicious, but they thought they knew what was going on. They understood why Rob's friend could be found before every show, obsessively checking and re-checking and re-checking every one of the guns.

## XVIII

When I dream about it, or catch myself playing the scene again when I'm awake, it's like watching a different person. I'm not even in my body—I'm watching Steve. Steve reloads the gun. Steve does not approach the props manager so that they can check the other guns. Steve doesn't care how many live bullets are in the guns, that people in the crowd might get shot, that other actors might get shot. Steve just wants to make sure he gets his man, no matter what the cost.

Sergio Leone's Western, *For a Few Dollars More*, is a bloody, violent movie about revenge and regret. It opens with a title card that reads, "Where life had no value, death, sometimes, had its price." The Steve that let Caleb walk out into the street facing a gun full of real bullets understood that. Every time I watch that Steve in my mind, I hope to God he never comes back.

## XIX

This morning I woke up before the sunrise. I made myself the herbal tea Judy bought for me because I still have trouble sleeping. I boiled water and poured it over a bag full of things that smell like a dusty field gone to seed, and took it to my window to watch the day starting. My view is different now, because I'm in a ground-floor apartment, but I'm closer to the mountains so I can still see the sun the moment it peeks into view. I watched as it grew into a full circle, and the shadows retreated, and then I sat down to write.

I keep these pages in the gun safe in my closet. I don't intend for anyone to read them while I live. But I see evidence every day of how history becomes lost, how the truth disappears when everyone accepts the lie. I am too much of a coward to set the story straight now, when I could be punished for it, but the thought of letting the world remember me as a man of honor feels like spitting in the face of everything I believe in. It would amount to the same as letting people believe that Wyatt Earp was a pure-hearted hero who never did a wrong thing in his life. The real Wyatt was so much more, and less. Making a hero out of a man who did bad things lets a little dark part of you blur the line between right and wrong. It lets you believe that you can do bad things, and still be the hero in the end.

We've got our usual shows this afternoon. It took a long time for Caleb and me to rejoin the reenactment. But by the time Owen finally decided he was done playing Doc Holliday, Caleb was ready to take the stage again. He's a great Doc, sly and charming, and he can swagger around the stage all he wants. I don't resent Caleb any more. We aren't friends, or anything like that, but I think we experienced a similar form of shock after Rob

got hurt. Caleb walked away from playing Wyatt because of what happened, and for some reason that made him more of a person to me. I tried to apologize a few times, for the concussion, but he wouldn't even let me get all the words out. Caleb told me that given everything that happened that day, he counted himself lucky, and regretted getting into stupid fights over trivial things. Though the last time I got blackout drunk was after Caleb said to me, with a grin, "Hell, if I hadn't left the hospital, I wouldn't have been in harm's way at all. Maybe you should have pushed me harder."

I had to wait even longer to get to play Virgil. If there's an Earp I want to stand in the shoes of these days, it's him. Virgil doesn't try to impress, or be a star, or even try to earn praise. He's the calm and collected voice of reason, the conscience, the one who believes that order is the most important thing. I think that we become what we pretend to be, and for me, pretending to be Wyatt is playing with fire. Wyatt meted out his own justice, ignoring the law, and he is celebrated for it. But life doesn't work that way, at least not anymore.

This chapter in my life feels like it's ending, but I know what happens next. I'll leave my apartment, and my path will take me past one of our billboards, my own face staring at me from under a hat and behind a gun. Allen Street will be quiet, the locals already at work and the tourists not yet out and about. The Corral will be open, granting access to the historic exhibits and selling tickets to the shows, but so early in the day few people will feel like reading about Mattie Earp's slow suicide by laudanum, or looking at photographs of dead Cowboys in wooden coffins. Some of the cast will already be there. Caleb is usually in costume by then, greeting people with a twirl of Doc's cane.

Rob often comes by, in his wheelchair, to hang out with us between shows. If anything, he's gotten more outgoing and cheerful since his injury. Judy goes with him to physical therapy twice a week (paid for by some sort of internet donation campaign she set up, which I still don't really understand), where he continues to make progress, and he frequently tells me about new research he's come across on stem cell treatments and the like. And I know more about Rob's sex life than I ever thought one human being would care to share with another. He's not even a little embarrassed to talk about it. The last time we went out for a beer, he started giving me details.

"Judy ordered this thing from a website, I'm not even sure what to call it, but it vibrates and it curves around your—"

I had to interrupt before the elderly couple at the next table over suffered embolisms. I've even helped him woodwork a few contraptions he learned about on forums for men with spinal cord injuries, and driven him to Phoenix for specialty items at intimacy shops. Anything I can do for Rob, I do. And I try not to let it cut me when he is grateful in return.

If Rob comes by today, the cast and crew will be happy to see him, as always. Anyone else in his place might make people feel uncomfortable, as a reminder of our notorious tragedy. But not Rob. He'll come rolling in at breakneck speed, jostling whatever beverages he has in the two cupholders he's mounted to the handles of his chair, which has flames that Judy painted blazing down both sides, and people will delight in his presence.

Eventually, Marcel will call out to us in his perfectly modulated voice, "Gentlemen, gather round, please. We are at fifteen minutes to showtime."

Before every show, we group in a loose circle in the open space behind the set. The props people bring out the guns, and an inspector we hired (at the Chamber of Commerce's insistence) after the Helldorado incident moves around the circle, checking the ammunition in each. No one will leave before the show starts, and any bathroom or cigarette breaks require checking the guns in with the inspector.

Then Marcel will tell us to take our places, and we will start the performance with the practiced ease of a gunfighter drawing and holstering his gun. Caleb will step out on stage and charm the crowd, drawling out jokes, making announcements about cell phones and loud gunfire. He'll exit, and the show will begin—

Wyatt and Morgan stand behind a bar talking to the Marshall while, offstage, the Cowboys whoop and fire off their weapons. From where I stand backstage, I hear all the dialogue.

"Marshall, don't you think you ought to do something about all this shooting going on?" Wyatt asks.

"You boys made a real good reputation for yourself out there in Dodge City, you wanna come out here and help me?" the Marshall replies.

"You're the one wearing the badge, friend." Wyatt begins his uphill battle of avoiding being the one asked to uphold the law in Tombstone.

The Cowboys enter, and refuse to surrender their weapons. Instead, one of them shoots the Marshall. The single gunshot booms. Morgan and Wyatt try to help the Marshall, but he dies as the Cowboys flee.

Then Caleb and I, as Doc and Virgil, enter the scene, guns drawn.

As Caleb has told them to do, the audience cheers as soon as they see us. They cheer every time I walk onstage, before I even do anything. That's the power of this show. People are given lawmen and outlaws, and they are told to cheer for the lawmen and boo for the outlaws. It's simple.

Caleb and Bill (our new Morgan) pretend to carry the Marshall offstage, with a good deal of help from the actor, leaving just Virgil and Wyatt in the scene.

"Third fool I've seen killed. Shouldn't have been wearing a badge in the first place." Wyatt says.

Then I speak my first lines of the show. "That fool tried, Wyatt. That's more than we've done since we got here."

Walking over to where the Marshall fell after being shot, I pause a moment, and then bend down and pick his badge up out of the dirt. I brush it off, and pin it to my own vest.

"Virgil, what are you doing? We didn't come down here to be lawmen." Wyatt says.

I tell him, "Wyatt, if this town's gonna make it, it's gotta have some law and order." And then I exit the stage, and the audience cheers for me—not just because I happened to appear, but because they applaud my actions. We've shown them the right thing to do, and they clap for it.

Backstage, before my next entrance, I always make sure the badge is straight, and that it can be easily seen beneath my coat. I use my sleeve to wipe the rest of the dust from the silver, until it shines. And I wait for the cue that tells me it's time to step back into the light and continue the story.

## A NOTE ON SOURCES

The stories and novella in this collection were inspired by lived experience, but also by real people, places, and events. “Laudanum” is a response to the Soiled Doves exhibit at the OK Corral Museum in Tombstone, as well as the books *Soiled Doves: Prostitution in the Early West*, by Anne Seagraves, and *Mrs. Earp: The Wives and Lovers of the Earp Brothers*, by Sherry Monahan. “Androgynes” begins with an epigraph from Peter Boag’s essay, “Crossing Gender Boundaries and Identities on the Great Plains, 1850-1900,” which served as a jumping-off point for my research into the lives of documented “cross-dressers” in the American West in the late nineteenth century. A picture and description of a canary resuscitation cage were found in a 1914 anthology called *The World’s Work, Volume 28*.

“The Danger Is to the Body” comes from my fascination with the Yucca Mountain Waste Repository project, which was defunded but not abandoned, and its sister project, the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant. The Sandia National Laboratories report, “Expert Judgment on Markers to Deter Inadvertent Human Intrusion into the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant,” can be found online; excerpts are available on the WIPP website. The site [www.theraycatsolution.org](http://www.theraycatsolution.org) is hosted by the individuals who are still working on creating a cat that glows in the presence of radiation. The song “Don’t Change Color Kitty,” performed by EmperorX, was released in 2014.

For the historical information in “The Understudies Earp,” I relied primarily on three books: *Wyatt Earp: The Life Behind the Legend*, by Casey Tefertille; *Wyatt Earp: A Vigilante Life*, by Andrew C. Isenberg; and *The Last Gunfight: The Real Story of the Shootout at the O.K. Corral—And How It Changed the American West*, by Jeff Guinn. The

archives (photographs, recordings of oral histories, and periodicals) at Sharlot Hall Museum in Prescott, Arizona provided not only factual data but contributed to the tone of this novella.