

2015

Caught up

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CAUGHT UP

A Thesis

Presented To

Eastern Washington University

Cheney, Washington

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

By

Chelsea Johnson

Spring 2015

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MASTER'S THESIS

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Chapter One

“The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.” –Revelation 3:21

This is what it feels like to burn: Everything slows so the warmth is delicious at first, a biting heat that closes your eyes and calms your heart, but then the flames start their descent, the flesh curling in protest, the red rising in bumps and blisters before reaching the melting point where skin and fat and muscle become one and you're nothing but liquid and bone. The flames come back for the bone and grind and grind, the fire licking over and over until all that's left is ash.

What we knew was that our phantom toes warmed as we rose above the city, small monuments to their larger counterparts, a miniature Eiffel Tower, a black glass pyramid, a stone tiger bent in worship. The great valley was a crater with flames rising above, the city mortar, the hellfire the pestle. The sky burned a light orange red the color of rust and milk, the sun like Mars, a red orb never rising or setting. After so many weeks we could no longer remember the sound of falling coins and the *flick flick flick* of card hustlers on the Strip. The air held a sort of silence, the flames and smoke and wind roaring like god whispering into the city, his lungs filled with smoke.

When the first marks appeared like glistening opals on our heads there was speculation. Had Las Vegas been infested with some strange contagion? Had all those visitors from around the world created an unknown sickness? Or had the air still ripe with nuclear dust finally coalesced into an outbreak, an epidemic? Men in

green and gray tried to close the city down. They came in tanks and quarantined the city as best they could, but cement blockades could not hold in the flash flood waters during the summer let alone the masses fleeing the marked. After seven days of containment, of men in tanks with microphones driving through neighborhoods instructing the infected to stay inside, they put down their guns and left us because soon enough it spread around the world city by city, women and men waking up next to strangers with devil marks on their foreheads red and dazzling, an aurora of colors and textures, scabbed edges, the smell of rotting flesh. Within weeks we had spread across each continent without any knowledge of how we were chosen or if it would end.

That was when the other symptoms started. Our bodies began to spoil like fruit gone to rot. We developed soft spots of aching bruised flesh, deep purple and blue spreading in pools along our arms and legs. Small rivers of blood fell from our ears, and when in heat, our eyes, too. There was no way to hide our condition, the exhaustion, the headaches, the upending of our stomachs but the constant hunger defining us. The skin around our nails grew black and flaked off, the nails eventually following suit. Many of us wondered if we'd already died, if our bodies had expired and left our minds behind.

Some said it was a sickness. Something in the air. Global Warming. Melting ice caps. Extraterrestrial. But many said it was god. The churches gathered in groups in their cities praying, supplicating themselves, preparing for the end, for what they thought would be an ascension, a savior come for the good left in the world. While the TVs and Internet still worked the specialists speculated, poked and prodded. The

scientists in three-piece suits sat on CNN: 24/7 Outbreak Coverage and said, No, this isn't god. But they weren't quite sure what it was. Some thought the marks were a super-bug, a hybrid contagion bred from overuse of antibiotics, too many parents pouring amoxicillin down throats for sneezes. Others said it was all the microwaves, our phones all glued to our hands and heads finally burning holes right through us. A few thought it was the result of our promiscuity, a scarlet letter of sexual disease, the new AIDS.

On Fox News they began filming exorcisms; pouring holy water on the mark did nothing but make it shine brighter, a fire opal greased and oiled and shining on our heads. But it's not possible, the scientists said. This wound or ulcer or abscess can't scab and ooze, bleed until the owner's eyes run red, but never attempt to heal itself. This defied their research. They opened emergency labs and clinics, injected Small Pox and HIV medications, set us up to IV drips and baked us in radiation chambers watching us foam and shake, crossing off a poison on their list, moving on to the next. They tried to remove it but found the abscess sunk into the brain, became a part inseparable from the whole.

Many wanted to kill us, slaughter us like cattle, like half-human others. They wanted to separate the wheat from the chaff, to keep the anointed safe, to let us burn, let the skin melt off our faces like rain. They wanted to return us to the ground so they could bow before their creator and say, "Look what we have done for you! Look how much we love you." Their fear turned their palms against us, thinking we were the antichrist, the one come to test them. They thought god was watching, that this was their final test, that the righteous would overcome and destroy us, that our

deaths alone would glorify god. If this was the tribulation, they wouldn't fail, wouldn't be left behind among the spiritually dead.

Others tried to save us. They gathered our hands in theirs and prayed, begged their god for forgiveness. Please, lord, strike the evil from them! They told us stories of Jesus eradicating demons from men and casting them into a herd of pigs, the pigs rushing into the ocean and drowning, their pink bodies like blimps on the water. They said if we confessed, if we stripped ourselves and spoke of the sin that betrayed us on our foreheads, that their god would forgive us, strike the marks right off our heads.

When this didn't work, when the weeks spread before us, many out of work and blaming us, small mobs began to form in the city seeking us out, ready to please their god with our deaths, to exterminate us like the pests they thought we had become. Our deaths would be their repentance for too many nights at the Crazy Horse, late evenings spent with glittered women pressed against their laps, the men's eyes glazed like precious stones.

Others tried to help us. All the world leaders came together to say, "No, please don't hurt them. Please give us time." But so many still raised their fists like clubs and said, "Cut out the rot before it ruins the whole." But we didn't know that then.

Six weeks after the marks appeared, the electricity was cut in many cities, including our own. People stopped going to work in order to collect and hoard food. Storefronts shone with glass instead of the bodies of women, the city a gray portrait of monuments long past. The Bellagio fountains sputtered to an end while other

casinos were closed by owners to block in their families, or looted by others looking for water. With no way to protect ourselves, to call our families—those few who still spoke to us—or to listen to the news we knew things would get worse. We knew it was our time.

We drove our cars as far as they would take us before the oil dried up or ran out. We looked for others with glistening foreheads, with glimmering stones set into their faces. Many gathered in small groups, took over small stores and parks. We sought each other so we might not die alone. When we shook, when the illness overtook us and our bodies were more bruised with rot than flesh, we held each other and wept. A small few still prayed. We reached for each other and hid knowing all the while others moved against us, sought to end the evil that marked us.

Some who moved against us met outside the Golden Nugget, the electric netting arced above dull and gray without power. They said that it was growing, that the mark was spreading, that god would come on a horse with a double-edged sword and strike out the marked without a second thought. Their pastors stood on makeshift stages crunching sequins beneath their feet and read sermons about the 144,000, the chosen ones for god's early reaping before plunging the world in seven years of hell on the earth. They had plans for us. They would root out our evil or they would end us.

They believed they had been called. If they made us bow before them, soon they would bow before their god who told them to seize their crowns before us. Many read out loud from their Bibles, made signs, and spray painted the black glass along the Luxor, breaking windows of the Egyptian replica. We were to be captured

and conquered, rid of our sinful mark and returned to the ground so they could prepare their thrones in heaven beside their god.

Some fled to the desert with plans of burning it out of us, making us atone for our sins. They would lay our bodies bare in that desert, let the blood-red sun scorch us from pink to red to black until our skin peeled off in sheets and strips. They'd pry our mouths open and fill us with oil so we could burn from the inside out, the only way to exterminate the evil, they said. Some created small task forces, worked with the few police still in the city to seek us out and cut us out, to rid the city of the infection. They thought we could multiply, that our affliction could spread to them like plague. What none of us knew is that we were *chosen*. There was no super-bug, no new AIDS, or Ebola. This was directed from above, sent down to a city meant to burn, to start it all.

A few would move to help us, to hide us from the hands of those who would take us up to the mountain top and surrender us as if we were their own flesh and blood, as if it were a sacrifice for them to take our lives. A small few would gather and see our sins as equal to their own. A smaller few would call themselves *other* even though their foreheads stretched clean against their skulls.

They would do whatever it took to rid us of our devil marks. They tried to shock it out of us, clamping our hands and toes with car cables until we shook and screamed so loud even the birds' calls began to sound like women screaming. Some of them would take us with them to the unknown, in an attempt to save us. They'd fill up their Kool-Aid bottles with arsenic and pour it down their children's throats, then our own, saying, "Fear the lord for he is great and his love endures forever." We

choked and vomited and choked on our own vomit until either the poison or the heat wrung out our last breaths.

What we didn't know was that the threat of god could make any man turn against himself, against his nature. His hands would no longer braid his child's hair, carefully trussing out the tangles. When one city would come under a great microscope with god at its lens, most men would turn their hands to weapons, and we would pay that price. We would know the wrath of god at the hands of the people of the city.

We didn't know this was a kind of test. That people would be called to define themselves by their actions. That the separation between us, the distinction between man or woman and other, would damn us all. There was never a chance for any of us. It was always *us* and *them* and *their* god.

What we never asked was: if this isn't god, what is it?

Chapter Two

“Those who worship the beast and its image, and receive a mark on their foreheads or on their hands, they will also drink the wine of God’s wrath, poured unmixed into the cup of his anger, and they will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever.” –Revelation 14:9-11

As Carl pulls out of Karen’s driveway, he tries to focus on the road. Although he’s been driving in and out of the city the past three weeks since the marks appeared, he still hasn’t adjusted to the constant crimson sunset that’s sunk over the Las Vegas Valley, burying them all in red shadow. Several of the hotels spew trails of smoke floating up toward what Carl hopes is a beautiful heaven. Karen is beside him, safe for now, and he doesn’t know what to say. He doesn’t know how to bridge the space of their seven-month separation, how to show her he’s the same man but also completely changed by what god has shown him. He tries not to look at the edges of her brown thighs peeking from her khaki shorts. He begins to chant the Lord’s Prayer in his head.

“I didn’t know what to expect,” Karen says, her eyes lost out the window of Carl’s borrowed Camaro. “But it wasn’t this.” She waves her hand, the smell of fire strong in her nose, the window speckled in ash. It reminds her of an early summer in elementary school when the valley was flooded in ash from a distant mountain fire. She remembers finding the brittle gray flakes on the blacktop. While her friends pretended it was witchcraft, that they’d all gained magical powers, Karen was

convinced god had sent it as some sort of sign, not so great as a burning bush, but a reminder of his presence. He and his swift hand of blessing and punishment were never far from her mind. She wanted to believe god was more than the fear that kept her awake at night, the terror of her heathen friends burning in fire forever. Those images of hell, the sure-fire way of the disbelievers, as her mother assured her, could be spared from her future. But she'd had doubts.

"It's changing every day," Carl says, nodding toward the families on foot, backpacks on their backs, all traveling in different directions. "When the National Guard came to barricade the city, that's when most of those who were trying to leave made it out, but there are still a few trying to evacuate now that the marks have spread." Even from the suburban main streets she can see broken windows and smoke everywhere, the rows of Adobe tract housing dusted in the blackened edges of fire. She's overwhelmed by the feeling that no matter where these people travel, what has begun can't be escaped. And although she feels the same tightening in her stomach she did as a child, Karen refuses to think this can be god. She refuses to return to the fear that poisoned her as a child.

"And getting more dangerous," Carl says, looking her way. "You should have come with me a week and a half ago. Do you know the risks I'm taking coming back for you?" He doesn't mean to sound harsh or angry, but those waiting in the desert don't understand why he's returning for her, and they certainly won't be happy if they hear he left the marked woman Karen was living with. He worries they might not accept his return empty-handed when they've been trying to root out the devil's mark themselves. He knows his weakness for Karen might separate him from the

people whose trust he's worked so hard to earn. But he's also sure this is god's plan for him; he wouldn't let Karen burn alongside that woman.

It's been too long since Karen heard the strained tone in his voice, the fine line between his buried anger and the newer man he has become since joining his church. She thinks to a week ago, when he first came for her, to take her away from Jo and her burning forehead.

Jo had been on the living room floor dismantling their Hemnes coffee table to add to her pile of barricade materials. "We have nowhere else to go," Jo said for what seemed like the tenth time. Karen wanted to make a plan; she was tired of breaking apart furniture and waiting—for what? To see if a mob would come for Jo? To see if somehow they'd wake up and Jo's mark would be gone? Jo's only response had been to barricade them in, to break the edges of frames and tables until her fingers bled so they could cover the windows and doors. Karen sat watching Jo when Carl knocked on their door.

Karen wasn't shocked to see him, but somehow it still came as a surprise. Jo and Karen hadn't seen another person in almost two weeks. In their isolation, Karen had been thinking of Carl, more than thinking of him, of his god and his dream for a second coming. She knew there was the possibility he'd come for her, and she'd told Jo this.

As he stood before her, rigid and tired, she could see how slight he'd become, how the definition in his arms had all but left, presenting the shrunken version of a man she once loved. She braced the doorframe, blocking him from Jo inside with the stretch of her arms.

He looked relieved to see her, happy she hadn't come to harm.

"Karen," he said. He breathed a sigh that made Karen want to run to him. She'd always been independent, but never saw herself as the protector, the calm force she had to become for Jo in the past weeks. "I was hoping you were still here."

With Jo inside, her mark like a beacon, drawing their attention back toward her, Karen didn't know what to say.

Carl looked at his feet—he didn't want to see the woman who'd taken his place. He'd only learned about Jo through a mutual friend right before the marks appeared. Karen knew that somehow he'd found out about Jo, but she didn't want him to leave just then. She wanted to look at his face and pretend just for a moment that he could fix everything for her.

"I wanted to come back for you. We've all moved out to Pahrump," he said. "The city's getting more dangerous, but outside it's still pretty safe." He took a moment to re-tuck his shirt, to really look at Karen and fill in where his memory had lapsed. "Will you come with me, please? I can keep you safe." Even though Karen had trained herself to resist those words, the lines of savior men, she wanted this—to be around someone with the conviction to make a plan, with an idea of what had happened to this city and the rest of the world.

But she couldn't leave Jo. She didn't want to be the woman who abandons someone she'd come to love out of fear. She said, "I'm sorry, Carl, but thank you for checking on me. I appreciate it, really." And she knew that the way she said *really* must have hurt Jo, who was still sitting inside, the sound of cracking furniture finally

absent from her ears. She turned to check on her, to see if she was okay, but Jo was standing a few feet behind her, her mark sparkling.

That's when Carl fell to his knees, his head bowed. He begged his god to save them. He said, "God, please," over and over, and Karen couldn't help but think that was the most honest expression she'd seen from him in a long time. She wanted to reach out to him, to run her hands through his matted brown hair and touch his face. She wanted to tell him it'd be okay, but she knew nothing was okay, that she was the one needing to be held, to be calmed like the frightened child she feared had returned inside her.

When he stopped his murmured praying, when he stared at Jo with tears in his eyes, he slowed his breathing.

"You will burn with her," he said, looking directly at Karen. "Please," he said, "Don't stay. It's not too late for you."

But with Jo behind her glimmering, a small sun on her forehead, Karen couldn't leave. She couldn't give in to the pit in her stomach that took her back to late nights in bed as a child begging god to absolve her, to clean her filthy soul, to make her worthy.

Carl stood to leave, his eyes squinted at Jo, the burn of that mark in his mind like staring too long into the sun, and returned to his car. As he drove away, Karen could see the barrel of a shotgun reaching up from the backseat.

Carl tried not to shake. He had heard Karen was dating a woman, but he hadn't allowed himself to focus on the depravity of her sin, to imagine that woman's hands on Karen's legs, feeling the soft underside of her knees. He couldn't empty his

mind of the feel of her, the heft of her on his lap, her lips at his neck, his collarbone. Although he should have known she was dating Jo, that she'd moved on, he certainly hadn't expected the woman to be marked. He wasn't prepared for the scaled edges of what used to be Jo's forehead, the aurora of reds and purples that swirled to make the gaping sore, its iridescence marking it as supernatural, other, not a simple flesh wound. He couldn't help worrying if it was too late for Karen, if her proximity to the devil's mark would somehow contaminate her, would consume her head to toe in hellfire. He had imagined the flesh of her legs ignited in flames and begged her. He fell into a quiet chanting prayer, the image of Karen's bare feet, the curve of her calf stiffening him.

*

Sitting in the passenger seat headed to nowhere, Nevada, feet on the dash as if the world weren't ending, Karen wonders if the gun is still in the backseat, if Carl's used it in the days since he first came to get her. She wonders if they'll need it where they are going. She tries not to think of Jo, of the mountain of dismantled furniture surrounding her as she sleeps, or of the way she secretly wished for Carl's return, that the crazy man she once loved would come back with answers and a plan, even if it was one she didn't believe in. She couldn't sit inside any longer while the city burned and neighbors disappeared with whispers of *rapture* on their lips.

"Tell me about the risks," she says, breaking the growing silence between them. She expects him to comment on the depravity of her sin, the way she *is* with

other women, the way she can't grasp the idea of a big god in a bigger sky, the very same reason she and Carl broke up. She still remembers their last night together, him leaning into her and asking, "Why can't you feel him?" They cried together because it was over and because before he joined the church, they'd been cruising toward what Karen imagined could be love, the real painful kind, the kind where he already knew about her family and how Karen could never see herself as a mother, couldn't even fathom the weight of creating another human being to live among the masses.

But this isn't what he said. He said even before hundreds of people around the city woke up with the devil's mark on their heads, even before the government barricades, the hundreds of tanks and police cars closing off the lower part of the state before the mark spread and the governments gave up on containing it, that god had sent him signs.

"He spoke to me, Karen." He keeps his eyes on the road as they head toward the Red Rock Mountains, their ridges blending into the crimson sky, up and away from the burning suburbs. "God came to me and told me that this city would burn, that I would have to gather up the faithful. I know it might sound crazy to you, but we have been *chosen*." He says this with a reverence Karen has never heard before, a fervor that was absent when they first met. It was his openness, his inquisitive mind that initially drew her to him, but she hadn't realized the vulnerability of his curiosity, his overwhelming desire to be a part of something.

At first, it seemed like he filled this need for something greater with Karen, late nights spent inside her, running his fingers down her spine, staying up late to

kiss the blades of her shoulders. They connected so quickly, unable to spend more than a day or two apart. He had been so eager to share his past with her, to lean in so Karen couldn't see the shadow of the blinds across his face, to tell her about what his mother had done to him. They ways they had been together. The messy death, the financial and emotional debt she left behind. They smoked bowl after bowl until their entire pasts, the important things at least, lay behind them, and they laid themselves bare to each other. In these moments his mouth had been so hungry against her lips that she wished there was a way they could be closer, a way to fuse their bodies and minds so they were forever inseparable.

But this didn't last, or it was enough for him, Karen thinks. She's come to believe it was a loneliness beyond isolation that led Carl to her. He wanted to be a part of something that broke him and begged his attention. And after a while, although Karen craved his touch, it was clear she didn't need him the way he needed to be needed. He wanted to strip himself bare and give everything to someone or something until it broke him, changed him, and left his mother so far behind he wouldn't recognize his own past if presented before him. It was this need that led him to god, Karen thought. Only something so large and crazy like this church that fasted for days in the desert, that supplicated their bodies, could fill the space that bore Carl open and left him bent, unwell.

"This is crazy," she says in a whisper, not knowing where her voice has gone. It is crazy, she thinks, but she has less conviction now than when they separated, knowing it has something to do with the sky and the way all forms of electronic communication went out nearly a month ago. She rubs her hands through her hair,

her fingers catching at the edge of her braid. Karen tries to be critical, tries to tell herself to find another solution to what is happening in the world. For the first week she thought it was some sort of contagion, but after more reports came out, after the initial scientific trials failed to find a virus they recognized, she began to question if it could be supernatural or spiritual. Yet even with the mark before her on Jo's head, she couldn't find god in any of it.

"God doesn't just speak to people," she says. "I don't know what's happening, Carl, but even if I believed god was real, why would I start now? The woman I loved, the woman I still love is marked and the city is crumbling. If this is your god, then please, tell me why."

She doesn't want to do this, she thinks. She doesn't want to fight with him because it's too late. She's already left, already given up her resolve when she saw him sitting in his car, only a week after his first visit, waiting for her. She didn't plan on wandering out into the garnet shadow, of leaving Jo while she lay sleeping inside. It reminded her too much of the first time they met, of the way the quiet man at Radio Shack smiled and made her feel intelligent and interesting even though she didn't know anything about wireless routers or why the Internet worked without cords. It reminded her of the way the air between them was a living thing, something electric and pulsing that drew her to him, even now after so much time apart, after all the crazy things he's been a part of, even after the rumors of spiritual sacrifices in the desert. She knows she can't break this connection between them, that leaving Jo is irreversible, that she'll have to see this thing with Carl through. All the while feeling the guilt of leaving Jo and the fear of what lies ahead, she can't

ignore the pulsing rhythm of Carl's presence, the calm that's slowed her breathing, the feeling of safety or release from responsibility with Carl in charge.

She wants to disappear back to their first night together, the way he touched her body like she was pure muscle and bone, the way his skin was so startlingly pale against the mahogany of her legs. It was like her body was something to be studied and marveled at, a curiosity he couldn't sate. When they fucked it was like he was trying to fill her, to combine their bodies until one wasn't recognizable from the other. Later, when he began with the church, she knew it was the same pull that he'd had toward her body at first, a need to know everything, to connect permanently to something substantial. She wondered for a long time why she hadn't been enough to fill that need, but as she sits beside him, a little ashamed and questioning his god, she wonders if it is possible that she can do that for him once again, if she can break him away from the course he's set upon. Karen worries more than anything that he's right, that something biblical really is happening, that god is returning and she'll be found on the wrong side. Carl certainly seems to think so.

"You can't understand," he says, dejected. "If you don't know god then you can't know his miracles." Karen has the feeling that he's said this many times, but what's happening around them, the way no one in the city can explain what is happening, the electricity going out, the radio silence, doesn't feel miraculous at all.

"Then please help me understand," she says. She doesn't want to fight, but she doesn't want to sit in silence either, because she doesn't want to think of leaving Jo, of not saying goodbye, of not warning her. Deep down she thinks Jo knew she

wasn't strong enough to wait or resigned enough to die at the hands of a merciless god.

"You'll know more when we get to camp," he says. He tries not to think of scripture, of the select number god will save, of the possibility of Karen *not* being among the chosen ones.

"And where is that?"

"Pahrump," he says, and before she can scoff he adds, "We need the cover from the mountains, and none of the police were out there because of the small population."

"Police? I didn't even know they had control in any of the cities. Before the TV went out it was rioting and anarchy everywhere."

"There are a few still patrolling downtown, trying to control the fighting. Some even came to join us, to help with the cause."

Karen's afraid to ask what the cause is, to know exactly what he's been doing in the desert for weeks. She can't help but think of sitting in church for hours as a child, of the way the bishop described hell for the nonbelievers. She hated imagining her friends consumed in fire, their hands bound in burning cuffs, their skin boiling and blistering.

"When did you officially take over the church?" she says, ignoring the fact that they are going to a small town outside Vegas known only for legal prostitution and its large population of born-again Christians, ignoring the fear that creeps inside her.

“Right after we broke up. It had to happen, and you leaving, it kind of gave me some perspective.”

Karen remembers the way he begged her to join him. It had been weeks since he last touched her. He spent every day at the church, far more hours than were required of the electrical work he'd signed up to do a few months prior. Most nights he fell asleep on the couch with his study Bible on his lap. At first, Karen was careful not to discourage him; she didn't want him to turn to the church instead of her. But she found him constantly studying it, re-reading Revelations and the stories of the beast on his horse to collect the souls of the damned. The night their relationship ended, he asked her to read with him. He began to read about the end times, the way all in heaven would gather at the supper of the lord to eat the flesh of kings, of the mighty heroes of men. Karen couldn't stand it, couldn't handle the words her mother had used to shame and punish her, to strike the fear of god in her. She pushed the book out of his hands and climbed atop him. She said, “Please, come back to me.” She put her hands on his face, felt the stubble on his chin, and said, “I can't listen to the destruction. I can't separate your words from the image of death in my head.”

Carl didn't stop. He read the remaining scripture from memory, telling her of the beast and the armies that would cover the earth in blood. He began to cry. “Don't you see that this destruction is coming for all of us? I can't turn away from it, Karen. Please don't make me choose.”

In that moment all the hatred toward her mother, all the feelings of disgust, the feelings of being unworthy to even wake in the morning flooded Karen. She couldn't return to that life of shame and constant repentance that she inhabited as a

child under her mother's hand. She couldn't bear the weight of her constant sin, the always having to make it up, to forever be indebted to a god she couldn't feel.

She gathered a few items and before leaving, kissed Carl on the forehead. When she returned the next morning he was gone, already having packed his things. He left the Bible on her side of the bed.

She tries not to think of any of this, of the way he asked her to run the church as a team, the way he said god would find his way into her heart if she just allowed it, the way she couldn't stomach the idea of entering a church, let alone converting for Carl, knowing full well he had the personality to become a prophet. But now sitting beside him while he defends his church, she wonders if she might have prevented it. She wishes she had stopped him. Even more she wishes she could believe him, that time had softened her to his view, that the sky, red like she imagined the curtain of the temple in Jerusalem, the one that split when Jesus was crucified, would bring her back to some semblance of faith and back to Carl.

But Karen knows this is what religion does. It isolates and bullies those who don't believe. As soon as the marks appeared, small mobs gathered trying to seek out the marked, thinking they were condemned by god, that somehow their marks would spread, thinking it was their duty to root out what god had set apart as evil. They worried they'd be next—that the sin in their hearts would manifest in their flesh. On the last day the televisions worked, before the great light of the Luxor went black, leaving a stain of white in the crimson sky, the 24-hour Vegas coverage announced that at least thirty-five people with the mark had gone missing. And

somehow Karen knows the disappearances had to do with god and sin and right and wrong, that the fear of some great creator might make people do horrible things.

“I’m glad to hear my leaving helped you,” she says, hurt. “What clarity did my leaving give you?” she asks, trying to rid her mind of the images of the missing people. “That I was holding you back from your calling or something. Carl, what do you think you’re doing here?” For a moment she thinks she prefers the unchecked anger, the way his words could grind her to dust. His distance, the glazed look in his eyes as he drives forward, frightens her, although she won’t admit it out loud.

“You don’t feel it?” he asks. “Can’t you see everything’s changing? I haven’t seen the moon in weeks. People are missing and there are rumors of bodies down by the strip.” He wrings his hands on the steering wheel, rocking back and forth. “This is the end times, there is no other explanation. This world is going to burn. I can’t watch you burn, Karen”

Karen fixes her gaze outside her window, tears pricking at the edges of her eyes, and recognizes for the first time how afraid she is. She’s afraid of Carl, afraid to die, afraid she’s left Jo to die alone in a house of deconstructed Ikea furniture. She curls her legs into her lap, her arms circling them tight, and feels Carl’s gaze once more wishing she could look back, find comfort in his protectiveness, and heave the burden of this fear on someone else. She knows he would do this for her, let her daze off into a false reality much like the one her mother inhabited. She feels herself shutting down, but catches her breath in time to see that Carl doesn’t take the onramp for the 160 to Pahrump, but turns off on a side street in the far south of the city.

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Carl slows the car as they pull up near the small waterpark on the edge of the city. Karen notices for the first time in a while how brown the city looks even under the shadow of red, each tract house tan with plastic mauve shutters, the front yards covered in rock and sandstone, a preventative measure against the drought. The street is lined in the long-dead and grayed desert willows she used to sit under as a child, their branches white and reaching like skeleton hands. She looks out toward the large neon slides, the edges calcifying and stairs rusting with neglect.

“What are we doing here?” she asks. She dismantles her braid and carefully arranges the plaits back into place.

“I need you to see what’s happening, to give me a chance.” He looks her directly in the eyes, wanting to reach out and get lost in the soft perfection of her legs. It’s been so long since he’s touched a woman, the one indiscretion after Karen meaning nothing. He tries not to think of the woman he picked up in Pahrump a few weeks after their separation. But it is Karen he aches for now, the feel of the delicate skin on her wrist, to touch her and get lost in her once again.

Karen shakes her head even though she wishes she could get lost in something too, maybe even disappear into this world of blind faith. She thinks that maybe this feeling, the great unknown stretching before her, is why her mother was so willing to accept the church, to believe she was some broken thing needing

forgiveness. But Karen doesn't think over this long; she doesn't want to understand her mother, to come to a place of forgiveness.

"Come with me," he says and leans over her lap, forearm grazing her leg as he grabs a pistol from the glove box.

She gapes at him, the reality of present danger upon her and the disbelief that everything has come to this.

"For protection," he says. He takes a deep breath as he closes the car door and tries to forget the silk of her skin against his arm.

There are three other cars in the parking lot, all with doors open, trash spilling and oil staining the concrete. In any other context, Karen thinks the setting might have held some romance—the sky frozen in an eternal sunset. Carl reaches for her hand, and although it stills her breath, she wraps her fingers in his, trying not to think of Jo and dead bodies and the bleeding sky.

The gates for the park are open and the trashcans tipped over and scavenged. Karen sees a striped blanket off to the side of the ticket booth. Beside it is a stack of soiled napkins, several empty water bottles, and a few books, but there's no sign of anyone nearby. The knot in her stomach pulses and tugs at her breath, threatening to unsteady her.

They find all the turnstiles locked, and even though Karen can easily help herself over, she lets Carl lift her and offers him a hand. The smell of chlorine and sweat and something unidentifiable overwhelms her, the chemicals almost welcome after the constant smoke.

"What's that smell?" she asks.

“Chlorine, excrement, flesh,” Carl says, and pales. Karen remembers that he never had a strong stomach for these sort of things, always turning a shade green when emptying the trash in their kitchen.

Carl moves forward with care, clearly having been here before. To the left Karen can see the slides, bright oranges and reds against the endless desert like an aged, brown drop cloth, and to the right, the blue buildings, doors propped open with deflated rafts. They walk toward the second door on the right, and inside what used to be an office or first aid stand, at least twenty people sit huddled in blankets even though the weather is warm, all of them in the dark, but with blazing marks on their foreheads.

Karen identifies the scent she initially recognized. Alone with Jo it had gone unnoticed, but in the room with so many of them, she can smell the rotting flesh, the mix of mildewed laundry and rust and bodily fluids sour in her mouth. Worst of all is that it’s familiar. She begins to realize that Jo might not have been so unaffected by the mark after all.

Carl covers his mouth with his shirt and Karen wants to stop him but gets the sense that they are beyond manners. A woman sitting in a swollen pink raft and swaddled in neon-striped towels stands and heads in their direction.

“What are you doing back here? You are no longer welcome here. Can’t you see we’re dying?” The woman looks back at the group behind her, people of all ages, a few children in a corner. “Can’t you leave us in peace?”

Carl releases the shirt still bunched up against his mouth. “Please, can we talk for just a minute?” Karen is staring at several of the children huddled in a makeshift

bed of double rafts. They're nestled together like a litter of cats, bodies piled atop one another haphazardly. The one closest to Karen is shivering quietly, the mark on her head glittering against the bit of light from the door.

Carl tugs on her arm as the three of them head outside. Karen can't help but think of Jo, can't stop wondering if she'd missed the smell, the pallor of her infection, or if she'd somehow chosen to ignore it. In the days after Carl's first visit, Karen could feel herself distancing from Jo, not wanting to touch her shoulder, refusing to shred the furniture into salvageable pieces. She knew Jo could feel it too, her separation, the fear deep down that Karen might be more likely to burn because of her proximity to Jo.

"Why are they so sick?" Karen asks, ignoring the dried blood in the ears of the marked woman who walks beside them. "Is this what's going to happen to Jo? I don't understand. She was almost normal, pale and sleepy, but almost unaffected—"

He leads her farther from the door. They sit at a bright blue picnic table, Karen and Carl across from the woman. Her mark is animated, blurs of red like lightening in a pool of melted pearls, in any other circumstance, a beautiful fire opal set in gold. Karen can't help but reach out for the woman, but as her hand wanders forward, Carl grabs her wrist and restrains her.

"Don't," he says, an order. She smiles at the woman and wraps her arms around herself. She doesn't understand why they are sick or why Carl has brought her here. She's just left the sick woman she thought she loved. Karen wants to escape from that reality, not be reminded of what she's done.

“We already told you we won’t come with you,” the woman says. Although beautiful at one point, her tanned skin turned pale makes her look dead already.

“I know,” Carl says. “I wanted to bring Karen here,” he looks back to Karen, “I wanted my friend to see what I’m trying to do. I just want to help. Let me help you.” Carl leans toward the woman, his eyes entreating, but he doesn’t touch her.

Karen wants to hug the woman. She wants to tell her it will all be okay because she herself wants to believe it will, that one day the maroon sky will melt back to blue.

“Don’t you think we know what you’re doing out there? I don’t want your help,” the woman says, raising her voice. “You don’t know what’s happening anymore than the rest of us,” she says, waving her hand about. The veins on her hand pulse and bulge at sporadic spots of purpled, bruised skin.

“For all we know this has nothing to do with your god,” she says, spit ejecting from the edges of her lips. “I heard that this might be some cosmic shift, the perennial light the cause of the marks. Something out there beyond my control. Beyond yours.”

“God has spoken to me,” Carl says. “I can help you, and you can help the others. You can atone for their sins, save the children in there for god’s sake.”

Karen tightens her arms around herself. She never wanted children, but she doesn’t want to see them suffer either. Hearing Carl speak like this scares her, reminds her of the documentaries she’s seen on PBS of religious fanatics, of their tempered Kool-Aid and deadly communes.

“What about the others? Weren’t they enough help for you? Don’t you think we’ve heard about what people like you are doing out in the desert, using this endless heat to your advantage?” the woman says, spitting the words like poison on her tongue. “We know we are destined for death, but it doesn’t need to be at your hands.”

Carl tries to interrupt her, but she puts her hands forward, almost as if in surrender. “Leave us. Please.” She settles her stare toward Carl, and the knot in Karen’s stomach threatens to make her sick.

They watch as the woman walks back to the room, grabbing a striped towel out of a nearby bin before casting another glance their way.

Back in the car Karen doesn’t know what to say although she has several questions. She never saw Carl as a violent man, thinking of the gentleness in which he’d move her body in bed, the trails of kisses. He was always sensitive, scarred of course from the shit with his mother, but gentle. Gentle enough to work with small electrical cables before helping her comb out the tangles that grew at the base of her neck. She doesn’t want to allow herself to feel regret, to worry that getting in this car with Carl will lead her to a destruction even weeks of endless heat couldn’t prepare her for. Carl tucks the pistol into the back of his pants before starting the car and turning toward the freeway that leads out to Pahrump.

Karen runs her hands over the smooth fabric of her seatbelt, her eyes burning from the glare of all those shining marks. She can’t help but think of the moment she first saw that mark on Jo, the way it repulsed her. That day she woke with her arm still draped across Jo’s torso, the peach fuzz on her stomach soft

against her fingertips. She had been nibbling at the edge of her earlobe, sucking gently on the stud in the crest of her ear when Jo rolled flat, still half asleep, and revealed the red circular gash in the middle of her forehead. It was crusted in black at the edges, but white and red and pink and glimmering in the center. Karen shook her awake from an uncharacteristically deep sleep, Jo finally sitting up in bed and asking what happened, what was going on, the blues of her irises darker against the crimson mark.

Karen cried all morning while Jo sat sipping tea, her eyes drifting, elsewhere, while they learned from the news that at least one hundred people in Las Vegas had been affected, that there were rumors of a government barricade. When other marks appeared around the rest of the world, Jo seemed relieved, almost happy to know that this thing might not be containable. And although Karen knew she should have been worried about Jo and her health, from the second she woke beside her with that mark, her mind was lost in the stories her mother used to tell of multi-headed devil beasts and blood like rivers where there hadn't even been water. In the days that followed Karen had gone through the motions of holding Jo, telling her everything would be okay, but inside she wondered if she had been spared, then hated that she thought this way. Being beside her only made it worse, made Karen see the world the way her mother had originally painted it for her—the sinners and the saved.

“Why are they so sick,” Karen asks, not willing to resign this to her mother and god, to the images of destruction she’s lived with for so long. “Jo wasn’t like that—she was almost normal, just the mark.”

“For some reason, when they are together the symptoms are worse,” Carl says, breaking through her thoughts.

“Symptoms?”

“In groups it isn’t just the mark. There have been reports of people speaking gibberish, almost like tongues but demonic.”

“But don’t you do that at your church? Doesn’t god have his own language or something?”

Carl almost snorts at her, looking her in the eyes before saying, “No. Although there are some traditions that believe god manifests himself in languages unknown to man. I have yet to receive that spiritual gift.”

Karen is trying to decipher how much of the man she once loved is left and how much has been taken from her, even though this isn’t the first time she’s lost loved ones to religion.

“Okay, what else?”

“In the group we just left, there have been more physical manifestations—vomiting, blood from the eyes and ears.” Carl shivers at the thought.

Karen pulls the sun visor down and flips open the mirror to look behind her as she did as a child in her mother’s car. Behind them she can now see the whole valley, the haze of smoke like a cloud sitting above the casinos, small fires casting the city in ash. She thinks of what the woman said, of how she said others had been taken. She looks at the lines of Carl’s face, the various ways he’s aged in the months they’ve been apart, but she can’t see him as a monster, as someone who could break

bones and split skin. His eyelids hang heavy and lavender now, but Karen can't see him as anything other than the searching man she first met.

“What happened to the other members of their group?” she says in a tone that makes her feel brave although the question sickens her stomach, a tight pinch that makes her want to curl herself into a ball.

Carl reaches for her hand but finds her thigh. He spreads his fingers out, the feel of her skin making him catch his breath. He leaves his hand there. “We tried to help them. That’s what we’re doing out here—trying to help, to prepare for everything that has yet to come.”

Even though what he says makes the hair on her arms and neck stand, and even though she feels like she could be sick, that this day and everything leading up to it might break her, she puts her hand atop his and squeezes.

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After an hour’s drive through desert, they pull into the main drag in Pahrump. Karen is reminded of how ugly the city is, the endless billboards of women in neon pink strips of fabric, a pair of them with their breasts pressed against one another, smiling, the words “What Happens in Vegas, Stays in Vegas” printed above them. They’re welcomed by the sign to the closest brothel and a lone ice cream stand shaped as a cone, the edges of the dipped cone revealing the blood orange of rusted metal.

A small cluster of portable buildings burn a quarter mile from the main road sending ribbons of smoke that pool below the bright red sun. Carl explains that they've been burning the brothels, and Karen imagines a beautiful woman with rounded breasts and deep coral areolas. She thinks about the woman standing like a goddess among the others while they line up every night for john after john with crumpled bills still sticky with sweat. In her mind, the woman grows large like a god and crushes them all beneath the thick plastic of her stiletto heel.

Karen wonders where all the people are as Carl finally pulls the car to a stop outside the Super Wal-Mart. She remembers seeing the news report about how happy the people in town were to get their own store, and looking now, she's not surprised. There's nothing to do in this town but worship or fuck. It's no wonder the town is known for those two things alone. Even though it's set so close to the California border, during the brief attempt at a barricade before the marks appeared outside Las Vegas, the military didn't even try to block them in. No one saw the small town as a threat.

Carl remains seated with the car running and looks at Karen wanting only to stretch out and curl into her.

"Is the store still open?" Karen asks, amazed at the unbroken windows, the lack of evidence of looting and robbery. The storefront's "Daily Deals" signs shine bright against the stuccoed tan brick of the large building. She unbuckles her seatbelt, helping herself out of the car.

Carl shakes his head. "No, as soon as the looting started the church came out and took over. Most of the brothels and fast-food chains have been looted or burned,

but we saved this," he says, waving his hand at the store. "Of course we don't have electricity, but one of the guys is an engineer and has been rigging some of the camping lanterns."

Karen looks around them, the store placed in the middle of a plot of desert ground, and for the first time she remembers the heat, the feeling of sweat at the small of her back even though the bright yellow sun has been absent for so long. She surveys the area seeing only the paralyzing brown of the desert, a loan center that seems to have never harbored life, a floral shop, and an abandoned Sonic at the end of the parking lot. There are several cars lined up all with gas caps open.

Carl notices her gaze and says, "No electricity, no gasoline. We've had to syphon gas from other cars to keep a few running." He pats the hood of his car. "We think this might be why the government cut the electricity. It makes it a hell of a lot harder to leave the city on foot, especially in early summer. They're trying to keep us all where we are, stay the chaos or something..."

Karen joins Carl and leans against the side of the car. She runs her hands through her hair, loosing several strands into her hand. "What am I doing here, Carl?" she asks and takes a moment to look him up and down, to notice he's lost weight and looks more slim than lean. Even though she knows she needs to appear strong and unaffected, she hates the idea of hurting him or seeming unhappy after he returned for her when she had no idea what to do.

Knowing others from the church might be watching from inside, Carl doesn't reach for her hand again although he'd like to. Instead he tucks his hands in his front pockets and sighs. He can't explain this need to protect her in a way she'll

understand. Her own salvation doesn't matter to her so his concern for it won't matter either. He doesn't allow himself to think of her burning, to imagine taking his seat in heaven while she burns amidst the global tribulation.

"It's safe here," he says, avoiding her eyes. "Safer. Every day more fights and fires break out. It isn't going to get better. It's going to get worse until it ends."

"Which you think is what, the rapture? God coming down to save you?" She isn't sure she can handle the conversation. Regardless of the state of the city, and possibly the outside world, Karen can't feel the pull from an invisible creator like Carl can, even though she sometimes wishes she could. She can't picture god breaking through the cloud cover and descending in their presence any more than she can imagine Santa in his sleigh every Christmas Eve. But what stops her, what makes her pause, makes her consider following Carl, is that she can't set her mind on any other theory. Although it looks like an epidemic, something inside tells her it's other, that her behavior now will come to define her.

He sees the exhaustion in her eyes, knows she's inevitably feeling guilty about Jo even though he won't allow himself to think about it and certainly hasn't mentioned it to the church. "Let me try to show you. Please."

After a few moments, after her hands begin to slide down the side of the black Camaro, Karen nods, wishing against all odds that this will all go away and also wishing she were a stronger woman, that she could have stayed for Jo, been a better woman for her and for herself.

Carl gives her shoulder a squeeze and leads her toward the doors. Outside two men stand beside the sliding glass with guns in their hands. Neither of the men

look qualified, Karen thinks. The shorter one with the protruding stomach and sweat stains reminds her of Bart, her tax consultant.

“Don’t mention Jo,” Carl adds, stern, nodding toward the guards. “We don’t believe in that kind of lifestyle here.” And before Karen has time to respond, to see the way his face changes, the emotion melting away, his hands no longer itching for her touch, they enter through the sliding glass doors held open at the top by a shower curtain rod.

In what Karen can only think of as Wal-Mart’s foyer is a table with chairs and a few piles of paperwork, bottled water, and several Bibles. Stacks of shopping carts still sit in rows, their metal winking gray and rusted. The ground is scuffed and dirty, small pebbles and sand from the desert making their way inside. Although little light comes through, a woman with beautiful wrinkled skin sits at a table knitting a scarf. She introduces herself as Janice and offers Karen a chair, which Carl pulls out for her. Surprisingly, she seems normal, Karen thinks.

“Is this the young lady you went into the city for?” Janice asks Carl. Her voice has the telltale rasp of a smoker giving her an accent that almost reads New York. In any other circumstance Karen would imagine her as one of the women at the gas stations playing electronic Keno with a cigarette dangling from her lips, pressing the buttons with long, artificial nails painted Fancy Pink. “She sure is beautiful,” the woman adds, winking at Karen.

“Yes, this is her,” he says. “Karen.”

Karen is taken aback by the organization she sees. Janice, who apparently prefers Jan, clicks on an additional LED lamp before adding Karen’s name to a list

titled “Members” and assigning her a sleeping area. The women sleep between aisles 14 and 18, in the rear of the store which Carl says is the safest area and also closest to the makeshift restroom, a cluster of neon blue port-a-potties. Jan says they already have a cot set up for her on the left in aisle 17. Before standing, Karen is given a Bible and Jan asks if it’s okay if she prays for her.

Confused by the efficiency of their makeshift bunker, she nods, not realizing that Jan means this instant, right here. Jan puts her hand on Karen and Carl’s shoulders. Karen closes her eyes but shadows make cloudy shapes beneath her eyelids against the camp lanterns and faint red glow from outside.

“Almighty god, today I thank you for bringing Karen into the fold. We all know Carl’s heart has longed for her in this difficult time. We pray that you bring her to your truth, that she can be a soldier for you in these trying times. Amen.”

After a smile and nod from Jan post-prayer, Karen follows Carl through the second set of sliding doors, which are opened by another stout man with a gun tucked into his waistband and a large cross tattoo covering his forearm. He also nods as Carl walks past, dropping his chin in a sort of bow.

Beyond the doors Karen is surprised by the shadowed darkness of the store. Before her she sees a few flickering lamps, their LED lights casting small blue pools along the floor. She can’t make out anything above her, but her feet echo as she walks. The smell of rotting or already rotted food overwhelms her, the taste of over-ripened bananas on her tongue. Carl ushers her quickly past the decaying food section, although Karen thinks all the freezers and fruit bins are empty.

Carl shows her around, points out the area where the men sleep, where his makeshift office is, when Karen interrupts him.

“I need to lay down. I need a moment,” she says. Her hands sink deep into her pockets and she has to tell herself not to panic. It becomes a mantra as Carl leads her to aisle 17, where Karen is happy to learn the other women are busy preparing for evening service. She immediately crawls into the cot Carl leads her to, wraps herself in a neon orange top sheet and closes her eyes. When she opens them Carl is gone and she lets out the breath she didn’t know she was holding.

Whether from the exhaustion of the day or weeks’ events or the anxiety that grips her, Karen falls into a listless sleep. She dreams of her and Carl’s first date, except they are in some unknown apartment with posters of trees and flowers along the walls. They sit on a used tan couch with creases that look like wrinkled skin. In the dream, they talk about politics and movies and music until they realize the pizza they ordered has gone cold, but they are no longer hungry. In it, she remembers the way she’d leaned against him as they watched a movie, the way she wanted to trace the path of hair along his arm, and then how he slipped his long fingers under the hem of her blouse and ran his lips up her torso, kissing her breasts, nibbling at her collarbones. She remembers the way his need for her radiated from him, how he wanted to possess every inch of her, and then, unlike reality, her mother was there too, sitting on the floor, leaning against the TV stand asking where she kept the salt. Unable to find it she mumbles to herself, “Karrie, why don’t you love your mamma? You know it’s a sin to disrespect your mother.”

When she wakes Karen is shivering from the sweat that's run cold on the edges of her body. She lays flat and looks at the automotive supplies still stocked on the shelves around her. She runs her hand along the ribbed floor mats that hang near her cot and thinks of her mother. If her mother weren't dead she wonders where she would have gone, if she would have picked up and moved with the rest of her church like the stories Karen remembered hearing about as a child, the ones her old, dead mother used to read to her in bed about the expansion West and how Jesus came to America to baptize the Indians.

This is part of why she had initially been so drawn to Carl—he was an atheist when they first met, or at least uninterested in Western religion. He'd been surprised and interested to learn Karen was a yoga instructor, not intimidated or disrespectful like a previous boyfriend. He'd asked her if she believed in karma, if her yoga practice was both about the physical and spiritual. His interest in her, his open-minded curiosity toward her passion was so different from the black and white rules of salvation her mother had set before her. It was refreshing, she thought, to meet a man who could harbor a similar interest in spirituality without falling into the trap of redemption and salvation.

When they started dating, he'd never even heard of Moses and Isaac or how Rachel's father married the man she loved to her sister, hidden under a dark veil. He'd been raised without the weight of burning bushes and nailed hands, only having experimented once with Scientology, which Karen saw as adventurous, indicative of a curious mind. But even at twenty-eight years old, Karen still catches herself singing old hymns about the saints and how families are forever. She knows

if her mother was sitting on that couch watching Jo tear apart their coffee table or watching Karen now sulking in her cot, she would have smacked her on the face and told her the lord doesn't have patience for doubters. Karen knows she's far from the woman her mother would have wanted her to be. Most days she accepts this, but today, lying in a camping cot in aisle 17 of the lord's Wal-Mart, she thinks of the beautiful images in the large foldout picture books and her mother's bony wrist on her hand.

After a while, she manages to shake the dream of Carl's lips on her neck and her mother's hand on her wrist. Her watch says it's 9:17 a.m. and Karen's surprised to see she slept all the way through the night. She's never liked jewelry or watches, but without the setting of the sun she doesn't know when to rise or when to sleep. Not knowing the time panics her, makes her feel as if she's completely lost control.

Beside her cot she finds a snack-sized box of Frosted Flakes and a warm bottle of concentrated orange juice. She knows it was Carl who left the items because this was the sort of man he'd been when they were together. He didn't leave her flowers or gifts, but instead always remembered to pick up her favorite wine or would surprise her with the DVD of a movie they'd seen together. Those were the kinds of actions that mattered most to her, and when they were together, he had always seemed to understand her.

After shoveling down the cereal and some of the warm juice, she feels the need to wander and clear her mind. She grabs one of the lanterns set at the edge of her cot and wonders if there are rules or curfews and why the men and women are separated, but then realizes if the rapture is imminent, fornication must surely be

frowned upon. Before leaving the aisle, she pulls her shorts down a bit and finger-combs her hair.

Karen walks through the aisles barefoot, the lantern casting blue streaks of light before her. She imagines the beams of light coming from heaven, that she's about to be visited by some great angel come to give her a set of golden tablets or to tell her she's pregnant with the next Jesus. Instead, she sees the old, warped weapon cabinets have been emptied, as well as some of the cleaning supplies, small rows for zip ties, cables, trash bags empty except for the particleboard backing.

She makes her way through the children's toys, running her fingers through the dolls' hair, pressing the buttons of toys that chime with sound. She tries to really imagine it, to picture heaven and hell, to see her mother floating on a cloud with a loom and cross-stitch needle humming the song that helps them remember the names of past church leaders. She wonders if the gray-haired man she used to watch annually on TV is dead, knowing he must be, but all she can remember is the great tabernacle choir singing, their robes swaying even though their bodies barely moved. "Dancing is reserved for the Baptists," her mother would spit, when Karen asked why their music sounded so sad. She knows now, her hands fidgeting with an already opened Rubik's Cube, she isn't so much afraid of hell, isn't afraid of being damned, but is afraid that if god is real, walks directly toward her, she still won't feel the splendor, won't be able to forget the evil she's seen.

Before returning the toy to the shelf, she hears footsteps against the squeak of the floor. Turning she sees Carl at the end of the aisle. He's changed from jeans and a T-shirt to a light blue button-up he must have found in the men's section. She

never liked shopping, but if she did, she might have selected something similar for him.

After what she's done in the past day, she knows she shouldn't find him attractive, that she shouldn't want to fold herself into his arms and cry or run her fingers through the clump of hair that gathers below the opening of the top button of his shirt, but she wants so badly to reach out to him. Weeks of false-hope and attempts at protecting Jo have left her raw in a way she hasn't experienced since the day Carl left.

She thinks of one of their last nights together, the way that even inside of her he felt distant, pulled apart. She remembers the way she pretended to fall asleep because she couldn't talk about god anymore or handle the pity he had developed for her in thinking she was damned. That night he prayed out loud for her, begged god for her soul, that she'd find him so they could be together. He asked god why he couldn't have them both, and while he did this, Karen lay curled in a ball trying to separate the moment from the last conversation she'd had with her mother, the disappointment of abandoning her family's faith, the feeling of being torn away from home and disregarded.

"I was looking for you," he says as he walks toward her. Karen pushes away the thoughts of that night and returns the toy to the shelf. "I didn't expect to find you here, though."

"I needed to clear my head."

"Did you sleep okay?" As he says this he laughs a little. "I mean, for the circumstances?"

Karen nods and Carl leans against an empty row of shelves. Karen briefly wonders if they've devised a use for some of these toys. She makes a mental note to ask, but thinks the batteries included might be the reason so many are missing. She meets Carl's gaze and tries to tell herself she's not the woman she seems to have become. She's afraid the shame of leaving Jo, of joining Carl in the desert, will come crashing down on her at any moment threatening to bend her until she breaks. She's worried Carl might realize he never really wanted her in the first place.

He takes another step in her direction and Karen holds her breath. She's not going to cry right now. She's not going to do this, she tells herself. But Carl seems to sense her anxiety and after taking a glance around, steps up to her, reaching for her hand. For the first time Karen can see the streaks of gray that have grown at his temples, the way the wrinkles around his eyes frame his face. He looks exhausted, and Karen feels the need to make something better after all she's done. She thinks of what her mother used to say when Karen doubted—"Karrie, lose yourself in the service of the lord." And although she never found that, she thinks she could lose herself in Carl right now.

She reaches for his hands and rubs her thumbs against his. The calluses around his nails tickle her skin, goose bumps rising up her arms. Although she can feel beads of sweat gathering at her back, she pulls his hands behind her and leans into him, leaving his arms wrapped right above her hips. She puts her hands around his neck, feeling him hesitate, but needing to be held and touched and wanting to be back where they were a year and a half ago before Carl met a man on a bus who would change him forever. But she can't think about that now. She leans her head

against his chest and sighs into him. He holds her tight and runs a hand along what remains of her braid.

“I know I shouldn’t say this and it might make things worse, but I’ve missed you,” he says, his chin resting atop her head. “The past seven months have been hell without you. I wish you could have been by my side.”

“I know,” she says knowing he wishes she had agreed to try, to just go to services with him.

“I think I need you.”

Karen doesn’t know how to respond, so she doesn’t. She doesn’t want to think about the things that drove them apart, the things that led her to Jo, the way Karen left her alone in that house. Even in this moment she can feel her body reacting against him, that need to be filled by him, to try to crawl into each other like they used to do. She tightens her grip around his neck.

Carl guides her head back with his thumb so they’re finally looking at one another. “This might be the end and you may not believe me, but I’m trying to do what’s best. And even with everything god has told me, he hasn’t pulled me away from you.”

“What did he say to you?” she asks, serious, feeling the space in her lungs tightening. There’s only so much a person can handle in one day, she thinks, because she knows what he’ll say next. She knows what they’re both thinking, that this thing between them, the electricity that draws them together, regardless of his crazy religion and angry god, is almost uncontainable.

He hesitates and takes a moment to look into her eyes, the strange blue lighting casting them more black than brown. “He said I’ve been chosen, that he wants *me* to do his work, that I can fix this, help these marked people, eradicate the evil. I’m supposed to be a prophet, Karen. I can feel it.”

He moves one of her hands to his heart, the pounding like a dance club beat, erratic and excited.

“I think this is my calling,” he says before kissing the hair above her forehead. “And I know this isn’t the right time. This is the worst time, but I still love you.”

And then without much hesitation Karen becomes the woman she said she’d never be again. She ignores all her instincts, the pit in her stomach, and swallows all the crazy things he’s said to her. For now she wants to believe him, to wash away the fear that suffocates her. She’s reaching for him and her lips are on his lips and her hand is in his hair. She’s kissing him like some hungry, wild animal she knows should be trapped and skinned. She’s reaching for him, melting into him so the past day and the sickness she’s seen and hasn’t yet seen can melt away.

But after a few moments Carl pushes against her shoulders, careful to avoid her breasts. “We can’t do this,” he says, exasperated, his pelvis still tilted toward her. “We can’t do this right now,” he says. Karen nods, feeling her lips swell from his mouth pressed against hers.

“Do you have a meeting or something?” she asks, not knowing what to say, trying to catch her breath.

“Every day. We have a schedule. I’ll show you later, but I have some things I need to do.”

He walks Karen back past her cot to the cluster of portable toilets before heading to the front of the store. His shape disappears among aisles and end caps of As Seen on TV products.

Inside the large portable restroom stationed where the electronics used to be Karen stares at herself in the metal mirror. She undoes her braid and pulls tightly against her hair as she forms a new one. She grips the plastic sink, trying to process what's going on, to replay the past day in her mind. She tries to think of the facts of her situation. Fact number one: the world, including Las Vegas, is ending or under attack. Fact number two: Carl thinks this is due to god. Fact number three: She doesn't believe in god. Fact number four: Yesterday morning she was living with a woman she thought she loved. Fact number five: Yesterday afternoon she left the woman she thought she loved to possibly die alone. Fact number six: She's in a Wal-Mart in Pahrump and wishes more than anything she could believe everything Carl has said.

Karen doesn't feel better after sorting out the facts. She knows she should feel worse about leaving Jo but doesn't know why those feelings won't come. She wonders if it is fear that's making her respond this way, or if maybe some basic instinct is leading her to Carl as her best bet for survival. Regardless, she's afraid of what she'll learn about his church and what they're doing out in the desert. But worst of all, she's worried that whatever it is might not be enough to make her leave.

Karen walks her way through the store, stopping by the shoe section and swapping her flip-flops for a pair of neon green tennis shoes. She props her lantern atop the shoe bench and looks at her reflection. Her legs look darker in this lighting, strong and toned. She raises her hands above her head, fingers interwoven except for the pointers which extend straight. She stretches, gently moving her practiced arms to the left and right, trying to clear her mind and stretch her spine, to rid herself of the sick feeling in her stomach.

“Getting a stretch in?”

The voice startles her, and before she can discern where it comes from, a short man with muscled arms and a tight blue T-shirt is standing behind her, his head cocked to the side, a small smile on his lips revealing a row of blue braces although he’s well into his twenties.

Karen crosses her arms. “Yeah, I guess.” She looks down at the shoebox, tissue paper scattered. “I needed some more durable shoes.” She looks back at her feet. “I’ll pay for them, of course.”

The man scans her body. “More durable? What do you think we’re doing out here?” He winks at her and Karen’s body goes stiff.

“Don’t worry about the shoes. We’ve got other stuff on our plate right now. I’m Jeff,” he says, extending a calloused hand.

Karen accepts it, but still stands rigid. “I guess you could say I’m Carl’s right-hand man,” he adds, laughing.

She doesn’t know how to respond, so she nods, smiling. He says he’s come to find her, to show her around and introduce her. “Carl’s orders,” he adds. Karen

follows Jeff as he leads her to the front of the store. He carries his own lantern, a larger industrial type that creates a large pool of yellow light, putting his strange, tight gait on display. He walks like his legs might be glued together at their apex, a trait that reminds her of bodybuilders.

Jan smiles and offers a wave as they pass. Outside, they walk to the left where Karen sees several tents set up in the northern edge of the parking lot. From her spot outside the small selection of houses make a square in the desert, although staring out so far in the canvas of tan makes her eyes see strange squiggles of light. As a child, these illusions of light made her feel powerful, a sign of some secret gift yet to fully pronounce itself. But when she told her mother, when she went to her and said, "I think I've seen magic," she told Karen that she must have opened her heart to sin because only the devil plays in the world of sorcery and witchcraft.

Outside under the relentless heat Karen realizes how thirsty she is, and as if reading her mind, Jeff leads her to the first tent where water and Gatorade line a long plastic table. Several women sit counting bottles and organizing beverages into boxes.

"Ladies," Jeff says, and the three of them go quiet. They all wear long denim skirts and button up shirts, even though it must be at least 115 degrees outside. Several small battery-operated fans point toward their respective faces which have little or no makeup, showing their ages as somewhere around forty. Karen notices that even their movements, the scratch of an eyelid or the straightening of a blouse, all appear in unison. One woman has a large white scar running along her cheekbone setting her apart from the brown-haired women beside her.

“I wanted to introduce you all to Karen. She arrived yesterday and will be joining the cause,” Jeff says. He offers Karen a smile that makes her wonder if he knows about her past with Carl.

“Welcome to the group,” one of the women says, and for a second Karen thinks they all spoke at once, a chorus.

All three of the women stand and introduce themselves, all with names that remind Karen of the Bible and her old Sunday-school teachers. They tell her how happy they are to meet her, how they’ve heard so much and how they’ve been praying for her for weeks. Karen realizes that the woman with the scar, Ruth, has a large smile that doesn’t reach her eyes. She makes a note to speak with her more, to find an ally among the strangers.

One of the other two women asks if she’ll be joining for women’s prayer before bed, and before Karen can answer, Jeff says, “You can count her in.”

They stop by two other tents where men and women count supplies, mostly food, but a few count bottles of bleach and lye, the cleaning supplies Karen noticed were missing while wandering the store. She wonders if one of these tents also holds explosives and knives, realizing with every step that the parking lot looks more like a military camp than a place for refugees, which she has somehow come to consider herself in the past few hours.

Jeff leads her to the largest of the white and blue tents with plastic windows and fake windowpanes. It reminds her of something someone might rent for a cheap golf course wedding. Inside are at least a hundred chairs of different sizes and colors all lined up and facing a podium. Bibles sit atop each chair and Karen knows this

must be where they hold church since several fans also line the aisles. Beside the podium is a brass cross with Jesus' limp body hewn into the metal. Several shiny metal tears drip below his cheeks. The base of the relic is set in a cement-filled planter. Off to the side, collecting a stack of papers, is Carl who doesn't notice her entrance. Several men in black and brown fill the front row of seats waiting for Carl to begin.

"Usually only a few men of Carl's council are selected for these meetings," Jeff says, taking on a tone of authority.

He seems to expect a response, so Karen nods because he's leaning close to her face, his breath warm and wet near her ear.

"But it seems you're a pretty special lady. Carl would like you to join for today's meeting. You can sit back here," he says, leading her to a seat in the middle of the room.

She thanks him and for the first time he seems to take the time to look her in the eyes. He offers a smile, but Karen can tell there's a purposeful distance between them. She wonders if any of his family members have been affected by the marks.

Jeff joins the men at the front without another word and Karen wonders how close he really is to Carl. The thought makes her nervous, but before she can dwell, Carl takes his place at the podium. Even from so far back she can see his hands shaking as he shuffles a piece of paper to the front of his pile.

"Welcome," he says, his voice deeper than usual, like the voiceover on an infomercial. "What a wonderful day to serve the lord!"

"A wonderful day indeed," the men respond, unprompted.

“I’d like to start today’s meeting by introducing a special person who’s finally come to join us today.” Carl swipes several drops of sweat from his forehead before extending his hand in Karen’s direction. “This is Karen,” he says, the pitch of his voice raising. It’s clear she’s been discussed publicly before because Carl doesn’t offer any more explanation or further introduction.

Several of the men welcome her while others grunt or smile plainly. Karen waves back at them and feels her cheeks swell red. She thinks of the way Jo used to tease her for revealing her emotions so vividly. Although her skin is dark like waxed Mahogany, her cheeks and neck often show the rose flush that accompanies embarrassment. Jo used to say it was nice because she could always tell when Karen was telling the truth, how when she lied her voice took on a higher pitch and her cheeks pinkened.

Sitting behind the men, with so many turned in her direction, Karen tries to picture herself in her studio stretched tall and calmed by the mirrors that surround her, the voice of her yoga instructor droning and encouraging her to breathe deeper. She imagines the slow, controlled descent into tree pose, the way her foot slides as she sets it atop the other thigh before entering a deep bend. She remembers the feel of her hands clasped in front of her chest. With this image in her mind, she feels her heart calm its erratic pounding and reminds herself that she needs to remain calm; she needs to fit in here.

Carl invites them to join in prayer before beginning business, and the men face his direction and bow their heads. His fingers curl around the edges of the podium, the skin of his knuckles running white against his heat-reddened skin. He

prays for peace, for god's guidance and his will. He prays for Karen, thanks god for her safe arrival. The prayer ends with a time of silence, of Carl asking that his will be imparted in their hearts. Karen stares at her new shoes, the back edges already rubbing calluses at her ankles.

He takes a few moments to collect his thoughts, but doesn't look at his notes for guidance.

"Today I thought I'd leave the budgeting and housekeeping discussions for later," Carl says, pausing to look over the group of seven men that sit before him. "As we all know, these are difficult times, but we are to rejoice because these tragedies are signs from the lord. It's news that his arrival is imminent."

The men nod and a few say "Amen."

Karen thinks of what Carl must have been like as a child. She knows about what happened with his mother, their *relationship*, as he once called it while drunkenly sharing a story with her. But somehow she can't see him as a little boy or even a baby, only as a fully formed, light-eyed young man. She wishes she had asked for a baby photo when they were first together but knows it's possible he'd never even seen one, that he also never saw himself as a child.

"However, we have been called to do his work, not to sit aimlessly while others drown themselves in drink and the bodies of others," Carl adds. He doesn't mean to, but he looks directly at Karen, his eyes clouded. "As you know, we've been doing our best to take on our own lots. We have the women planning for the community, counting goods to sustain us. Meanwhile, many of you have been out in the city and the desert, doing what must be done."

A few of the older men shift in their seats, but from so far back Karen can't tell if it's due to the heat or hesitation.

"Today, I'd like to discuss the plan for what must be done, to set a course for dealing with the marked who threaten our positions in heaven beside our almighty god," Carl says. As he continues, his voice trembles less, his eyes focus on those of his men. "Some say we've already spent too much time with the marked, that their sin will grow and take shape, that somehow we'll be next."

Jeff stands up and leans against the back of his chair. He faces the group. "There have been some discouraging reports," he says.

The man next to him nods.

"And I'm not discounting this," Carl says, his voice losing some of its power. "It's a real concern."

The man sitting beside Jeff scowls and says, "With all due respect it's more than a concern. It could be us next." Although Karen can't see his face, she can imagine the look of disgust on his face, the sour way his lips and nose contract as he speaks.

Carl removes his hands from the podium and stretches his fingers long beside his body before curling them into fists. He returns them to his stack of papers.

"Which is why we're here to discuss the next steps," Carl says with a sigh. "What we've been doing isn't enough. It's not working."

Jeff nods, his hands flexed at his side as if preparing to step in and take over, to give the men a show.

“We’ve had some of the women for weeks, and only a few have converted. Most are still resistant,” Jeff says.

One of the men puts his hand up as if asking permission to speak. “To be truthful, I think we’re at a standstill,” the man says.

“And I have to agree. Some of you have approached me with your suggestions. Jeff and Ralph, could you please update us on your ideas for how to proceed?” Carl asks.

Jeff steps to the front of the group, and while Carl stays at the podium, he seems to shrink without the eyes of the men upon him. Jeff paces, as if to increase the drama of the whole thing. He puts his hands in his gray trouser pants. Two crescents of sweat bloom where his massive chest meets his torso.

“We’ve heard rumors of success with another church group, out past the highway onramp. It seems they’re taking more drastic measures, and my source says they’ve had several conversions.”

“What is it?” Carl asks.

“Although the mark itself doesn’t appear to respond to fire, the sinners seem to make progress under the torch. Several have been saved. It seems prolonged exposure to the heat has the same effect.”

Carl pales at Jeff’s suggestion, but several of the men seem interested. “Are you saying there’s nothing else we can do?”

“Not if we want to save them before our lord returns,” Jeff says. He takes a breath, shakes his head as if what he’s saying pains him, and adds, “I know you

planned on baptizing these women, and we can still do that, but not without more *encouragement*." Several men nod, but Carl's cheeks completely lose their color.

Karen begins to tug at the small regrowth of hair on her knee raising splotches of red up her leg. She can feel her mouth open and dry, unable to process exactly what she's hearing.

Carl seems to sense her confusion, her worry. "But wasn't the point of it all, of the actions we've taken, to bring these sinners back to the lord?" he asks.

Jeff doesn't need any time to think over his response. "Don't you see this is the only way to save them?" Several of the men shift in their chairs. "I apologize," Jeff says. "It's just that this is how we can bring them to the lord. As soon as they convert, we will move quickly to baptize them."

"You mean in case they don't survive?"

A silence falls over the group. "Yes, but who are we to question when god brings one of us home? Are we really going to risk their eternity for temporary pain?" His hands are turned toward Carl, his pose reminding Karen of her family's portrait of a Caucasian Jesus in blue robes with feathered hair and upturned palms. As a child she often dreamt of the fireplace exploding, melting the cheap gilded frame into gold paint and rendered Jesus a more authentic brown or charred black.

One of the other men speaks up. "But are we to believe these conversions are genuine?" Karen can tell this man isn't used to confrontation. Even from behind, she can see his yellow-striped shirt doesn't fit correctly and that his hair gel is melting down his neck.

“Thank you, John. I think that’s a good point,” Carl says, before looking to Jeff whose face has grown dark, his head looking like an off-kilter stop sign with his rigid jaw and reddened face.

“I think,” Jeff says, too loud before correcting his tone, “I think some of us here might be afraid to make the decisions god has called upon us to make.”

Karen thinks she can see his hands trembling, and even though he seems angry, even violent, the way he looks at the men makes her think he believes what he’s saying is true, that he thinks fire is the only way to save these women. But she knows she’s trying to distract herself, trying not to imagine the light coral in Jo’s cheeks, the way she might respond to a torch at her head.

The men sit in silence, Jeff’s words dividing them but not one of them willing to breach it. One by one they direct their gaze back toward Carl. Karen wishes she could invisibly stand beside him, grab his hand and tell him he doesn’t need to do this, that he has nothing to prove. But she knows this isn’t true, that for him, everything—his soul, eternal life, her damnation—rides on his decisions in this makeshift chapel and the men who help him run it.

After several moments that Karen passes by counting the progress of sweat down her back, Carl regains his strength, his face back to the mask of a prophet.

“Well, let us hope this is what god has called us for, otherwise, may he have mercy on us,” Carl says. He looks out toward his men and then directly at Karen.

“Spend another week with them; share his word. If the marks don’t leave them or they don’t convert, baptize them with fire then water.” With this said, Carl exits the back of the tent. The other men whisper among themselves, and although Karen

expected to see a smile on Jeff's face, he leans over a chair looking as if he can't regain his breath.

Before they head her way, Karen slips out the tent through the main opening. She tries to steady her pace, to appear calm. Inside she's wondering where these women are and why there aren't men among them. She worries that Carl doesn't have as much control out here as he led on, that these men will decide the fates of the marked with or without his approval. The thought of fire blackening Jo's face, of her crooked smile turning to char sickens her, and before she can hold back, she's vomiting into the planter in front of the store. The rocks dig into her knees and she feels the skin stretching and breaking while she retches the little water she'd managed to put down.

Chapter Three

“Behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet and they will learn that I have loved you. Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown.”

–Revelation 3:9

This is what it feels like to suffocate: The air you hold inside is a tight, hard thing— your body trying to save what’s left. Your lungs are a sponge, wrung out, dry and gasping. The rest of your body riots. Your back arches and your arms fling. You push your chest up to the air trying to breathe through your skin. The vessels in your brain swell, the blood a hammer at your temples, the flesh tingling, reminding you to suck in, to gasp, but you’re restricted, a balloon wound tight around a finger. Then everything slows. Above you the sun turns from red to orange to yellow. The great orb burns your eyes and you think of miles of wheat, burned blades of grass, buildings with blown-out windows. You think of your mother or father, the way he or she did or did not describe god. You see the yellow orb grow wings and become an angel that devours you.

We weren’t sure what would come next. Many of the wealthy in the city had locked themselves up in their houses, the marble floors cold against their feet. They called their friends to join and fed their children snacks while they waited for the world to return. Politicians and leaders couldn’t stay in one spot because nowhere was safe. The schools and stores filled with the homeless and lost, and the highways were scattered with cars, doors still open, trunks filled with whatever couldn’t be carried on foot.

Small militias gathered, some against us and others simply to fight or preserve or keep moving. In the city, three large groups formed against us. Downtown men pushed slot machines against walls and tore down pink flamingos and pictures of sequined women from the walls. They kept us under lock and key. Elsewhere, beside the ghosts of Frank, Liberace, and Elvis, beside buildings built by mobsters and western travelers, they gathered cars and trucks to find us, each day sacrificing one of us to their god, each day sending one of us home. And then there were the men in the desert, the ones with calloused hands, nail beds forever caked with grout even after years of Sunday mornings spent scrubbing before church. They hid behind the mountains, the great red sky shadowing them in sanctuary. They moved against us all, against those in the city, against all who didn't bow down with workers' hands, with hands like Christ, cracked and caked, and they said, We will make this right.

Those in the desert named themselves the Fellowship of the Lord and drew a line between them and the city, them and the marked, those who would burn and those who would not. They gathered weapons until their truck beds whined and their hands could no longer distinguish the touch of cold metal. In their warehouses they gathered supplies, hoarding mountains of water and driving past those of us who would break cacti open with raw fingers just for a drip of its dew. They did not stop to feed us; they did not offer us the help of their hands. When their meetings ran too late, they went to those of us they'd captured and said, "Just wait because tomorrow you will meet our god."

Sometimes when they hurt us we cried out, and sometimes when they touched us we stayed calm. Most of them sought to unravel us, to sear out a confession, to shock the sin out of us. But others came to touch us where they knew there was no redemption. After they did this they looked long and hard at our marks, trying to figure out if god had seen what they'd done through some strange looking glass. A few cried out immediately, not looking at us but at our foreheads and said, "God what have I done to you." They thought he was with us. They were wrong.

Chapter Four

"To everyone who conquers and continues to do my works in the end, I will give authority over the nations; to rule them with an iron rod." –Revelation 2:26-27

Carl knows he should have stayed behind in the tent. The men, except for Jeff and one or two others, must want to speak with him. Usually Carl stays late to pray over those who bring their burdens to him, those who seek his and god's forgiveness. He knows some of them weren't cut out for this. Although they'd taken kindly to Carl when he first took over from Pastor John, they never thought the time of tribulation, of blood-crusted hands, would be in their lifetime. Most of them were gentle and fat, the kind of men who bounced their children on their stomachs late at night before bed. Like those before them, they thought such a reckoning would fall on their children's shoulders, not on their own. And then there were men like Jeff who seemed born for conflict, hands shaped to fit around a woman's neck.

As Carl paces behind a few of the supply tents, the asphalt burning his feet through his rubber-soled shoes, he thinks of Pastor John's last night, the moment when he knew it was between him and Jeff to take over the church. Carl, Jeff, and several of the other church leaders had been at John's for hours. His wife busied herself by offering them wheat bread with margarine while John's lungs churned out brown-slicked mucus like excrement into jar after jar. None of them spoke. The hospice nurse came down after a few hours and let them know it would be any time now, but John was still semi-lucid. She said he asked for Carl.

As Carl rose to take the stairs he himself had equipped with a lift just a month earlier, he could feel Jeff's eyes staring at the back of his head. Upstairs, Carl met the previously round man who offered him—a complete stranger—a job off the bus, the man who took a chance on him, who gave him god and salvation and answers he never found in women or other religions. John's body had grown frail and sharp, and it pained Carl to see him this way, to worry about accidentally crushing him beneath the velvet blanket. He positioned himself as far away from the pumping jar as he could and took John's hand.

"You know this is what god wants," John said, slurring his words with rasps of wet breath. He sounded as if he were drowning.

Carl didn't want to accept this, and being new to the faith he hadn't come to reconcile death, to fully picture the glory of heaven that would make death seem like a gift. He'd only felt that way once, when his mother died, and the joy of her departure had nothing to do with faith or god. Sometimes he still wonders if he wants to die, but how else can he behold his god? "I trust that you know his will," Carl said, trying to believe his own words.

"Know this—," the pastor said before making a sound like thunder cracking from his lungs, black liquid crusted at his lips. "Our people will be tested. God is going to give us a chance to make it right, to save many. Listen to his words and do his will. Eradicate the sin that plagues us, Carl." The man reached for Carl's hand and squeezed with surprising strength.

Carl told him he'd do his best, that he'd been waiting for this his whole life, for something to believe in, for a purpose that would define him. The sick man

nodded and smiled with gray-stained teeth as Carl reassured him. They prayed together, and two hours later, beside his wife who wept too loud for anyone's comfort, the pastor died, leaving Carl in charge.

Although John passed almost six months ago, Carl can still feel the bones of his hand as he wipes his own down his pant legs. Thinking of John is the only way he's been able to renew his faith in what must be done. If it hadn't been for John's faith in him, Carl thinks he would have returned to the violent and angry man his mother had known, that he might have eventually turned against Karen, too. He reminds himself that he's been chosen, that John and god have set a path before him.

He finds Karen sitting in the planter filled with imported red rocks along the front side of the store with her long arms wrapped around bent legs. From the distance, she looks like a folded piece of leather, her body sleek and her skin a soft matte brown. Carl sets himself down next to her, allowing the rocks to form triangular indentations beneath his palms. He can tell she's been crying or sick, that something isn't right.

Karen wipes the edge of her mouth and turns her head toward Carl without lifting it from her knees. Beneath the cloudless auburn sky her hair takes on a reddish tint, and Carl thinks she might be the most beautiful woman he's ever seen. Her eyes remind him of polished stones, still smooth and dark under the water's current before drying to a dull gray.

"Hi," he says.

She tries to smile but her lip quivers instead.

"I know that was a lot to hear," he says. "Are you okay?"

“I’d like to say I somehow expected this,” Karen says. “But I didn’t, or I hoped so much that I didn’t let myself think it.” They sit in silence while Carl runs his fingers through the rocks. “Why are you doing this?”

Carl mirrors her position, but crosses his legs and leans back against the concrete stucco of the building’s façade. “We can’t do nothing,” he says, and for the first time Karen thinks she hears regret in his voice, but he continues. “Don’t you see that this has been foretold? I can’t stop what’s already begun. God has set us upon the earth to do his work, to prepare for the end of times.”

Karen defers to a question she often finds herself asking in discussions about religion. “But if god is all-powerful, wouldn’t he just end it all, send some to hell and take some to heaven? Why go through all this? Why make us suffer?” She tries to keep her tone even, not wanting to betray the confusion and frustration she feels or the way this moment reminds her of the last ones spent with her mother, the way her mother kept praying aloud even as Karen walked out the door for the last time, the way she kept saying, “Oh, heavenly father, please help your daughter for she is lost.”

“Who are we to ask for his reasoning?” Carl asks. Karen can see why people are so eager to follow him—when he speaks about god his voice lightens and his eyes widen, amazed even at his own belief. “Don’t you see the future is laid before us? It’s been written. We can’t do anything but take a side because god will come soon and, one way or another, we will all bow before him.”

“I don’t know if I can believe that,” she says.

“All will bend their knees,” he says, “either by choice or by force.”

“But don’t you think hurting other people, murdering them—. Oh my god, I can’t believe I’m even saying this. How can you even consider killing these people who did nothing but wake up marked?” For a moment Karen wonders if this is all a dream, because of all the horrors she could anticipate in her future, this was not one she had prepared herself for.

“It’s not murder. It’s doing god’s work. Don’t you understand we’re like god here on earth? We’ve been called to make the difficult decisions. Until he returns, we *are god* and we must choose who is worthy to wait on earth for his return,” Carl says, his breathing ragged from trying to make her understand. He wants nothing more than for her to see what he sees, to imagine the flamed chasm of hell and the ivory thrones awaiting them beside their lord.

“I just don’t understand what makes you think god would want you to do this. I mean, aside from him *speaking* to you.” She knows her tone hurts him because he closes his eyes and leans back against the building again.

“Do you trust me?” he asks. “I know a lot has changed, but I’m still the same person.”

She thinks of her mother, of the way she always asked Karen if she trusted in the lord, if her heart really belonged to the one almighty god.

“Do you trust me?” he asks again. He meets her gaze.

“I trust that you believe what you’re saying, that it’s not a lie,” she says. She wants to say that she doesn’t trust his source, that she doesn’t trust the idea that god spoke to him.

“Things are going to change quickly. This isn’t going to work unless you trust me,” he says.

“I know.”

“I want you beside me. I want you to be my partner, to help guide me. You may not trust me but I do trust you.”

“I know,” she says again. This is what she’d wanted when they were together, but not within this context, not under these conditions. Toward the end of their relationship, this was the Carl she had wanted—the one who trusted she was enough, the one who made her feel needed.

“I need to show you. I need you to see what is god’s and what is the devil’s. I need you to see their work, to want to choose,” he says. “I know you’ll choose him.”

But Karen doesn’t think she can or will. If she was ever to trust a church leader it would be him, but Carl being in charge, being so sure hasn’t made it real for her, hasn’t allowed her to ignore the fear and doubt, to bury the memories of her mother, of falling asleep every night with images of fire and her bishop’s fist pounding at the microphone, saying how god will wipe out the nonbelievers, that he can read her heart.

But she also knows Carl’s different from the bishops of her childhood church. Somehow, he seems less sure, but she also thinks it might just be a willingness to die that calms him. Even though the things he wants to do frighten and disgust her, she still sees the man she originally met, the probing gentle hands, the way he used to brush her hair after a shower, the eagerness to protect her even though she so badly wants to be a woman who doesn’t want protection. Part of her wants to scream and

yell, to shake him and say, “Carl, you’re crazy.” But then she looks at the sky and thinks of the glimmer of Jo’s mark, of the sticky shining fire on her forehead and in this moment she thinks it must be god, and even though she doesn’t believe, she doesn’t feel like she has any other choice. Although her stomach aches, although she’s repulsed by Jeff and the women who all look alike in row after row of white tents, she reaches for Carl’s hand, and he takes it.

*

Carl says it’s time to show her something, and Karen follows him to the car. Inside, she runs her fingers over the stiches that bind the cream-colored pieces of leather seating together. She’s never been in such a nice car, and she doesn’t ask Carl why it is among the two dozen or so they keep outside the Wal-Mart. Several “Live Sex” billboards stretch before them and Karen thinks she should have attended one of those shows or maybe a brothel, just to say she did, just to know she really tried everything. She imagines waking one day to a startling blue sky and driving across the whole country knowing how lucky she is to be alive, knowing the whole time her fears about god and the afterlife were unfounded. She imagines living without the constant fear of a vengeful god’s retribution, the fear that in a moment her life might end and eternal suffering might begin. She imagines being free of the constant worry she’s wrong, that somehow god is real and she’ll pay for her dissent.

Carl holds her hand and strokes the skin between her thumb and pointer finger. He keeps the windows cracked, and as he heads down the main drag in Pahrump, they both smell smoke and ash, the remnants of brothel fires.

“Do you mind if we take a detour?” he asks, not taking his eyes off the road and carefully weaving between the broken-down cars that litter the street. “I’d like to take you somewhere.”

Karen nods and admires the mountains that surround the eastern edge of the town. She wonders if this is where Yucca Mountain is, the one where politicians tried to plant nuclear waste in the 80s. She remembers the flat-topped ridge from her Nevada history books, the endless rallies protesting the mountain, the stainless steel sheen of the tunnels built to carry and store the waste. Empty now, the laws never passing to move the material to the state, Karen wonders whether the metal still shines and if anyone’s been in those silver caves deep and dark like tombs. She imagines wandering over and uncovering the entrance by rolling away a large steel stone.

Carl parks the car outside what looks like a Beverly Hills mansion transplanted in the desert. The house has sculpted white pillars and double doors that stretch higher than Karen can reach on a standard ladder. The windows all have clear glass, although a few are speckled in black ash that’s risen from the small city. The only thing making the building less than regal are the wooden letters that spell out “The Ranch” placed above the doors like those outside colonial-style frat houses.

“Are we at a brothel?” Karen asks, laughter somehow finding its way into her mouth.

“It’s one of the few I could keep them from burning down.”

“It kind of looks like the White House,” she says and eyes him suspiciously.

He pulls her forward. “There are several set up to look like historic houses.

They’re actually beautiful. Plus, there’s really no point to burning these things down.

When the lord comes for us, after we’ve ascended, everything will burn.”

Inside they both gape openly at a chandelier made of crystal, the staircase set in white marble, a salon to the side with tall ceilings and a bar of similar pale stone. The walls are also stark white, giving the place a heavenly glow in spite of the red shadows that seep through the windows. Strewn across the floor is glass, clothing, cigarettes, and other personal items left in a hurry.

“When they found out we made camp here in town, they all left,” Carl says, answering her unasked question. Karen imagines a small team of ex-prostitutes on foot in large plastic heels with goldfish in their shoe bases walking through the smoking city. She shivers, thinking of the people they might meet there, the small armies patrolling the streets near the strip.

Carl guides Karen through the rest of the bottom floor. Several of the rooms are locked while others are deserted with half-filled dresser drawers turned over on the beds. Upstairs Karen presses her face to the glass of a large rectangular window and can see all of Pahrump. From here the Wal-Mart looks so small, the tents like little teeth beside a square blue mouth. She can see the mountains that shield them and pools of gray smoke far beyond.

“I really thought I would never see you again,” Carl says, standing beside her. “I thought you were lost, and I thought it might kill me. I know it sounds dramatic, but it kept me from doing the things that had to be done.”

“You came for me so I could help you?” Karen asks, still gazing out the large, fingerprint-speckled window.

“In a way,” he says. “But I also knew I needed you. I was dreaming of you and you dying in various ways. It made me upset. In all of them I just wanted to reach out and pluck you from whatever situation it was. I wanted to hold you again.”

“You know I was safe,” she says, unconvincingly. “It’s not like we could go out and get ourselves into trouble. With Jo marked, we were just going to wait it out and see what would happen.”

Carl’s face goes rigid at the mention of Jo, but he doesn’t get angry. “I don’t know how to get you to believe me. This isn’t something you can wait out. This is forever. No man—or woman—can outrun god.”

They stand looking out until their eyes blur all the desert browns into one tan canvas speckled in gray. Carl’s proximity makes Karen’s body rigid, but the feeling of desire begins to take over the knot in her stomach. She feels her chest tighten and her legs go stiff. She aches for his touch to release her from the fear that freezes her beside him.

Carl moves her hands to his shoulders one at a time before reaching for her waist. For a while he stares at her, studies the way her cheeks have grown a little rounder, the thick black of her eyelashes. When they begin to kiss he feels his body relax. He doesn’t think of Jeff or Jo or the marked people, but he does think of god. As

Karen leads him to what must have been the suite, a room with purple carpet and a plush red featherbed, Carl thinks this is what god's wanted for him all along. He knows Karen is the key to everything he must do. Although he wants to get lost in her like he used to, he wants more for them to fuse, to connect in the final way they'd never been able to before: physically and spiritually.

Karen thinks about how much older Carl looks as she takes off his shirt, then her own. She lies back on the red comforter that swallows her and tilts her pelvis toward him. She pulls him closer and undoes his belt, his pants. As she watches him grow before her, she knows it's never been about gender. It's always been about the pull she feels to someone, that physical ache that unsettles her. When he's finally inside her, she feels like she can't breathe, like time could end in this moment and she could die with him inside her because his fullness blocks out everything else. They're kissing like animals would if they could, so hungry, and he's so deep in her that her body responds to him with a wet tightness that unravels Carl too quickly.

Even though he's finished, he doesn't move. He feels himself changing shape inside her, but only lifts his chest so his body doesn't weigh heavy against her. Karen reaches up and touches his nose, draws invisible lines down his chin and up to his ear, then back again. She realizes both of them were silent except for a few groans and thinks this must be some sort of worship, this physical space that exists not between them but within them when they are together.

They lie beside each other for what feels like hours, but they've all lost track of time without the setting of the sun. Carl kisses her entire body and brings her to a climax so fulfilling that for a moment Karen swears she saw the sun again, bold and

yellow and bright. They fill the silence with small touches, with fingers walking across torsos and arms and lips.

Karen begins to doze beside him, her body warm and soft against his. He wonders if he's moved too fast with her, but doesn't allow the guilt of their union to swallow him. He's sure this was supposed to happen. As he lies beside her body, his hands sweeping across her torso to her shoulders and down her arm, he's the most content he's been in weeks. At the same time, he knows Karen doesn't fully know him, that there are things he needs to share with her before she'll consider joining him and fully committing to their cause. His time with the church has made him want to be more forthcoming, to show her who he really is, his full past. For the first time in a long while he thinks of his mother and the memories of her body that have haunted him, and the way he tried to forget her.

She tells him, "Go ahead, yell at it."

Carl's thinking, Bitch, it's an ashtray, but he yells at it anyway. He tells it how it's a dirty fucking cunt, this bitch-ass ashtray.

The auditor woman smiles. "Are you feeling less stressed now?"

"Not quite," he says, still catching his breath.

"Then you're not finished," she says. "Keep going."

He's staring at the thing. It's got the Flamingo logo—pink feathers etched in glass—and he's thinking, god, this woman is a stupid bitch. And then he's thinking about his mother again.

He takes another go at the ashtray. He tells it he'd like to break its little gash open, cut it with its own shards.

He says to the ashtray, "Fuck you, I'm going to fuck the living shit out of you."

She says, "This is a good start."

Carl tries not to think about his time with Scientology, especially now he's with the church, but also because he's still convinced it helped him in a way. Karen knows a little about it, that he'd gone to an auditor for several sessions, but he was never able to tell her the whole of it, how *exactly* he finally rid himself of the recurring memories of his mother.

"Just tell it straight," the auditor says. For the first time he thinks he recognizes an accent in her voice.

He says, "She pulled over and opened my door. I was in the backseat. She told me to get out and I didn't. She said, 'Get out,' again. I didn't. She grabbed me by my hair, curly then, before I grew old and it grew straight. She held me, palm against my head, facing me down the street to a group of men circled around a car lifted on bricks. She said, 'Is this where you want to live?' She said, 'I swear to god I'll leave you down here, 'cause this is where we'll be if I can't get my fucking work done.' I probably cried. I was a child."

The auditor takes notes. "Okay," she says. "Let's go through it again. This time, tell me how you feel as you experience it. Don't just remember it."

Carl tells her he felt nervous, that he thought she might leave him there knowing he'd never make it off B Street by sundown.

She says, "Go back to the beginning." He remembers the color of the shirt he was wearing—orange. He tells her he was frightened. He tells her he knew there had been a murder in the area that week—gang related.

"From the beginning," she says, "one more time." As he repeats the story, she asks, "What do you see? What exactly do you see?"

He tells her the street signs were green with white letters, that his mother's car was still wet in the window creases from the car wash that morning, that her shoes were like pizza slices but snakeskin, that she wore flesh-colored pantyhose, not black.

He thinks they're finally done. He's shared. He's been cancelled, and he thinks she'll tell him that the memory no longer exists.

She says, "Is there an earlier incident like the one you just told me?"

He looks at her. Even though her breasts form a heart with her waist in her sweater, he's growing tired, feeling drained from all this talk of a person who no longer exists. He doesn't know where to start.

"What are you thinking about?" Karen asks and rubs her eyes until they find their focus.

"Nothing," he says.

She looks at him, meets his eyes. He wants to curl up inside her and wait out everything happening around them.

“My mother,” he says. “Somehow it always comes back to her and it makes me think I’m pushing you too hard. I want you to believe in what we’re doing out here, but I want you to come to that belief on your own.”

Karen rolls onto her side and meets Carl’s eyes once again. “I don’t know how to process what’s happening, and I know it’s not going to be easier after what you show me today. But I also know worse things are probably happening downtown, elsewhere. I know people are dying but I don’t know if I can be the one to make that decision. I don’t know if I can hurt other people.” As she says this she thinks of Jo alone in their cookie-cutter house stained brown below the roof from years of desert storms. She does know how to hurt people, she thinks, but doesn’t feel better or worse recognizing this.

Although what he’s done hasn’t come easy, Carl knows that something inside him has made him capable of what’s happening in the desert. He might not be lighting the flames but he’s calling the shots. He knows if this turns against him, in the eyes of god he will be most culpable. He tries to remember ever wanting to hurt someone. He thinks again of his auditor and mother.

The shirt he’s wearing is orange with purple stripes and his mother is wearing a fitted pantsuit that makes her look like she’s wearing a costume rather than business casual.

“What happens next, in detail?” his auditress asks. She doesn’t look bored yet even though she’s heard the story at least ten times.

He tells her that his mother gets out of the car, that she has to walk around to the opposite side to open his door. She grabs his shirt first, then his hair when he doesn't respond to her. The men down the street are like statues, leaning hard against their car and each other. His mother is yelling. Her breath smells like burned sugar.

"Why are we still talking about this? It's supposed to be cancelled," he asks.

The auditor is scribbling down notes, but she says, "I think this is where it all stems from—the stress that blocks you."

This doesn't feel like the other breakthroughs. He's starting to think she's enjoying this story, getting wet from little him thinking he was going to get gangbanged or murdered in the Vegas ghetto. He decides he fucking hates her sweater.

She must sense his stress because she offers him water before they continue. Carl stretches his legs. He walks around the room and notices there aren't any identifying objects. He doesn't even know her real name. She tells him to sit back down.

"Do you know what's really holding me back?" Karen says, sitting up in bed and folding her legs beneath her like a pretzel.

"What?" Carl asks, nervous.

"I don't even think it's the violence," she says, "at least not completely. It's that when I close my eyes and pray, I don't feel anything. Sometimes I think I do, but then I think it's really just the vacuum of nothing I feel. I close my eyes and I see nothing."

"Let's talk about the last time you saw your mother."

He tells her about his mother's house, how she moved into a nice place about fifteen minutes from the strip, how from her backyard he could see the Red Rock Mountains and the pink hue of the sunset.

He tells her that even after he left home, when he was sixteen or seventeen and things got really bad, sometimes he'd return home and sneak into bed with her like all the times she used to get into bed with him. She'd nestle close to him, her body warm and sticky under the sheets, her hands on his body like the first time, like all the nights on top of his Spider-Man sheets, how he didn't know it wasn't normal to be touched and stroked by your mother until the fifth grade when boys started making jokes about fucking their friends' moms.

"Usually by the morning she'd threaten to call the police," he adds. "But most of the time she let me stay for breakfast."

"Is this what happened the last time you saw your mother?" the auditor asks. She's trying to get down to it, to shake the story out of him, and at this point Carl's convinced she's enjoying it, that she won't stop until she feels the crotch of her pants soak wet from the outside.

He decides to keep her waiting. He tells her that it was kind of like that. He tells her that in the beginning he wanted to say no even when he didn't know it was wrong. But he also tells her he liked it, that he felt safe in bed with her.

She scribbles at her note pad, her legs crossed, shoes pointed in his direction. He leans forward, elbow resting on his knee, palm on his cheek so he can smell the burnt vanilla of cigars on his fingers.

She says, "Okay, what do you remember? Try to be detailed."

He smiles, feeling like he's giving her what she wants to hear. He tells her he can still feel how warm the back sliding glass door was, even past midnight. He tells her about the bohemian curtains that swung in front of the door, chiming low like rolled wooden beads, the way his mother mumbled, a side effect of the meds.

"Let's focus on the last memory," she says. Her scribbling has slowed. She looks at him, eyebrows rounded so her eyes look bright and surprised.

"Okay," he says. He's struggling to get back into the memory he's suppressed for so long. She asks him to walk around the room. He takes a lap and a sip of water. She waits, pen ready.

He tells her his mother was mumbling, that the dog had been dead for at least a year so no one barked anymore. He tells her he remembers crawling in, pushing the pile of decorative pillows to the floor and the memory of her skin feeling hot even under the fan, that she was wearing thin night shorts, but he didn't remember the color. It was dark.

"Just tell it straight as you remember," she says. She's stopped taking notes and waits for him to continue.

"Her back was dripping with sweat," he says. She was so warm but he curled himself against her. He felt her through the warmth of her pajamas. "I remember the clarity—just the stick of her, that skin feeling, you know?" he says.

He tells her she mumbled in his ear all night long, that he didn't know what she said for sure, but that he was sure it was good. She fell asleep smiling. He could feel that even in the dark.

“And what happened next?” the auditor asks, her eyes like bright mossy lakes, her chin sitting against her fist.

“When I woke up she wasn’t in bed,” he says. “I remember noticing her absence more than normal. I found her in the living room. She was dead, of course. Too many pills. There was a lot of vomit. She was wearing the same shorts. The dog next door kept barking. That’s all I remember.”

He can feel her looking at him, the heat in the room—the actual heat, the perspiration dripping down the old repainted walls—drawing her toward him.

“I’m not sure I feel clear,” he says.

“Well,” she says, “you know these things take time. We’ll have to go over it again...” She looks to her notepad. She tells him to get some more water before they do any canceling. He chugs the water and bends the tee-pee paper cup to match the shape of her body. She’s reviewing her notes again, scribbling quietly.

He thinks of his mother, how quiet the house was with the dog dead and no one else there. He thinks of her leaned against the car on B Street, her body long, the way her nails felt against his head, pulling his hair.

“To tell you the truth,” Carl says, reaching for Karen’s hand. “I think it’s normal. Faith isn’t an easy thing.”

She nods, kissing his hand.

Carl doesn’t say that sometimes when he prays he feels nothing too.

When they leave the small mansion, Karen knows she can't bury such huge fears with sex, but she also knows Carl and his touch and the way they're drawn together is the closest thing she's ever felt to god. She tries to remember this, the current that pulls and warps them together, as he drives them out to the site where they've been keeping the women, the ones she knows will remind her of Jo.

Although Jo was the first woman Karen has ever been with sexually, she's always known she was attracted to both men and women. As a teenager, she found herself commenting on her friends' beauty in a way that eventually made them uncomfortable, that led them to tell their mothers Karen was a dirty girl. They all were raised to look out for sins of the flesh and to keep each other accountable when one's salvation was in jeopardy. When Karen's mother finally came to her room when she was fifteen and confronted her, Karen didn't understand the issue. Why would seeing her friends as beautiful be a sin? And even though she said, "No, Mom, I don't want to have sex with them," because frankly, she wasn't ready to have sex with anyone, her mother reacted as if her fate as a sexual deviant had already been decided. After, each night they prayed that god would cure Karen's sexual predilections.

This was the story Karen told Jo on their first date when Jo asked if she strictly dated women, when she asked where she fell on the spectrum. Karen felt a little embarrassed to be so unsure. She said, "I don't know what I am. I just find you beautiful, but I also find men attractive." And even though Jo was the most beautiful woman Karen had ever seen and so confident in her love for women, and only

women, she understood Karen. She didn't judge her for not knowing or for having a complicated past of male ex-partners, Carl specifically.

Later that first date night, after a long evening of flirting, Jo took Karen to her bed. Karen would always think of that night as the most aroused she'd ever been, as the most confident in her body and in her sexuality she'd ever felt. She never forgot the feeling of connectedness two women could share in their similar anatomy, the way both their bodies were puzzles to be figured out, the way everything was for their mutual benefit.

Thinking of that night with Jo and the roughness of her lips embarrasses Karen now as she sits beside Carl, because she recognizes she should be more empathetic or worried, but she can't stop thinking of that night with Jo, about the way they quickly evolved into a quasi-friendship-sexual relationship, but also how she knew she never needed Jo like she needed Carl. For the first few months she was with Jo this relieved her. She told herself it was much better to choose someone than to need them, but somewhere inside, Karen knew she was still waiting for Carl, that nothing could replace what they found beside one another. A part of her missed the fucked-up frenzy of constantly trying to make it work but never quite getting it right. But in many ways this also disappointed her. She always thought she'd be a different kind of woman, someone she'd respect if looked upon objectively.

She tries to bury the thoughts of the person she wishes she could be as they drive, and even though they sit in silence, Carl doesn't release her hand. He maneuvers the car through several twisting desert roads and back to the main

street. Karen thinks this must really be the end because no one would take a car this nice off-roading unless they knew it didn't matter.

She is surprised when Carl pulls into the parking lot outside the Gold Town Casino. The large, defunct sign says "B ST STE K BUFFET N TOWN 400 POINTS \$\$\$." Walking up to the front of the strip-mall casino she can see the sparkling fluorescent lights of the Gold Town Casino sign have turned gray and many of the bulbs are broken. Even though Karen never loved growing up in Vegas, she always found the ridiculous historical imitations entertaining. But without all the lights, the casino's old west façade looks like a broken child's toy—it's arches too small and the windows plastic, inoperable. Although the building is long and narrow, there's only one entrance through a revolving glass door.

Karen sees men with guns guarding the door. Karen's never held or desired to hold a weapon before, so being so close to the smooth metal frightens her. Even as a child she avoided games with toy weapons—she never found the act of pretending to kill fun or fulfilling.

Carl doesn't release her hand as they walk inside the glass chamber. Karen remembers the few times her mother took her down to the strip for shopping or errands, how she always wanted to run between the machines and press the buttons. She wonders if they've gutted the hotel, or if the shining machines sit dormant inside.

Before she can take in her surroundings, she sees Jeff waiting for them on the purple carpet. He offers a wispy smile that makes her shoulders tense, but before he

can approach her, the woman from the water tent with the large facial scar loops her arm through Karen's.

"I didn't expect you out here," the woman says, her brown eyes round and attentive. "I'm Ruth, in case you forgot. I know it's been a busy couple days for you."

Karen smiles and exchanges pleasantries, but it's clear she's distracted. The casino looks almost as she expected—bright purple carpet with firework designs, rows and rows of metal machines, signs for Bingo, a large bar off to the right. The walls are still covered in advertisements for bands and the Thursday Night Keno Special. Along them they've added shelves, a few plastic banquet tables, a refrigerator attached to a generator, and several large plastic storage boxes. Karen recognizes the faces of several people from the Wal-Mart. Around twenty church members shuffle through the lobby and back into the dark of the casino floor. Karen and Ruth are the only women in sight.

"Where are the other women?" Karen asks, not sure if she means the women from the church or the marked.

"Don't focus on that stuff yet," Ruth says. She offers Karen the look a mother might give her child when she knows something bad is about to happen, and leads Karen to one of the bars where they both sit after grabbing warm water bottles.

The heat is stifling. She can feel the swell of warmth along her spine and under her breasts. She shifts to unstick the back of her thigh from the puffed plastic of the bar chair. This kind of heat reminds her of the summer her mother's car volume buttons melted right down the front of the dash. The internal thermometer had registered the car at around 150 degrees. It was the same summer one of the

fathers in their ward accidentally left his toddler in the car while he ran into the pharmacy. He'd only been gone fifteen minutes when he realized he'd left his son. Karen remembered the tiny blue-glossed casket and the way she wondered if the boy's face had melted too.

Karen looks up at the painted stagecoach and horses that sit above the bar and wonders why they chose this spot. Although there's some red light filtering in through the windows, beyond the bar most of the casino floor is shrouded in darkness. She sips her water and rubs her arms which have begun to stick to the electronic poker screen set into the bar top.

She looks for Carl and finds him speaking to one of the guards and Jeff.

"He's a good man," Ruth says, looking at Karen then back to Carl. "It's tough, but he's doing the best he can."

There's something about Ruth that reminds Karen of her mother, but maybe it's the way she says "good man." It seems like a benediction. Sitting beside Ruth waiting to meet the women, Karen thinks she knows Carl's a good person, that he would never hurt anyone unless he truly thought he was helping them.

The women sit in silence and watch while men shuffle in and out of the room. Karen listens carefully trying to hear what Carl is saying to Jeff and the man with the gun, but she can't make out their words. Although there are several people speaking, Karen can't adjust to the silence of the casino floor. Growing up, even the movie theaters were in casinos, so sitting surrounded by all the silver and bright neon machines, her mind begins to generate the sounds of falling coins and electronic beeping.

“You all right?” Carl asks, bringing her back to the slot machines, the western casino floor. He takes a chair beside her.

“It’s just hot,” she says and laughs nervously. “It’s always hot.”

Several of the men seem to congregate near the doors as if waiting for her to react, to get up and run or scream. Karen looks at Carl.

“This is an interesting choice of location,” she says. “Where are the people—the women—you’ve been trying to help?”

“They’re upstairs in the hotel. I just wanted to sit for a minute before I take you up there.”

Ruth leaves and rearranges supplies that are already organized in neat rows. She makes a point to move away from them, to give them what privacy they can have in this place.

Karen can’t help but think back to the marked people at Wet n’ Wild, the way their marks shone in the darkness, the dried blood at their lips and ears. She wants to find a way to help, but she also doesn’t want to be reminded of Jo, to let herself wonder how she is doing and if the symptoms of the mark have grown worse. She knows just because she’s come out to Pahrump with Carl doesn’t mean she can hide from this all, that she’ll have to take a stance and do something. When she was with Jo all she could think of was doing something, getting out of that condemned house, but now she’s faced with addressing whatever is happening and seeing these women, part of her wishes she had stayed in their little house tearing apart furniture.

Carl puts a hand on her shoulder, looks her in the eyes. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I think so,” Karen says. “I want to meet them.”

Carl grabs a lamp and leads her through the machines to the staircase. He explains that this is where they’ve been trying to save the marked. “This is where god’s work is being done,” he says. “This is where my prayers are most days. Well, when they aren’t on you.” Inside the stairwell, several fluorescent blue lanterns sit on the floor casting large shadows against the glossed walls.

They only climb a few stairs before stopping at the large white fire door. One of the men from the church is guarding the door and the sign that reads “Floor Four.” Although he’s armed, Karen recognizes him as one of the quieter men from Carl’s council. Something about the roundness of his face and his pink cheeks comforts her. She doesn’t want to be afraid.

The man unlocks the door and Karen follows Carl’s lead. Inside, the walls are checkered in flat blue emergency light panels that illuminate the hotel floor like a runway. Even though they can see clearly, the hallway takes on a pallor that reminds Karen of a hospital. A few people from the church wander about, most with Bibles and water bottles in their hands. Several guards patrol, and a few smile in her directions. Karen thinks they look more like grandfathers than soldiers.

At first, Karen thinks the sound in her ears is her own making—ringing bells, clanging coins, flickering cards—but as Carl guides her down the hallway, she realizes the high-pitched sound is someone crying. As they approach, Karen can feel the sweat dripping from her hair down her neck.

Carl stops about halfway down the floor and releases her hand. He removes a key from his pocket and unlocks the door. "Here we go," he says.

Inside the room the shrieking is so loud Karen's senses seem to heighten. She notices the deep green of the carpet, the boarded up windows, the orange-brown hotel headboards nailed to the wall. Although the room is old and some of the cowboy wallpaper peels from the corners, the room is clean and well kept. The screaming woman is sitting in a chair in the corner near the tan and maroon drapes and a man with a Bible sits before her.

"Holy, holy is our lord god almighty!" he sings, but it's clear her screaming has distracted him from the original tune. Without taking notice of the visitors the man continues, "We bow down and worship him!" Although there's conviction in his voice, the man's posture betrays his fatigue. Beneath the portable emergency lights his face looks ashen, his eyes swollen.

"Tom," Carl says, reaching for the man's shoulder. "Thank you."

Tom nods at Carl and looks over at Karen who's still standing near the door.

"Get some water. You're doing great," Carl says to the man who swiftly stands and leaves.

Karen walks over toward the woman and notices how beautiful she is, even with the red and cracked mark on her head. She tries not to stare. Part of her worries if she looks at the mark too long, if she gets lost in the aurora of whites and reds and pinks, she might never be able to look away. Aside from the mark, the woman's skin is clear and her long brown hair lays across her shoulders like cloth. She's wearing a T-shirt and sweatpants, and her red tear-stained face aside, she

looks clean. There are several granola wrappers in the trashcan and boxes of cereal line the top of the desk.

Carl takes a seat on the bed adjacent to the woman and Karen joins him. “This is Jessica,” he says.

The woman stares at them long enough to stop crying. She blows her nose and stares at Karen.

Now she’s calmed down, Carl asks if he can pray with her before they speak. The woman looks around the room, her eyes unable to settle on one thing before finally leaning forward and spitting in Carl’s face. Her saliva sticks in white splotches on his cheeks. Karen moves to get a towel, but Carl stands. “You stay and talk while I clean up. She might speak to you,” he says.

Before the door can fully shut behind Carl, the woman begins to cry again, the tears like neon blue pearls rolling down her cheeks.

“I don’t know what to say,” Karen says. She crosses her feet and looks at the woman. “Are you hurt?” As she says this, she knows this is a ridiculous question, but the woman responds.

“Beyond the obvious?” Jessica says, congested and pointing to her head. “No. I mean, they aren’t hurting me. Yet.”

“They want to help you,” Karen says too quietly to hold conviction.

“By praying for me? By taking me away from my family and trapping me here? You can’t just take people from their families.”

“But what if they can do it—what if they can save you or get that mark off your head? What if this is your only chance?” Karen almost believes what she’s

saying. She tells herself that if she were marked, she'd want to try anything, whatever it takes. She wouldn't let it sit and fester until she drowned in her own blood.

Karen finally notices the woman's eyes—a blue so deep they're almost purple. She looks Karen up and down and blows her nose. "What if I were someone you loved? What if I were him?" she asks, waving her hand toward the door. "Wouldn't you want someone to let him go? Please," she asks, "please let me go."

Before Karen can go to that place where her memories of Jo reside, all the promises she made her, the way Jo's hand fit in the small of her back, before she can finally allow herself to understand the gravity of her betrayal, the door whines as it opens and Carl returns.

The woman begins to cry again, each sob reaching a higher octave. Carl sits back on the bed and reaches for Karen's hand. He lifts the other to the sky, up toward the asbestos popcorn ceiling, and prays. "God, take mercy on your fallen one, for she needs your strength. Please rescue her from the devil's grip and bring her into the glory of your loving embrace. Lord, deliver her from the devil's grip so she may fall at your feet in worship."

Reading List

Robert Olen Butler	<i>Hell</i>
Jeffrey Eugenides	<i>The Virgin Suicides</i>
Karen Joy Fowler	<i>We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves</i>
Mary Gaitskill	<i>Bad Behavior</i>
John Green	<i>Looking for Alaska</i>
Thomas Hardy	<i>Jude the Obscure</i>
Pam Houston	<i>Cowboys Are My Weakness</i>
Aldous Huxley	<i>Brave New World</i>
Kazuo Ishiguro	<i>Never Let Me Go</i>
Franz Kafka	<i>The Metamorphosis</i>
Robert Lopez	<i>Kamby Bolongo Mean River</i>
Lois Lowry	<i>The Giver</i>
Mary Miller	<i>The Last Days of California</i>
Mary O'Connell	<i>Living with Saints</i>
Claire Vey Watkins	<i>Battleborn</i>

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