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The Elvis Yurt: A Novel in Progress

by

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An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

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and

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Thesis Adviser

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FIRST FEEDING

“Well, now, wasn't that just the quickest birth you ever saw?”

Zolla stood over the bed where Aramantha rested with her tiny son. The green curtain was still drawn closed. Mai clicked rapidly at the computer keyboard, updating the records, accounting for the birth of a boy. They could hear the Mamas whispering on the other side.

Layla sat cross-legged on the concrete ground. Her fading blue hair was streaked with sweat. “Actually, I’ve never--”

“Wait.” Zolla had bent closer to the new baby's head and now had a sharp frown on her face. Layla jumped up. “What's wrong?” she and the new mother asked at the same time.

“He stopped breathing. He isn't breathing!”

The four women stared at the infant for a long, frozen moment. Mai ran over and placed her hand on the baby's chest, crying, “Oxygen! We need oxygen!”

Zolla dashed for the oxygen tank in the corner. Layla groped for the curtain and ran out of the birthing area. The women in their cots and camp chairs called to her as she flew past, ignoring their questions. She ran out of the tent and down a long expanse of former sidewalk, now paved with sleeping bags and populated by ragged men, women, and children who stared up at her blankly as she ran past them, sometimes jumping over their outstretched legs. She ran into the camp kitchen; no one tried to stop her as she threw open lids and cupboard doors, searching the storeroom until she found what she was looking for: a gleaming bottle of maple syrup.

In less than a minute, she was back inside the birthing tent, unscrewing the cap as she ran.

Other babies, crying, breathing. Mamas whispering, calling out to her as she streaked past.

Mai, fumbling with the malfunctioning oxygen tank. The baby's face had turned bluish-purple.

"You didn't give up!" cried Layla, swooping down over the baby, talking to his small blue face, a face she knew and loved, for she had been the first to see it. "Don't give up!"

She poured a shot of syrup into the bottle cap.

Aramantha held her son's head while Layla pressed the cap to his mouth and poured maple syrup onto his tongue, just a few thick drops, the color of earth. The women watched and waited. Then Aramantha whispered, "Did you see that?"

The baby had tasted and swallowed the syrup. As they watched, it brought him back: that quick taste of sweetness convinced his lungs to latch onto life, tricked his newborn brain into believing there was something worth breathing for. And the baby drew a breath while all eyes held him in desperation. No one else breathed, as though to save any lifegiving properties in the tent's stagnant atmosphere for the benefit of the infant as he breathed, and breathed again, and then the women all exhaled at once in a chorus of relief. And just as quickly as it had begun, the involuntary normality of it was forgotten, for we never think of our breathing while it is properly working. We never think of our lungs tied to our tastebuds or consider the way a sweet tooth is tied to the life force like a loose tooth to a doorknob, and the slam can spark a reaction that the brain never asked for.

Layla felt too heavy for her legs. She sank back down to a cross-legged position on the concrete ground. Zolla took a shocked step backward. Aramantha closed her eyes. Tears fell on the baby's head.

Mai opened the green curtain. "It's all right," she said to the room of Mamas. "The baby is healthy. A healthy baby boy."

The last word was said quietly.

"Well," said a woman in a low camp chair, "congratulations, anyway." The woman's hair was wrapped in a white towel. She wore a white bathrobe, clean except for a dirty tinge at the hem where it touched the stained cement, and held an infant in her arms, also wrapped in white and also bearing the logo of the Marriott Hotel.

There was a general murmur of congratulations, but the women held their cheer in check.

"Thank you." It was Aramantha. She reached down and held Layla's hand for a moment, then turned back to adjusting the baby at her breast.

"His first feeding," sighed Zolla.

"His first feeding!" laughed Aramantha. Her face glowed as a tiny arm waved a tiny fist and a tiny mouth sucked. "I'll always have to tell him that his first feeding was a cap full of syrup!"

The women smiled but none of them looked the new Mama in the eye.

"Damn, I forgot for a minute," said Aramantha.

Layla stepped out of the enclosure and faced the rest of the Mamas, the Mamas who had glared and snarled at her when she'd first arrived that afternoon. Wrapped in secondhand terrycloth, they lay on their sides or propped up against the metal frames of cots, legs sprawled, bodies stretched and weakened from their recent efforts at producing new life. Some of them held babies, some did not. Some were still pregnant, their bellies rising up from the cots like balloons.

Layla had walked in off the street two hours earlier and the first thing she had done was to puke in a trash can. Now she had delivered a baby and saved its life too.

Mai looked up expectantly as the canvas flaps parted again. A woman entered, doubled over in pain, supported by two women who held her up and helped her to walk, half-squatting, into the tent. They stopped near the entrance and looked around. The pregnant woman suppressed a cry. Her face was contorted and her legs were shaking.

"Please, bring her over here," said Mai. The women led their charge slowly across the tent, and Mai yanked the green curtain along its portable track, exposing the birthing area. She stuck her head back out and said to Layla, "Well? Are you coming in?"

*

What happens to an infant brain introduced too soon to the power of pure sugar? Would honey have done the trick? Did nobody try mouth-to-mouth? Would the Miracle Baby ponder these questions over his morning pancakes, wherever they took him, Oklahoma or Arkansas, to be fed and fattened up, raised to be a killer, a soldier, a robot? They heard all sorts of stories but it was all so new. None of the boys who had been taken had grown up yet, and the Mamas believed their boys would come back to them, and save them, when they grew up.

THE VELVET ELVIS

The morning after the government shutdown, Paula sat at the picnic table outside Yurt A, with her new digital sketchbook, the Canvascreen, propped on her lap, recreating with an optimistic splurge of green a cluster of drooping rhododendron bushes and ferns.

Val came out of the yurt, carrying the French press in one hand and the blue enamel percolator in the other. He opened up the Coleman stove and lit the burner, striking a long match and placing the old coffeepot over a hissing blue flame. Then he walked up behind Paula and leaned over, observing her work. The rough plane of his unshaved cheek pressed against her face and jostled her sunglasses. He said, pointing over her shoulder, “You should add a squirrel there.”

They both stared into the silent bushes. Paula said, “Remember that year when you played your guitar and all the little animals and birds came out...”

“Yeah.”

The Canvascreen felt heavy and the scene she had painted bothered her – it looked artificial because it looked too real. She set the sketchpad down on the picnic table and made the virtual painting disappear with a wave of her finger. “I miss paper,” she said.

“I miss birds,” said Val.

He squeezed her shoulders and strode back over to the cookstove, where clear water was beginning to rise and burst and rise again inside a clear dome, like the dome of the skylight in their yurt. They had made love under the skylight, on the vinyl mattress, a bed that always felt a bit damp, like a car seat on a hot day under the open sunroof, like the steam from percolating

water in a bubble dome. Paula wondered what great eye had peered into their percolator that morning, to look down upon her long hair falling on his chest, her body grinding down on his stretched frame, his giant hands holding her hips and pulling her against him, his legs that stuck off the edge of the futon, her hands twisting the king-size flannel sheet that dragged across the hardwood floor, too big for the bed. They made love under that empty eye, rain-specked like a dirty windshield, a few branches like windshield wipers poised and ready, but not a cloud in the sky.

Paula clicked her brush to the chalk pastel setting; her sleeping Canvascreen jumped to life and projected a palette of colors, a vast grid of colors too big for the screen, into the space above it. She hovered the brush over the blues, thinking about bluejays, “camp robbers,” as they used to call them. She couldn’t remember what they looked like.

Val scooped a layer of ground coffee into the clear cylinder of the French press, poured a stream of boiling water, and stirred the muddy brew with a long wood skewer. “Okay, we’ll let that sit for a bit. I’ll get the cream.”

“It’s not cream,” she corrected him.

“I’ll call it cream if I want to.”

He was rummaging in the cooler, and Paula was still frowning at the virtual blues, trying to remember whether bluejays wore a crown, and how long a squirrel’s tale was in relation to its body, and the taste of real cream, when she saw a man and woman walking up the hill toward their yurt.

“Hello there,” called the man.

Val spun around, waving the jug of soy creamer. “What’s this?” he muttered. “Must be coming from RV-land.” He had taken a walk in the dark, the night before, after they had arrived. He knew exactly how many RVs were still at the park, how many tent campers, how many cabins and yurts were occupied, what kinds of cars and trucks they drove, and which ones had gun racks in the back windows.

“Good morning,” he called back, loudly. “Coffee’s on.”

The man and woman were both dressed in khakis and polo shirts. The woman wore a wide sunhat over thinning hair; the man’s bald spot glowed in the hazy morning sun, blinking pinkly as he climbed the hill, stooping.

“Here’s the *cream*,” Val said to Paula with a wink, setting it on the table.

There was just enough coffee for four cups, which Val poured out, hot and fragrant, into dark blue camping mugs. They all sat down around the picnic table, and Paula slipped her sketchbook out of sight.

“Well,” said the man. “I see you managed to get in.”

“I see you decided to stick it out,” said Val.

The man's name was Oliver and his wife was Linda. They owned a forty-foot motor home.

Oliver said, “The rangers come through yesterday and told us they were clearing out. Just said they had to go, because the government in Salem was shut down and they didn't have jobs anymore. They advised us to leave. Told us they were going to be locking the gate when they left, and what we did from here was up to us. Most of the campers that were here packed up and

left, but some of us over in the RV section figured, what the hell, might as well stay for now, see what happens.”

“But what is going to happen?” asked Paula.

“I don’t know. But this park was closed. Yet you came in anyway. Sure made a hell of a lot of noise doing it, too.” He laughed, but his eyes held a spark of anger.

“Oh, that’s my fault,” said Paula. She forced a laugh. “I’m the one who drove through the bushes last night.”

“*You* drove?” gasped Linda, speaking for the first time.

Paula remembered the fight, the screaming in the dark, across the hood, over the pounding ocean wind, seeing only his gaunt outline, a shadow of Val on the other side of two stark beams of headlights. The light illuminated the air, exposing mosquitos and particles and a small laminated sign that hung from the iron gate looming before them in the moonless dark: *Park Closed Due to Government Shutdown*. Then she remembered seizing the wheel and slamming on the gas pedal. She had torn up the thicket and scratched the shit out of their rig.

Guide my hand. I’ve never done the four-wheel drive thing.

Oliver was glaring at her from the other side of the picnic table. The wind blew a salty ocean breeze from the nearby beach and Paula strained to hear the sound of just one gull overhead, but it was quiet except for the constant wind and the crackle of their morning campfire.

“Sorry if we disturbed you,” said Paula. “I just figured, if there’s no government, then the people are the government. This land is your land, this land is my land, right?”

“Some people might see it that way,” said Oliver. “And there are some who might say that in the event of a government shutdown, the people have a duty to respect a locked gate and try to maintain some semblance of law and order.”

“We paid for it nine months ago,” said Val. “We have every right to be here. It’s a public park. And by the way, you’re here too. Shouldn’t you have cleared out when the rangers told you to?”

The older man sipped his coffee. “You armed?” he asked quietly over the rim of his mug. White hairs stuck out of the collar of his white shirt, where a gold cross was pinned.

Paula put a cautious hand on Val’s knee and held her breath. Val said slowly, “I prefer not to say.”

Linda spoke up then. She nodded toward the front door of Yurt A and asked in a high-pitched, nervous voice, “Are you two big Elvis fans?”

Everyone looked at the yurt, a circular structure with the clear dome of its skylight popping up out of the top and a sturdy front porch made of knotty golden logs. It sat on top of a hill like a hobbit castle; they had picked it from the interactive map months ago and had stayed in it several times before. Paula had reserved this yurt a month before the wedding, shortly after poly marriage was legalized. At the time, she had thought their new wife would be coming with them on their annual trip. In pre-wedding excitement, they had talked about camping with Andi, the fun they would have in the bunkbeds.

The top half of the yurt’s front door was set with a square window, filled by a rumpled portrait of Elvis Presley on stage, dressed in a tight white bejeweled suit, haloed by starbursts of

colored lights, with a slick oil-black pompadour, hound dog cheeks, and a too-small guitar hanging around his neck as he faced a microphone and an unseen audience of lovesick fans. It was an image printed onto fabric, designed to be a wall hanging, of the kind that were once sold at dusty county fairs and parking-lot markets.

Paula could feel Val becoming a spider of anxiety at her side, his long arms and fingers twitching, like a hyper teenager in a June math classroom. A pointy knee bounced up and down, and she knew he was about to start drumming on the picnic table.

“I like his earlier stuff,” said Paula. “Not so much that era with the suit and the crooning. I like the real rock and roll.”

What Paula liked about it was the breakthrough, the historical moment, crystallized in time, that changed the world. What she wanted was to have been there, a witness, but Elvis had died before she was born.

“My parents liked him,” she said. “But it's mostly Val here who's the Elvis fan. That Velvet Elvis was his gift to me, our first Christmas together.”

In truth, it was a Velvet Elvis minus the velvet, a Cloth Elvis with delusions of grandeur, a cheap knockoff, frayed at the edges and faded, but as essential to their vacations as the French press and the flannel sheets. Paula didn't mention the other Velvet Elvis, the one she had bought for Val, that same Christmas. That one had been better. On that one, Elvis was young and gorgeous and wore black against a hot pink background. She remembered the stifling heat of the day when she had hurled the pink Elvis out of their 12th story apartment window during a fight, their first summer together.

Come on, look, we can drive in right through there if we just plow through that little thicket. You brought the Velvet Elvis, right?

“How long have you two been married?” asked Linda in a soft voice with a slight drawl. She must have noticed the wedding rings on their fingers. She couldn't see the wedding necklaces that Paula and Val wore around their necks, tucked inside his black tee, her Hawaiian printed sundress. Most poly families had started keeping their necklaces hidden from sight.

“Eighteen years,” Paula answered. “We have a son in college.”

“You don't look old enough to be the mother of a college kid!” said Oliver.

“I was 18 when I had him,” Paula admitted.

“I had my first child when I was 16,” said Linda. “We had five kids! Seven grandchildren, now, too. The oldest is getting married this fall. We might be great-grandparents one of these days!”

“That's great,” said Paula. “It's getting so dangerous to have babies, though.” An image of the birthing camp in Portland came into her mind and she shook her head, reminding herself not to think about work.

Linda's forehead crinkled like parchment when she frowned. She glanced sideways at her husband, then turned her attention back to the Velvet Elvis in the window of Yurt A. “My parents wouldn't let me listen to Elvis,” she said. “It was race music, you know.”

“But Elvis was white,” said Paula. Val had become very still.

“He was copying the black musicians of the time! And that made it just as bad, as far as my parents were concerned.”

“Sounds like your parents were real racists,” commented Val.

“Well, I’m from the South, originally. I was born and raised in Dallas, Texas.”

Paula glanced at Val, expecting him to say what he always said whenever the name of that state came up: *Fuck Texas*. He didn't say it. Instead he held Paula’s gaze and said, “Well, there’s your problem.”

“I lived in Dallas for a while, when I was younger,” said Paula. “Can you believe they're still trying to secede from the United States?”

Oliver spoke up. “It just might happen, too. This country is falling apart.”

“That is true,” said Val.

“So, what do you think about this government shutdown?” asked Paula. “Is it serious?”

But Val had pulled his necklace out of his shirt. Long, provocative fingers, too long, like the fingers of a Martian, presented the small platinum pyramid, and with an exaggerated flourish Val dropped the ring and everyone stared as it slid down its gold chain and settled against his chest like a tiny bomb.

Paula automatically reached for the chain around her own neck. She had to say something. “We have a wife,” she announced. “She had to stay back home in Portland. We haven't been able to get in touch since we got here last night. We’re kind of worried about her.”

Linda gasped and got up from the table. She wouldn't look at Paula but turned to her husband, who barked, "That's disgusting!" Oliver got to his feet and stood with his arms crossed against his chest while his wife cowered behind him, backing away toward the trail.

Val jumped up and towered above the older man. "You know what I think is disgusting? Worshipping a male god who advocates the destruction of families and the slaughtering of innocent children!"

Oliver's eyes bulged in his red face. "I believe in a just god," he said. "And I'll tell you this. I didn't work my whole life supporting my family and paying my taxes just so that people like you could take over our government and drive it into the ground with immoral laws that go against decency and all of God's commandments! YOU are the reason why all this is happening! And you may find that you're not welcome here at this park."

Oliver stalked away from the table, heading down the hill where Linda waited. He grabbed his wife's arm, and they hurried together down the deserted road toward the RV camp.

"Bye bye," murmured Paula, watching them turn out of sight, fluttering her fingers in a sarcastic wave. "Thanks for the coffee."

Val laughed, but his jaw was still jutting out and Paula could see the rigid veins in his neck. "I guess they aren't into poly," he said.

"Apparently not," Paula laughed. "I was kind of hoping they wouldn't need to find out, but you sure took care of that."

“I was just getting rid of them for you, baby. I know you wanted to work on your painting. Add a squirrel!” He kissed the top of her head and extricated the bends and angles of his limbs from the picnic table, then stood staring into the distance.

From their hilltop vantage point they could see the bubble-topped roofs of empty yurts, like a village of giant percolators nestled in a forest of browning trees that gave way to a far-off line of sand dunes under an overcast sky. Val nodded in the direction of the RV camp and said, “Fucking hypocrites. They were all for destroying the churches but they wouldn’t give up their God.”

“Imagine if we had told them our wife is black.”

“I guess they’ll be back tonight with torches and pitchforks.”

“We can’t let them take over this campground, Val! There is no way I’m going to let some closed-minded old assholes make me feel unwelcome at my favorite place in the world. We should kick them out and take over ourselves.”

Paula was only partly serious, but Val was already starting to make plans.

Three days later, Paula went home from her anniversary trip alone.

CRISIS LINE

Andi tapped her wristpad and watched a series of lights flash at intervals, indicating that she had met about half of her movement goals for the day. It was 8 pm.

She reached forward and switched off the multi-monitor, leaving the room dark except for the glimmer of lights through the giant window overlooking the city. She hadn't stayed at the office this late for over a year. There was still so much to do – the priority birth list for this month was the longest she'd ever seen. Andi had spent the entire day wrapped up in the details of one participant, a woman who already had an eighteen-month old daughter and was scheduled for operation the next day.

Administration of the state health plan had fallen into complete disarray over the last four days; with all government staff indefinitely laid off, it had become unnecessary for Andi to do the complicated job of coordinating exceptions to the state-imposed cesarean section law. But suspension of the law did nothing to make the doctors any more willing to allow natural births. She still had only a small pool of four obstetricians who were willing to consider non-surgical delivery, but even they were dragging their feet on accepting anyone from Andi's list, due mostly to the lack of any guaranteed government payment. So Andi was working with non-government organizations, private funds, and midwives. Still, more and more babies were being born in homes and apartments and houseless camps, and the crisis line hadn't stopped ringing for days.

Andi saw three solid lights on the console and another one blinking. She stood up and stretched, thinking she should go in and check on the volunteers, but it had been such a long day, she hoped they wouldn't even remember she was still there. Overwork was against the policy of the Portland Birth Crisis Line. “Self-care,” she muttered. “Self-care.” For the thousandth time

that day, she felt a pang of anxiety as her thoughts turned to Paula and Val. Where the hell were they? She looked at her personal phone again – still no call, no response, no text, nothing. They were supposed to be back in the city last night, but if they were, Andi didn't know. She had spent the last two nights sleeping on the couch at work.

The network light flashed. Andi switched the monitors back on and saw the face of Ashley, one of the volunteers in the room next door. “What's up?” she asked.

Ashley wore a headset over a head of brown curls. “I have a caller who just went into labor. She's at the Gordly Camp. Dr. Dillon's staff isn't answering.”

“It's just after eight. Shift changeover. Check and see who's scheduled next. It should be Martins.”

Ashley's face on the monitor was turning pink. “Oh, of course!” she said. “I'm so sorry I bothered you. I completely forgot.”

“It's okay.” Andi smiled, trying to exude confidence and reassurance. Paula was usually so good at this. She felt another pang, this time of annoyance, wishing Paula were here at work, where she was desperately needed. “You're doing a great job. Don't worry about it. You can ask me any time you have a question. I'll probably be here for a few more hours.”

Ashley looked relieved. “Thank you! It's just been so busy! I keep forgetting things.”

“Don't worry about it, you're doing fine. Now go ahead and take care of the caller.” Andi switched off, hoping she hadn't cut Ashley off too abruptly. She buried her face in her hands and tried to block out the image of the Burnside houseless camp and the idea of another woman giving birth there, in a filthy tent or, worse, out in the open, like the woman she had tried to help

when she was a teenager, like the women she had helped when she went back for her internship. Now that she was program coordinator for the birth crisis line, she was removed from the physicality of it. She no longer had to see it; she fought for the Mamas and babies from behind a bank of monitors and telephones.

Her iPhone was ringing. Andi grabbed it and shouted, “Paula! Where are you?” She sank down on the office sofa under the wall of windows and watched the electrified city go blurry under the tears in her eyes.

Paula's face appeared on the phone screen. Andi reached over and brought it up on one of her monitors. There was her wife, looking disheveled and panicky. “I'm in a gas station,” Paula said. “I've been looking for a land line phone and this is the first one I've found. I'm on my way home. I'll be there in an hour. But I see you're still at work. I could come there.”

“No, go home and I'll meet you there. I'm going to head home right now. What happened? Why didn't you come home yesterday? Where's Val?”

“Val is...well, Val is staying at the yurt. I'll tell you about it when I see you.”

“What? Are you all right?”

“I'm fine. I'll see you soon, okay? I have to go. There are too many people around here and everybody's acting crazy. It's the fucking wild west,” she whispered. “I'll see you at home. I love you.”

“I love you too.” Andi stared at the screen as Paula's frazzled image faded out and was replaced with the cheery yellow homescreen of Retro Bell. She thought of Paula stepping into one of those silly plastic booths that were designed to look like antiques when they were really high-tech wireless video call systems. You even had to use an old-style rotary dial to place a call.

It was just the kind of thing that drove Paula crazy: new devices and gadgets cloaked in “retro” stylings designed to make people feel like they lived in the past even as they were propelled straight into the future.

The tracking device on Andi's wrist was just one example – Paula couldn't stand it. It looked like an old-fashioned wristwatch but in fact it monitored every movement of her body, night and day, and provided constant feedback on her sleep patterns, blood pressure, heart rate, caloric expense, and countless other functions. Right now it was flashing lights in a designated pattern that let Andi know she was experiencing too much anxiety. She closed her eyes and tried to meditate, then shot up from the sofa, hurriedly switched off the computers at her desk, grabbed her bag and flew out the door, stopping to pop her head into the crisis line room.

Six people sat at six desks, most of them wearing headsets. A couple of them held telephone receivers attached to cords that came out of the consoles, and there were faces on some of the monitors, the faces of women callers who consented to being viewed. Andi knew it didn't matter whether they consented or not: each conversation was secretly archived on digital video by the government. It was just one of many compromises the crisis line had to make during the shift from DV to birthing. It was all perfectly legal, not that the law meant anything now anyway. Andi had no idea if anyone was even still maintaining the recording functions, which were handled remotely by a new branch of Homeland Security officially called Homeland Childwatch but generally known as the Babysitters.

One of the volunteers was not on a call; Andi addressed her, trying not to look at the faces of the women speaking on the monitors. She couldn't hear what they were saying – only the advocates to whom they were speaking could – and she didn't want to see the looks in their

eyes, or see the other people in the frames or the backgrounds to their desperation. Ninety percent of their calls came from the houseless camps, and the conditions weren't pretty. Andi focused her attention on Taylor, a trans woman who was not currently taking a call. "I'm going home. I just heard from Paula, finally! She's okay, but I have to get home and see her. Is there anything you need before I go?"

"I don't think so," said Taylor. "Be careful out there."

"You too. Thanks for being here. Good night." Andi gave a wave of her hand to the room in general, and the volunteers smiled and waved back without interrupting the urgent conversations they were holding with a city full of desperate mothers and frightened mothers-to-be.

*

Paula leaned her head against her wife's shoulder. It was 4:00 in the morning and they were propped up in bed, drinking cups of kava tea. Paula's left leg was pressed against Andi's right leg. Her head was finally starting to feel relief from the stress of the last four hours. She sipped her tea. Andi stroked her hair.

"We'll figure it all out tomorrow," said Andi. She set her cup on the bedside table and slid her legs under the covers. "Come on, get in bed. Are you sure you're all right?" She tucked the comforter around Paula's shoulders.

"I miss my son," sobbed Paula through the pillow.

"Don't worry," said Andi. "We'll call Simon tomorrow morning. It's gonna be okay."

Andi reached out and hugged her. Paula drifted to sleep in her wife's arms.

*

What are you doing? You can't just cut down trees!

These are branches. Don't worry about it, I did it in a very ethical way. I only took one branch from each tree. These are going to make a fence around our kingdom.

Val, I have a job, I have responsibilities, the crisis line is probably completely falling apart right now and it's not fair to leave Andi to run everything without even getting in touch with her. I have to get back to work! I'm not going to stay here to watch you play silly war games with a bunch of rednecks! You're all a bunch of cavemen with your goddamn torches and fire displays. I don't give a shit who can build the biggest fire and who can yell the rudest insults in the dark. How cowardly is that? I am leaving right now!

Fine. But here's what you have to do. Go back, get Andi, and get all the pregnant Mamas and the midwives and bring them out here. We'll start a birthing colony. It will be glorious. There's plenty of room here. It will be perfect.

What the hell, Val? You need to forget all these stupid plans and get ready to come home. Come on! Start packing!

Baby, calm down. This is not a stupid plan. This is a dream come true. It's the perfect opportunity and you know it. We are in the right place at the right time, and we are going to be true Americans and stand our ground.

That's not what it means to be a true American! We have no right to take over public property just because we happen to be here. It doesn't work like that, it's not a land grab!

How do you know? It's whatever we say it is and if we don't grab something now we're going to be wishing we did when those bastards take it over and start waving their Confederate flags everywhere!

Just because we think our idea is better does not give us the right to start a war, Val! Think about it. Are you going to fight? What are your weapons? Are you going to kill somebody over a fucking yurt? Please, stop this and come with me!

I'm staying, Paula.

Don't you want to come home to Andi? We're going to miss our big man.

Bring her here.

Val. Do you realize that I am taking the car and leaving you here? I am leaving. I'm driving back to Portland now. Are you coming with me?

I know you'll be back.

THE WALK

Aramantha was the only Mama tall enough to reach the top shelves in the supply cabinet. She lay in bed on Wednesday night, swathed in a film of sticky sweat, while the tiny infant slept beside her, swaddled in white. She thought about the cabinet. Her hand rested on top of the clean white sheet where her belly used to be. Where the baby had been, earlier that day. Not flat yet, but flattening.

She drummed her long, brown fingers against the cotton drum of her vacant abdomen. Her legs felt weak and wobbly and her vision was blurry, but she managed to pull herself out of the cot and hobble to the cabinet.

She opened the door and glared at the darkness. She had to hide the money.

Glancing around, she made sure the other Mamas were asleep or too occupied with their babies to notice. She was dizzy. Steadying herself against the cabinet door, she quickly reached into the folds of her white terrycloth robe and pulled out an envelope. She held it for a moment, feeling its thickness and weight, then carefully placed it on the top shelf, deep in the darkest recess the tent had to offer.

Zolla wasn't tall enough to reach the top shelves in the supply cabinet, but watching Aramantha, an idea had begun to form in Zolla's head. Those shelves would be a perfect place to stash a few pills. The pain in her lower back was the worst. She needed some more of those muscle relaxers, but she was running out of hiding places. It was perfect.

On Thursday morning, Zolla and a handful of volunteers helped the Mamas get up and ready for the Walk. It was Aramantha's first time, but she had a vague idea of what to expect.

The St. Johnny Authority kept its main Portland offices at the former fire department building near the Avel Gordly Birth Center that had been operating for the last five months under the west end of the Burnside Bridge. Since the camp's establishment, dictated by the St. Johnny Emergency Exclusion Effort, a curious spectacle could be seen on Tuesday and Thursday mornings, winding its way down the cobblestone path cut by the rusting rails of an abandoned light-rail track, past the trash-choked and crumbling Skidmore Fountain, and over to the old fire department: a handful of brown and black women dressed in white pajamas and hospital clogs, clutching white-wrapped newborn babies, escorted by exactly one advocate from the crisis center and two armed male guards of the St. Johnny. All new babies were to be inspected twice weekly until ready for Separation.

Aramantha was the tallest of the Mamas but as she walked, still unsteady and slightly feverish, clutching the infant to her chest like a fat burrito, she let her head hang and her shoulders stoop so as not to betray the confidence and relief that surged inside her, fueled by cash, punctuated by the sharp pleasure of a gust of fresh air that felt like a clap on the back after the stifling confinement of the tent. Her son was saved. Those whitelady advocates wouldn't succeed in what they were planning.

She squeezed the sleeping wad of her little miracle and marched, thinking about the money, knowing that her son would not get to be the pawn they hoped for.

FIRE STATION NUMBER ONE

The Walkers reached the first opening, one of four open bays that used to be garages for fire trucks before the Water Tanker Flyers put fire stations out of business. Arson attacks against Christian churches had destroyed nearly every religious structure on both sides of the Atlantic during the last five years. Aramantha's father had been a firefighter; he had died defending a Methodist church in Northeast Portland.

It was a WTFer who had swooped in and found Aramantha, squatting in her father's house. All the firefighters had gone underground by that time, forming volunteer teams who used salvaged equipment and landline phones in their efforts to save burning buildings before they could be destroyed by water bombs.

The WTFers' first job had been to find the families of firefighters and "contain" them. The flyer who discovered 18-year old Aramantha, long-haired and alone in a crumbling ranch house on the east side, was only 22. She was a good catch for him: a single black girl. Fatherless. Unlike the privileged black women in white marriages, this one could be brought in.

He had freckled skin and cropped hair and a nervous twitch that kept his knee bouncing up and down as he sat across from Aramantha at the wooden dining table, reading her the terms of Oregon's Emergency Exclusion Law.

When finished, he looked up from the screen propped on the dusty table, squinting at Aramantha.

"You pregnant?" the boy had asked, his right knee bouncing wildly.

The sign for Fire Station No. 1 was covered by a large red banner with the logo of the St. Johnny Authority – an image of a gothic tower resembling Portland’s still-intact St. Johns Bridge, surrounded by flames to represent the torching of the world’s cathedrals.

The advocate, a blue-haired white girl named Layla, who had saved this baby’s life the day before, now took Aramantha’s elbow and steered her inside the large open bay. Aramantha imagined traces of the old firefighters – scent of motor oil, of strong bodies, sounds of deep laughter and comradeship. Brothers and sisters in arms, who used to be heroes. Now it looked like a combination between a medical office and a government bureau, lined with gray filing cabinets, desks, and infant-sized examination tables.

Aramantha shook off the hand that held her arm and glared around the room. Raising her voice so that it echoed off the far wall of the vast garage, she cried, “Take him!”

She pulled the baby off her chest and placed him on the nearest table while guards and Clurg workers began to cluster and bristle. She laid the baby down, then, robe flying around her bare legs, she sprinted to the ancient alarm box near the door and smashed it with her bare fist. The siren seemed to clear its throat before it screamed as it hadn’t screamed in five years, and Aramantha bolted back onto the cobblestones, sprinting for the churning brown river.

THE BOARD MEETING

On Thursday, the seventh day of the government shutdown, an emergency board meeting was held at the offices of the Portland Birth Crisis Line. Paula sat at the head of the conference table and stared out the window at the falling rain. Too many people were talking at once and she had stopped listening. Her head pounded. She and Andi had been living at the office for the past two days. They slept on one of the futons for a few hours each night and ate leftovers from the refrigerator in the kitchen. They had both been writing, speaking, telephoning, listening, planning, convincing, pleading, and juggling the numbers in their dwindling budget in hopes of keeping up with the demand for services. None of it was working.

“Paula, can we hear from you?” asked the board president, Louise Meyer, a wealthy woman who had been involved with the crisis line since it formed in the 1970s.

Paula sat up straight and ran a hand through her hair. “The situation is terrible,” she said. She glanced over at Andi, who sat in the chair to her left, rapidly taking notes. “Andi and I have spent the last two days trying to sort out the health care situation for our participants, and it keeps getting worse. Dr. Dillon and Dr. Nguyen are both out – they're done, they refuse to continue attending births at the camp. There have been six births there in the last week. All six babies are healthy. Four girls, two boys. Our volunteers are still showing up for their shifts on the line, and we're doing the best we can to provide resources, but it is getting to the point where there is next to nothing we can offer. So, Andi and I have been doing some thinking.”

Paula stood up and walked to the window. Gray clouds obscured the city, wrapping it in a layer of fuzz reminiscent of winter, but it was hot and humid outside, and she knew that people she could not see were fighting in the streets below. Fighting hand to hand, neighbor against

neighbor, man against woman, fighting with words and curses, with fists and weapons, with articles, memes, flags, billboards, protests, riots, threats, thefts, demonstrations, and killings. “The city is falling apart,” she said bluntly, turning to face the room. “It is completely unsafe, for all of us! I heard you talking about the trouble you had just getting to this meeting. I haven't left the place for two days so I can't even imagine.”

She returned to the head of the table and stood with her hands clutching the back of her chair. “It has become impossible for us to meet our goals using the methods we're now using. The policies we've been dealing with over the last few years have eroded our core values to the point where we are no longer doing any good here.”

Paula cleared her throat. “I'm trying not to cry right now. Self-care has not been happening. If it weren't for Andi, I don't know how I would have gotten through these last few days. Thank you, Andi.” Paula took a sip of water and looked around the room. Andi smiled up at her and the women in the room nodded and smiled. The board members were all women, and most of them were young. They were idealistic, unmarried young go-getters with good jobs in law firms, hospitals, and government offices. They had long, shiny hair and they wore fashionable lace collars under tailored jackets with blue jeans and heavy boots.

“Things have gone very wrong,” she continued, running a hand along the worn wood grain of the conference table. “And now, there is a new development which, I think, and Andi agrees with me, could help bring in a new – well, a new era. An opportunity for us to do something completely different. Some of you have already heard about what happened at the Gordly camp yesterday. For those who haven't, one of our volunteers, Layla, decided to visit the camp in person.

“We’re in the process of working on amnesty proceedings for the two baby boys born this week, but this government shutdown is creating all kinds of roadblocks and complications that we just don’t have time to deal with. The Clurg is only growing stronger and more entrenched with every minute we waste trying to fill out paperwork and go through proper legal channels that no longer exist. We have to actually do something.”

She took a deep breath. “The tracking system was hacked today and we haven’t even been able to make contact with the doctors we have left – there’s just no way to coordinate care. Okay, so our volunteer Layla shows up at the birthing center at the Gordly camp...” Paula broke off, laughing uncontrollably. She held her hand over her mouth, giggling.

When she’d recovered her breath, she went on, “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t laugh, but the idea of this twenty-something girl with blue dreadlocks going down there – sorry. Basically, Layla ended up assisting at the birth of one of the boys born yesterday. Then, after the birth, the baby stopped breathing, and Layla saved his life. She got him breathing again by finding a jug of maple syrup and forcing him to take a drink of it! She saved this baby’s life with maple syrup. It’s actually...a miracle.”

Paula sank down into the chair and let her head fall on the table. The room waited quietly. She felt Andi’s hand stroking her hair while she cried.

Andi stood up. “It is a miracle,” she said quietly. Andi wore a rumpled gray tee shirt and yoga pants. Her thick dark hair was twisted into a bun at the top of her head, and frizzy strands stood out around her face. Her eyes were bright. “This miracle has created an interesting situation at the Gordly camp. Layla is still down there – she hasn’t left, she is basically living there now. She seems to have taken on some sort of heroic role within the birthing camp. It’s way

beyond gratitude for saving the baby's life. It's more like – well, it's almost like they are seeing her as a savior.”

“Oh, great. Just what we need. A white savior. Working miracles? Really?” Gretchen was a white woman who hiked in the gorge every weekend with her dog.

“Yeah, what makes it a miracle, exactly? Doesn't that imply it was done by God?” asked Shanna, a recent sociology grad with a large trust fund. The groans that had started to burst around the table at the mention of a white savior took on increased volume at the mention of a God.

“We lose babies down there every day,” said Marina, whose parents had immigrated from Mexico. “Does God not care about them?”

Now everyone was talking at once, and Paula just sat there with her head on the table.

Finally Andi said loudly, “The child has been named. His name is Miracle Baby.”

She didn't say who named him.

“The news has spread,” said Andi, “and Layla is now some kind of rock star at the camp. And it seems she has now become the chief midwife at the birthing facility, although she had absolutely no experience as a midwife until yesterday. Since then, she has presided at two more births – one girl, and one boy.”

Andi sighed. “A lot of the calls coming in to the crisis line today have been about Layla. *Doctor Layla*, they're calling her. They want to know about her, they want to know if she can deliver their babies, or save their sick babies. And the Miracle Baby himself has become the center of a new controversy. Some of this has been shared on web media, and it's hard to know

how much is true and how much is rumor, but it appears that the women are not about to let this particular boy go to the Babysitters.”

“Of course they aren't!” blurted Allison, a young woman wearing thick glasses who had worked for the county before the government shutdown. “He's special! I've been following this on the web today and it's really amazing! The women are finding their power. They're rallying around that baby.”

“It's like they finally have a reason to stand up and fight,” added Marina.

“Some people would say they have had many reasons all along,” said Louise. The elderly widow was the crisis line's largest donor. She looked around pointedly. “I think it's a shame that it took the near-death of this one baby to --”

Paula's head popped up. “Please,” she said. “We've been over this before. You know the conditions they're living in! They have no way of fighting back.”

Andi cleared her throat. Paula stood up and steadied herself against the table's smooth wood edge “I'm sorry,” Paula said. “But I'm tired of having to bow down to the goddamn Bootstrapper faction! We have to take a stand right now. Over the last ten years, this organization has done nothing but constantly give in, step back, and adjust. At every turn we've lost funding, lost partnerships as every shelter and service provider in town has also lost funding and closed down, and we've lost volunteers and employees – there are so few people who are even willing to do this kind of work anymore. We've conceded every step of the way, and now we have almost nothing left.”

“What Paula is trying to say is, the way we see it, this whole thing is over,” said Andi. “This org as we know it. There isn't going to be a crisis line at all pretty soon. So. Paula and I have decided to quit. I quit.”

“I quit,” echoed Paula.

“What are you talking about?” demanded Louise.

“We're going to start a commune,” said Paula. It felt good to say it.

“We're going to openly defy the EEL,” said Andi. The two women grinned at each other and Paula felt some of her anxiety melt away.

“What are you two laughing about?” asked Louise. “You think this is some sort of adventure?”

“Louise, you have no idea,” said Paula. “The mother of Miracle Baby, a woman named Aramantha, is in trouble. We learned a little while ago that she tried to run away from the inspection center this morning. She was arrested by the Clurg before she could get to the waterfront and she's in custody now. She might have accepted a bribe from a Babysitter scam. One of the camp workers found a wad of cash that the Mama had tried to hide. It doesn't make sense that she would try to run away without it. It seems like she just kind of snapped. We believe she's having a mental health crisis brought on by post-partum depression and a traumatic birth experience after the near-death and miraculous saving of her baby. We want to help reunite her with her child.”

Louise snorted. “Sounds like a sales pitch. Why would she want him after she tried to sell him?”

“Sometimes they offer money to Mamas along with the promise that they’ll be reunited with their babies if they can follow them. Aramantha was probably told there’d be a boat waiting for her. She obviously did it because she wants to be with her child. We think that the Miracle –”

“If you stick to that line you’re only parroting old Christian junk,” scoffed Shanna.

“You know that the Clurg still encourages belief in God,” said Paula. *A male god*, she thought. *A “just” god.*

“Oh, I see,” said Louise with a smirk. “You must be planning to call in a special favor from your brother-in-law. Is that it, Paula? Is the Head Clurg going to turn his back while you start a commune for the Mamas? Because it’s a miracle?”

“Yes, Johnny Clurgfield is *our* brother-in-law, mine and Andi’s,” said Paula.

“It’s okay, Paula,” muttered Andi.

“Look,” said Paula. “I haven’t spoken to him in almost twenty years. I’ve been fighting against Johnny and his gang for my entire adult life and it has gotten us nowhere.” Paula moved closer to Andi and put her arm around her wife’s waist. “Andi and I have decided to take direct action. If that means losing our jobs, well, then, we quit. But we feel like there’s an opportunity here that we can’t afford to overlook. And we aren’t going to tell you about it while you still have Bootstrapper sympathizers on the board.”

“I’m very disappointed it has come to this,” said Louise. “There’s nothing more to say. I move to adjourn this meeting.”

Louise had supported gay rights since the death of her daughter, but like many of her generation, she didn’t know what to make of the poly question. It was embraced by some as a

necessary extension of civil rights and by others as a means to enforce an ultimate patriarchy. Louise, as the president of the city's main feminist organization, was necessarily a member of the former group, and joined them in criticizing members of the latter group, while barely disguising her prim old-lady disgust with the whole business. But she didn't like being called a Bootstrapper.

There was silence while Louise waited for her motion to be seconded. Finally, Marina spoke up. She had straight white teeth and her voice was slow and calm. "I think," she said, "we should continue this meeting without these former employees. We have a lot to talk about now. Paula, Andi, please go ahead and take your things and leave. We'll take care of your final checks tomorrow morning. Goodbye."

*

They had just stepped out of the elevator when the alarm went off. Something had happened somewhere in the building – fire, crime, or maybe somebody had just decided to pull the alarm. Paula could understand the feeling. She squealed and ran toward the alarm box in the lobby, feeling her body pulsing back against the red, screaming waves of sound. Andi caught her, grabbing her arm as she went to seize the hammer that would break the square of old-fashioned glass. It wouldn't matter – the alarm was already sounding. She just wanted so badly to smash that glass. But Andi was holding her from behind, pressing her arms to her sides and speaking into her ear. "Look," Andi said. "Look at what it says."

Paula looked, through the tears that had reappeared. She was really losing it. She had to get out. What was she supposed to be looking at? The alarm bleated and blasted, an incessant

panicked throbbing. People were running, yelling. Andi's brown finger tapped the glass. "Look," she whispered in her ear.

Paula looked. "Beware of fakers," she read, numbly, from the small sign posted on the old-fashioned alarm box, a warning that not every alarm is an emergency.

"Beware of fakers," said the voice in her ear.

Paula turned and faced her wife. On the other side of the glass doors, the city was slowly erupting. She saw a woman running down the sidewalk, pushing a stroller containing two blond haired, pink skinned toddlers, surrounded by a high pile of clothing and household belongings, a laptop computer and a coffeemaker balanced on top. She saw two men fist-fighting on the corner in front of a group of houseless people huddled in the shade of an overturned dumpster, while men and women in business suits dashed back and forth, oblivious to the pelting rain, waving phones that wouldn't work, waiting for buses that wouldn't come.

The two women held each other in the lobby of the building while the alarm roared its song of chaos.

Paula thought about fakers and the faking she would have to do in order to impress Johnny the Head Clurg. She had a godly prospect to wave under his nose. Let him beware of her.

Paula and Andi stepped out into the wet, chaotic afternoon and began to make their way home.

THE CLURG

“You just have to go see him,” said Andi on Friday morning. “Don’t try calling. You just have to show up. Although...they do have a lot of surveillance.” She tapped the screen, enlarging the mapp of the Clurg compound.

“Why won’t you come with me? Please, come with me.” Paula reached out. Her arm felt heavy as her hand dropped awkwardly on Andi’s shoulder. Andi was sitting on the floor near the end of the coffee table. She turned and dropped her dark cheek onto the back of Paula’s hand, brushing both of Paula’s wedding rings lightly with her lips. Andi leaned over and met Paula’s kiss with closed eyes. Then she pulled away and resumed her cross-legged position in front of the mapp.

“Look at that, it looks like they have about twice as many guards now. Six of them.” She raised her head and looked straight into Paula’s eyes. Paula’s arm had dropped down the side of the couch. She trailed her fingers on the carpet and felt her jaw trembling.

“Fuck. I can’t go there alone!” Paula whined.

“Well, you’re insane if you think I’m going there with you,” said Andi flatly. “I can’t believe you would even ask me that. You want to get me killed?”

Paula turned away and pressed her face into the orange brocade.

“Are you even going to look at this mapp? I’m trying to help you.”

Paula was silent.

Andi stood up. “Okay. Look. I know how much strain you’re under. Okay? Paula?”

Paula wrapped her arm over her head and curled up, sobbing silently.

“I get it,” said Andi. “But you know, I just QUIT MY JOB, and so did you, for the goddamn Mamas and babies down there, remember them? Can you quit feeling sorry for yourself for a minute and think about them?”

Paula squeezed her eyes shut and rubbed her wet face against her sleeve.

“Look at me!” said Andi.

“Okay! Show me the stupid mapp.”

*

Four hours later, the gate of the Clurg compound loomed before Paula’s exhausted eyes. The first thing they had decided was that she had to go now, today, before things got further out of hand. The highway toward the state capital had been choked with traffic but the winding country road was wide open, oddly quiet, with an unusual number of American flags flying from flagpoles or just stuck into the ground on flimsy sticks beside mailboxes at the ends of long, gravelly driveways.

Paula turned into one of these driveways and eased the Jeep up to the slatted black gate. She clutched the steering wheel and swallowed, feeling her skin go cold and her stomach clench at the sight of the guards: two young men wearing full military commando gear and holding AR-47 rifles. The shorter one on the right side of the gate held a tablet in one hand; he kept his eyes fixed on it and Paula knew he was watching her approach on a video screen. She knew she’d been observed on camera long before she’d even entered the driveway.

The guard on the left was waiting calmly. Paula put the Jeep in park and jabbed a pissed-off finger at the button on the stereo. The blasting music stopped. All the windows were down

and with the sudden silence Paula realized how loud it had been. She grinned at the guards. “The Sex Pistols,” she said, and laughed. The cassette had played five times during the trip.

The guard didn’t smile. He was twenty-two years old and had been working for the Clurg since he was a teenager. Paula studied his slack cheeks and pinpoint eyes, partly hidden by the brim of a black cap. He was a country boy, maybe even a relative; she recalled blurry faces of kids playing Nerf tennis on the green field behind the house, in calmer times. Kids on toy tractors, kids with picnic plates, chirping kid voices on a sunny Memorial Day.

“Luke,” she said finally, remembering. A cousin’s stepkid. Now obviously hooked on opiates and gun-power. “I’m here to see the Head Clurg.”

Paula had plaited her thick blond hair in two long braids that hung down over each of her shoulders. She blinked a few times, batting the long eyelashes that framed her round blue eyes, remembering how she’d practiced this silly move in front of Andi before leaving the house. “Perfect,” Andi had said, frowning. “You’re just a perfect Aryan.”

The guard on the right, glaring at Paula through the passenger window, was square-jawed and older. He gripped his weapon tightly as he muttered updates into the transmitter of a headpiece connected to his ear, and a few moments later he nodded to Luke, who entered a code on his wristpad and stepped aside while the heavy gates slowly opened inward. Paula drove through, watching in the mirror as the gates swung shut behind her. She pulled up to the gravel lot beside the main house and saw her mother-in-law Deborah, Val’s aging mom, walking toward her.

Beige carpet. Black leather sofa and armchairs. Giant TV screen, football. Her brother-in-law reclining, short legs in gray sweatpants, gray socks propped up, toes up. She saw the toes first, then met his eyes.

“Hi, Johnny.”

“Hi, Paula.” A twitch of a foot. “Where’s Val?”

Foggy lemonade and a tray of miniature sausages in doughy wrappers. Paula was a vegetarian.

Deborah lowered herself into a worn spot on the couch and lit a cigarette.

“Val’s at the beach,” said Paula.

“You always go for your anniversary,” said Deborah. The Chihuahua at her feet thumped its feathery tail and yipped.

“So, what are you doing here?” asked Johnny.

“I’m here to make a deal.”

*

This is a story about a family that began with a baby who nearly wasn’t, a “miracle” that didn’t have to happen, but did, because Layla had an idea and a good pair of running shoes, one hundred years ago when this all started, an idea that started with sugar and ended with the breath of life. The trail of syrup that Layla dished out would drizzle and squirm its sticky, liquid way into the future, adding its smoky kick to the bloodline, carving itself like its slow sister, molasses, into a niche in the family mythology, so that a hundred years later a woman named

Elvis contemplates Mars and curses her lack of sugar synthesis that never let a skinny girl like her feel the Hunger. Because an orphan girl was forced into collecting memorabilia based on her unusual name. Because Paula threw the pink Velvet Elvis out the window: it was about the survivor, the one that lived.