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Autumn fires are the worst kind of fires and that year we couldn't seem to get rid of them. Whether it was due to a particular harsh drought cycle, man-made global warming, a planetary wobble, or God's anger, all of that was lost in the effluvium of political rancor that was concentrated in the north. But in Southern California it only provided a change in the scent of the air and a reason for Tobias and Redmond to argue.

"I would have preferred a Pink's hot dog," Tobias said in an attempt to change the subject.

Redmond smirked at him across the formica table top. "Where would you get the money for anything?" His grin grew into a full smile and he continued with, "At least here the coffee's free." On cue, as if from one of the million lost screenplays of Hollywood, he tilted his coffee cup to the waitress who smiled broadly back at him.

"It's free," Tobias agreed, "and terrible." He instantly regretted saying it with the waitress standing there. Redmond was right, it was free, and Tobias' own comment made him feel like a petulant child. Unsurprisingly, she shot him a nasty look and, when Red didn't defend the coffee and, presumably by extension, her, she turned and headed to rear of the diner to disappear into the kitchen.

Red let disappointment in his friend's current gloom show. "Well, we could always go hang out in your basement." It was a cheap return shot and Tobias cringed at the suggestion, even though Red had been kind enough to leave out that it was, in fact,

his mother's basement. The screaming of her and her latest paramour had driven him from that place when his internal Matriarchal Proximity Alert had warned him she was moving to turn her anger in his direction.

"Yeah, let's not."

After a few smirking moments Red returned to his original point by saying, "There's always the cabin."

Tobias sighed, feeling the gradual erosion of his resolve under his friend's persistent charm, something he had seen work on dozens, if not hundreds, of people. "Half that place is on fire," Tobias said, using the handiwork of whatever arsonist had kicked off this season as his own personal firebreak. Even all the way down in the Irvine diner you could smell the smoke every time someone came in or left.

"That's what makes it perfect!" Redmond nearly popped out of his seat. "Everyone'll have evacuated!"

"Because it's on fire," Tobias replied slowly and deliberately, close enough that he could see his own reflection in the surface of Redmond's dark brown eyes.

"When else wouldn't your uncle be up there?" Redmond, as he always did, implored his reasons as though they were obvious, correct, and already accepted as fact. In this particular case, for this facet of his argument, this happened to be true. Tobias's Uncle Zeke practically lived up at the cabin, although he frequently couch surfed with relatives or crashed at cheap motels if he found any work in the County. But those times were unpredictable and he often returned to his cabin unexpectedly when some drunken infraction of the rules caused him to be expelled from homes or when his own temperament caused him to quit a job half-done.

"Red," Tobias said, leaning back into the vinyl of his half of the booth, feeling the other man's wave of enthusiasm break against him, "there is no gold."

"How do you know that?" Redmond spreading his hands across the table and the map of Orange County that was trapped under its plexiglass, stretching out all of the potential adventure that lay before the pair. "If there's no gold, how did he pay for that

cabin? Even if the cabin's a dump, the land it's on has to be worth a mint."

"My grandfather built the cabin."

"Then where does he get the money to live? Or pay for the booze and the drugs?" Redmond asked these last questions a little too loudly, drawing attention from the diner's sole other couple and the still unhappy waitress. Tobias resisted the urge to look around at them even though he could feel their eyes.

"I don't know," Tobias lied. Or partially lied. While Tobias had never seen the gold that his friend so ardently declared existed, he had seen Uncle Zeke's government checks. He didn't know what they were for, his mother whispering something about disability, but he did know that Uncle Zeke sure cashed them. But he didn't feel like telling Redmond that — his family had already heaped enough shame on him.

"Then there has to be something to it."

Redmond's volume increase drawing him in, Amir, wide and brown, approached the table. Tobias tried not to groan, seeing Red steel himself at the approach, for Amir bore with him an impressive bouquet of different smells that made being in his proximity difficult. It was this, and its effect on the customers, that kept Amir in the back most of the time, allowing the boys to be served unmolested by Red's admirer. But knowing that insulting him would only provide the excuse needed to expel them, both kept their mouths shut, trying to breathe as little as possible. "What are you doing here?" Amir asked, in an accent that Tobias thought of as Armenian.

Red, slipping close to the line of ridicule that would get them thrown out, held up his cup by the handle and said, "Drinking coffee?"

A glint in Amir's eye suggested that he suspected derision at play, but that his grasp of English prevented him from being certain. "Two young men such as yourself? Why are you not at work?"

For what felt like the dozenth time that day Tobias sighed. He had been asking himself that question, but had been, for today,

trying to stay away from it, feeling that he was caught in the growing whirlpool of young men in America that were unemployed and grew to be less employable with every month they did not have a job. Instead of trying to explain that Tobias just looked into his coffee cup and said, "No work."

"No work?" Amir snorted. "Come in the back, I'll put you to work. Dishes must be washed." Tobias and Red looked at each other, caught between knowing Amir offered honest work and knowing it wouldn't last or offer a road to anywhere better, feeling a low, burning shame at being unable to explain this to Amir or anyone else without it sounding like a cheap excuse.

Whether it was because the sudden increase in temperature reminded him of the fires or merely out of a need to escape, Tobias asked Redmond, "And what if you're wrong?"

Red smiled, knowing that his friend was talking about the cabin. "Then I'll buy us a 12-pack of LaBatt's."

Tobias nearly snorted. "Where are you going to get the money for a 12-pack of LaBatt's?"

Richard winked at the waitress as he replied. "Oh, I'll think of something." He gave her his most winning smile – which embedded in his handsome, if scruffy, face was pretty darned winning.

Tobias stood up, which from an olfactory position put him uncomfortably close to Amir. Fortunately, his superior height put a bit of atmosphere between the two. "Thanks," he smiled. "We'll be going."

With the bell from the liquor store door still ringing faintly Tobias said, "I can't believe you took that girl's money." Leaning against the one car in between them, an ancient and beaten Eldorado, he couldn't hide his half-grin, produced as it was by a certain admiration for his friend's audacity.

"What?" Redmond stretched out the beginning of the second syllable, smiling at the pleasure of being a scoundrel. A 12-pack of LaBatt's under his arm, he walked over to the driver's side of the Cadillac.

"I'm just admiring your audacity," Tobias spoke across the car's vast expanse.

"It's not like I robbed her." Red carried no tone of defensiveness, but spoke like he had done someone a favor.

"No, you just made her promises you have no intention of keeping." Even while admonishing his friend Tobias couldn't keep the smile from his face.

Seated in the car Redmond set about jangling keys, preparing the beast to undock. "How could you say that?" Redmond replied. He gave Tobias a salacious wink adding, "I have every intention of paying back Sarah's generosity later." Red slung the 12-pack from his lap into the backseat, "Besides, I kept my word about the beer didn't I?"

"Sort of," Tobias felt his smirk stretch into a wider smile. "I thought the beer was going to be a concession if we didn't," he gave his friend his most derisive smile, salting his next words with the emphasis of ridicule, "find the gold."

"It is." Redmond looked hurt that he wasn't being taken seriously, to which Tobias never knew quite how to react. However, Red snapped out of it a second later with a grin. "But if I'm right we'll need something to celebrate with." Tobias watched his friend put the car into gear, wondering what to do next. He knew continuing to mock Red after finally giving into his initial charms would only cause him to go into a full-blown sulk, and Tobias was having enough difficulty proofing himself from his own current dejection. Years of experience had taught him he wouldn't be able to resist the combined effects of their negativistic conflagration.

So he was happy to change the subject when Redmond asked, "Do we need a map or anything?"

"Naw," Tobias lied, holding up his mobile, "We'll just look it up if I can't remember the way." It had, in fact, been a number of years since his parents had taken him to Uncle Zeke's place, so Tobias had at best misty memories of how to get there and less of an idea if there was reception. Those trips having stopped nearly half a decade ago when some unnamed sin had been committed by one or more offending parties. Between his parents and uncle it

would be almost impossible to determine who had done what or even if the transgression had been real. Tobias had watched his parents shed almost all of their adult relationships as he had approached maturity, each one a sacrifice to their paranoia or rigidity, eventually including their own.

"You sure?" Redmond responded in a way that made Tobias think that his friend had his doubts.

Tobias smiled: Due to his position in the booth he had been able to see the diner's one television, so he knew (mostly due to the news ticker on the muted set) that the forest around the cabin had been cordoned off. Even getting to the cabin at this stage would be likely be impossible and if Red wanted to wanted to drive around all day, then who was he to argue? And now there was beer, to boot. "No worries," Tobias replied. He wasn't taken advantage of his friend, he told himself, this was just giving them something much needed to do for the day.

The time from Irvine to the Bernardino forest was filled with the usual discussions of future plans, girls, philosophy, and economics. The recent stir that Piketty's work on inequality had caused took up the lion's share of the time. Redmond hadn't actually read it, but found it was fairly easy to debate the finer points of "nothing succeeds like success" in all of its various historical forms. Particularly since neither of he or Tobias had experienced anything really like success yet.

The rising heat of the day slowly sapped the conversation, much of the time spent stalled in traffic. Out of conversational material and almost afraid to ask, Tobias eventually did out of boredom. "So what makes you think there's any gold, anyway?"

Red smiled, watching smog rise off the L.A. highway. "You remember Skunk?"

"That dealer in Bay City?" Tobias recalled the thin, short, slightly scuzzy-looking drug dealer. He always wore dark aviator sunglasses that reminded Tobias of an episode of C.H.I.P.s. Mostly, though, he remembered his promise to deliver Molly had just, Tobias was fairly sure, been a combination of an opiate and meth.

"Yeah. He was there one night when Zeke showed up

down at the Torch."

Tobias let out a stuttered chuckle as he did every time he thought of Zeke out in Los Angeles, but particularly now at the idea of him and Skunk in the same room. Skunk, wherever he was from, clearly thought of himself as pretty slick, certainly smarter than most, as evidenced by the Molly shell game. That, combined with Zeke's sanctimonious reaction to slights, perceived and real, could lead to very real trouble. Or at least highly entertaining trouble, considering Tobias was almost 100% certain his uncle, even 30 years older than the weasel-named drug dealer, would whoop his ass. Still laughing slightly Tobias asked, "Did they get in a fight?"

"Naw," Red waved away the idea. "Zeke was in rare form that night. Even got on stage." The Torch's open mic nights were renowned for their brutality, half the crowd there for the expressive formation of disapprobation, its joy taken from crushing the unworthy. But Tobias had seen his uncle get on in front of those animals and play his guitar with such skill and veracity that it was hard to see how he hadn't become a star 20 or 30 years ago. But the same went with the man's carpentry – when he was on his game Zeke performed his craft admirably, competent and timely, even dealing with clients in a friendly but firm fashion that made sure he was properly compensated for his skill level in a competitive market place. Tobias found it almost impossible to reconcile that man, whom he only saw from time to time, and the man who owned the cabin. He always had.

Tobias emerged from these thoughts to realize his friend was still speaking and he tuned back in. "Someone had told Zeke that Skunk could get him some Special K."

"What?" Tobias knew his uncle was a fan of alcohol, weed, and oxycodin, but he had never heard of him picking up Ketamine before.

"I dunno. I guess being comatose is his latest thing." Red shrugged without moving much in the driver's seat. "But Skunk told me he paid for it one time with a gold coin."

Tobias snorted a bit as the image of Zeke paying off Skunk with a chocolate coin wrapped in gold foil popped into his

head. But not even Skunk was that big a fool so he asked, "What, like a doubloon?"

"That's what he said." Red replied wistfully. His eyes found a place on the horizon and stayed there.

Tobias stared at his friend with an almost indignant level of skepticism. "And you believed him?"

"I didn't say that," Red answered in a defensive tone that told Tobias he might not, but that he wanted to. "I just thought it'd be worth checking out. I mean, when was the last time he worked?"

Tobias thought of the disability checks again, but instead decided to go with, "If Zeke had gold lying around, why the fuck would be be living like he does?"

"I don't know." Red looked back over his shoulder as he merged with traffic, trying to find his way onto the 330. Both young men thought of Zeke and wasted potential, and how the weight of gold put a thumb on the scales of that equation. "But it's pretty fucking selfish of him."

After a long pause Tobias waved the thought away. "I don't buy it. He's barely functional, but he's got income. He could afford to live in his lavish style without gold." Seeing more obstinacy cloud Red's face, Tobias decided it was time to put aside whatever shame Zeke made him feel. "He works when he gets his head out of his ass. The rest of the time he gets disability." Tobias paused. "Hell, some times people just give him money."

"Why would they do that?" It was Red's turn to cast disbelief.

Tobias shrugged. "Cause he asks."

Considering this new information, Red shrugged. "Well, the beer is bought and the bet is made. Besides," he slapped his friend's shoulder, "what the Hell else are we going to do?" Tobias smiled back, glad to see Red trying at jocularity, but sensed the hard edges around his obsession and found it worried him.

At the outskirts of the forest they began circumnavigating its borders in what felt like an interminable attempt to locate a way in that wasn't blocked off by the LAFD or other emergency

services. Tobias had to admire his friend's determination; Redmond remained unfazed as one failure piled on top of another. As they winded further and further away from the main roads, though, the emergency services manning each checkpoint became less and less severe, causing Tobias' to worry, and seeming to increase Redmond's resolve.

Tobias was jarred out of his worry, though, as Red brought the car to nearly a stand-still, looking out across Tobias' side. His younger friend followed Red's gaze until he saw a trailhead to an access road only obstructed by a FOREST CLOSED TO PUBLIC USE sign and some orange cones. Redmond continued to crawl the leviathan along, jerking the wheel at the last moment to rip a turn through the perforated roadblock, flooring it as if the person who had set down the cones might make a sudden appearance. If that happened, it was lost in the rear-view mirror amongst the dirt and dust that trailed behind.

Tobias, pushing himself off the door the centrifugal force had crushed him against, opened his mouth to protest against this choice of action. His words were bounced out of his throat as unintelligible noise, though, as the road became even bumpier than it was before, taking an upward trajectory, steeply climbing into the Bernardino mountains. His anxiety rose with it.

Now that the impossible, or at least very unlikely, had occurred and they were in the forest, Tobias checked his phone for a signal. There was none. Seeing this he immediately wished he had taken Red's suggestion to bring a map. The prospect of spending the day driving around didn't seem as idle now that they were winding closer to the fires than was wise or possibly safe. While the fantasy of hanging out at Uncle Zeke's cabin and swimming in its lake while mildly drunk sounded pretty good even now, Tobias doubted very much this would happen, but could see by Red's smile that his friend wasn't going to give up till they found the cabin. Or until they were caught and driven out by the authorities.

Preferring the former, Tobias decided it was time to wake up and play. Sitting up in his seat, he looked around, trying to spot anything that might be an indicator of their position. "Where'd we come in from?"

"What?" Red leaned close to the Eldorado's steering wheel, peering through the windshield in an attempt to discern the dirt road from the dirt in the air, the smog in the sky, and the film of all these things that had collected on its surface.

"Where'd we come in from?" Tobias repeated.

Slightly irritated that his friend was distracting him divining reality from the melange on the windshield Redmond asked, "Why's that important?"

"I can't figure out where we're going unless I know where we are."

Still leaning over the steering wheel, Red gritted his teeth from a rictus and replied, "Guess you should have brought that map." Tobias felt his crest fall at this, recognizing in his friend the change in expression that marked the transition from excited to zealotry.

Recalibrating his internal state accordingly, Tobias found and put out an appeal that he knew would resonate with Red. "A map doesn't do any good unless you know where you start. We need to figure that out before I can figure out how to get to the cabin."

Redmond relaxed a little at this, Tobias' words reminding him he wasn't alone, and his eyes began to search for more than just the road. They drove like that for a time, climbing higher. Tobias couldn't tell if it was his desperate imagination or reality, but the air seemed to be getting cooler as they ascended and the wind picked up, both of which appeared to be confirmed by Red turning off the Eldorado's useless air-conditioning and rolling down all the windows. Even the dirt in the air became less cloying, almost disappearing once they had passed an abandoned clapboard service station with pumps out front, their square, analog displays looking like robots from some old TV serial.

This only made the smell of the fire easier to find them, though, as the Eldorado took them along the curve of a high granite outcropping. At its apex stood a sign for a scenic overview decorated with information of names and dates, plus the usual Californian signs telling people how to behave. In rebellion to

these things Red lit his own cigarette, saying as he exhaled, "Looks like we're between Puma and Little Fawn."

Tobias thought about the two major lakes and that the cabin wasn't on either, but the Puma Dam was a large landmark of sloping concrete and pointed steel that he remembered driving by in his family trips. The cyclopean structure was held in his memory by childish fantasies of casting himself off to fall along its buttresses down to the blunted stones at its base, his parents never pausing in their front seat arguments.

"I remember this spot," Tobias said, then corrected his friend as he turned towards the dam, "No, don't go 'cross it." Red changed course, unsure if he had seen sentries on the bridge. The ghosts of memories that the dam brought up made Tobias think he might actually begin to remember the way, pointing his friend in a new direction now that the road diverged from the single track it had taken till then. After a time, though, the way past the dam only seemed to spiral away into more meaningless directions and none of them meant anything to Tobias.

This led to hesitation in Tobias' navigations and Red sensed it. In a tone that Tobias recognized as getting close to anger Red said, "I thought you said you knew where you were going."

"I did," Tobias replied, acknowledging both that he had said it and that he was failing in this now. If he had known Red was going to take his silly idea this seriously he never would have. But the flinty look in his eye told Tobias that suggesting that they call this quits would only end in choleric quarreling. Instead he just became more listless with his instructions until he stopped giving them entirely, only shrugging at his friends increasingly irate questions.

Red's ire, though, only made him more reckless and determined, eventually ceasing the third degree. Instead he took on every following turn like a hairpin, something that Tobias recognized as a passive-aggressive punishment for his failure to lead the way to the fabled cabin. It worked in that regard: In addition to irritating him it was unnerving enough to leave Tobias grateful that the evacuation had left no one else on the road.

Red kept this on long enough that Tobias was getting

ready to demand that they head back, even if it meant throwing away the whole day and the 12-pack that was to go with it. Mouth open to utter this phrase, in as pissy tone as his disappointed and dirty self could muster, he looked to the right to see what appeared to be a residential road that was nearly invisible from the forest's trail the Eldorado was blazing. Hidden as it was by a jungle of dried-out bushes and deciduous trees, it triggered some faint memory of Tobias'.

"I think that's it," Tobias said quietly, not sure if he could or wanted to be heard over the whip of the wind, but the gravel grinding up under the tires as Red braked let him know he had been. Both men coughed as their dust caught up to the car, causing Tobias to lose the entrance in the cloud of yellow and brown dirt floating through the air. The road reappeared, the dried out plant life it had been hiding behind nearly the same color as the dirtied cloud the wind was taking away.

"You sure?" Red's petulance, cooked by the heat of the day and what so far had taken on the appearance of another of life's failed adventures, was apparent as it was quiet. It reminded Tobias enough of his mother that it made him feel like punching him.

Instead he looked at where the roads joined, examining the poor maintenance of the drive itself and the surrounding overgrown plant life. Both things surely marked it as property of Uncle Zeke's. Or abandoned. Either way Tobias replied, "Yeah," confidence growing in his voice, joined by a kind of wonder that they may have actually found the place.

Needing no more encouragement Red whooped and slapped Tobias on the shoulder before slamming the car into a reverse turn, pointing it down the hidden drive. He plunged the Caddie through the poor visibility of the particulates and plant life, the car bouncing even more as it ran over what felt like a giant pothole. This only caused Red to whoop again, pressing down on the accelerator until they emerged from the debris cloud onto a road that was barely wide enough to accommodate the Caddie's girth.

The road's condition quickly forced Red to reign in his

initial excitement, the narrow width matched by its undulating surface, the pothole being just part of long and irregular grooves that had been worn in by years' old erosion. The loud and creaking protests of the elderly automobile's suspension tempered Red's driving, as did the plant life that bordered the road scraping against it like dried fingers. Dehydrated branches reached in, dropping bits of themselves behind as desiccated leaves were sheered off by the corners of the windows. Tobias rolled his up when one prickly patch scratched his face.

The slow speed that the road's surface demanded coupled with the short horizon the plant life created tested Red's initial optimism. After a short time he asked, "Are you sure about this?"

Tobias was: Despite the drought-stricken jungle that crowded the lane he could feel a familiarity to the place that made him increasingly more confident that this was the path to Uncle Zeke's cabin. However, after that abuse his friend's recent driving tactics had heaped upon him he wasn't inclined to share this piece of good news. But he knew he wanted to reach the end of the drive. So instead he said, "What if I'm not? How are we gonna turn this beast around?"

Redmond slouched back behind the steering wheel. Determining where they were now, or even how far they had come, was impossible in the field of dried-up dreck. Trying to perform a U-turn would mean pulling off into the clawing plant life that bordered the only known path, which only promised ruin. But the road went straight. Red looked at his friend, suddenly resentful at his lack of options, only to watch Tobias light another cigarette, daring the forest around them to catch fire and burn.

Emerging from the dehydrated embrace of the vegetation it took Redmond a moment to realize they weren't simply on a wider portion of the dusty road. In the clearing they had arrived in everything had browned out some time ago in California's indefinite drought. The soil was cracked and wide, with nothing to break up its uniformity but a single tree that stood somewhere between life and death, a few bunches of sun-blistered leaves still clinging to its withered branches, and a cabin whose peeled surface blended in with the landscape like a carpenter's

chameleon. Only the black eyes of its few windows stood out against the monochrome.

As Red brought the Eldorado's carriage from a crawl to a complete halt, Tobias looked out across the blasted landscape with the expression of man who had just landed on the moon to discover it was, in fact, not made of cheese. He hesitated to leave the car, somehow worried that the atmosphere outside of it might be unbreathable. Red looked at Tobias, waiting for final confirmation.

"This is it," Tobias announced and Red stepped out of the car. Tobias watched him, unsure if it mattered should he follow. He did anyway.

Walking out towards the tree, a faint memory of climbing it somewhere in his mind, Tobias followed its shadow to a depression, oblong and shallow, that lay in the Earth next to it. The lake Tobias remembered was gone, evaporated all but for a puddle that remained in the middle. A few dried black hoses nuzzled the wet mud, stretching from it to somewhere off into the barren tree line as though the forest had evolved a proboscis to suck the pond dry. He let out a bitter chuckle as he thought about the fantasy of green earth he had been nursing in the car, how stupid it had been of him to expected it to have somehow remained. At least the tree was alive enough to provide some shade to drink the beer in. Even that, though, was tempered by the high, taut wind that moved the top of the surrounding forest, carrying the smell of the fire.

Tobias' revery was interrupted by the noise of an agitated rattling. He turned from the basin to see his friend standing at the cabin's front door, looking every bit like its nose as it was framed on each side by an empty window. Watched by those eyes, he left the wasteland of the lake to cross the dead remains of the grass to look at his friend wrestle, frustrated, with the cabin's front door.

"What are you doing?" Tobias tried to put some of the humor back in his voice, attempting to set aside the frustration that had been building between the two, his own cooled by their arrival and the accompanying disappointment.

Still holding onto the door Red shot an angry expression

over his shoulder, surprising Tobias. Letting go of the handle on the bleached plywood he bent to haphazardly flip over the welcome mat, exposing a rectangle where the wood was still dark, but nothing else. "I'm looking for a way in. What do you think?"

"So you're just going to break in?" Tobias was faintly surprised that his uncle bothered to lock the cabin at all but now that he learned that he had some faint familial instinct of loyalty nudged him. He tried not to let the judgment in his voice sound through.

The anger in his face mixed with confusion as Red looked up from the deck. "What did you think we came here to do?"

Tobias blinked, the only outward indicator that he was grappling with disbelief. It had been hours since they had left Irving and somehow he still didn't really believe that his friend's goal was to find gold, but apparently it was and it had not abated sitting in the hot sun. The only reply that came to his lips was, "You're still serious?"

Red stepped off the porch scrutinizing his friend for signs of heat stroke. "Of course I'm serious. Why the fuck do you think we came all the way out here?"

"To drink beer?" Tobias replied in a tone that suggested it was the only sane or rational reason to be here. As Redmond searched the ground for something, Tobias wasn't sure that either of those qualifiers applied.

Redmond located and picked up a rock the size of his fist and moved back onto to the porch and alarmingly close to one of the windows. As he did he said, "We can drink beer anywhere."

"Whoa, whoa," Tobias said, raising his hands as he might to stop a charging beast, "what are you doing?"

"Breaking a window." The sweat and frustration on Red's visage gave Tobias the impression he might use the rock on him if he got in his way.

"Just, before you do that," lowering his hands Tobias tried to think of something to say to prevent property damage, but only came up with an appeasing, "let me see if I can find another way in." Tobias walked onto the porch, looking to his friend as if seeking permission. "There might be a cooler inside we can put

the beer in." Tobias wasn't quite sure who he was rationalizing for, but the permission he sought was granted with an impatient flick of Red's eyebrow. Tobias stepped to the door.

Reaching up he felt along the top of its frame, sliding his hand along it. "I already looked there," Redmond said, his tone clearly indicating the insult he felt that Tobias would think something so obvious hadn't occurred to him.

"Alright," Tobias replied cooly, trying to keep from responding to his friend's peevishness. He stepped back from the door to examine the cabin, then turned to walk off the porch, putting a slight feminine lisp into his voice as he said to Red, "Don't be cross," smiling to see this only made him more so.

Far enough back that he could see the whole of the cabin Tobias tried to intuit the key's location. This only resulted in Red asking impatiently, "What are you doing?"

"Thinking."

"About what?"

It was Tobias' turn to shoot his friend a querulous expression that said it was both a stupid question and that Red was distracting. Tobias looked over the cabin's exterior before responding. "About Zeke and his key. I've worked with Zeke on a few of the carpentry gigs he actually held onto. When he's got his head on straight he's a practical dude. But he's self-aware enough to know he's prone to bouts of alcohol and drug-induced amnesia. So he'd have a spare key."

"I knew that already."

"No, you were floundering around. I'm thinking this shit through." More to avoid eye-contact as he said this than anything else, Tobias began to pick up and toss rocks from the front porch's immediate area, half-heartedly looking for something under one. But he knew there wouldn't be anything there. "Whatever personal problems he might have, though, Zeke's also clever, so it won't be in any of the usual places," he added.

"Then the fuck are you looking under rocks off the front porch?"

"Good point." Tobias stepped back again. He was there long enough that the sun and Red's stare were beginning to make

him uncomfortably warm when he let out an, "Ah-ha." Now that Red's shorter height was framed within the profile of the house, Tobias remembered something. Much like Tobias, Zeke was tall.

Tobias put his foot onto the one step that led to the porch and pushed himself up on it. Hooking his hand into the rain gutter that lined the front of the hip roof he slid it along its unseen interior base. With nothing above the cabin but clear blue sky, there was nothing there but some trace amounts of dirt, a few leaves and pine needles – and a key.

Tobias lowered himself back down to ground level, a smile broadening on his face as he did. "There hasn't been any Goddamned rain," he said by way of explanation. For the first time in hours Red smiled back, reaching for the key like it were made of the gold for which he was looking.

Tobias snatched the key away, using the height that allowed him to retrieve it to keep it from Red's grasp. "What the fuck?" was Redmond's quick retort.

Tobias felt nudged again by what little familial loyalty he possessed. "I don't know what you think you're gonna find in there, but it's still my uncle's place." He brought the key to a lower height, almost within Red's reach, then raised it slightly again, making the condition of its surrender clear. "We're not going to tear it up."

"What do you think I'm going to do?" Red was indignant in his reply but was still reaching for the key.

"With the way you been tear-assin' around?" Tobias answered honestly, "I've got no idea what the fuck you're going to do."

Red glowered at his friend and for a moment Tobias thought this was going to turn into a wrestling match, something that they hadn't done since grade school. Instead Red stopped reaching for the key and walked to the Eldorado. He returned carrying the 12-pack, shielding his eyes from the wind blowing dust off the lake and smoke from the forest.

He stopped a few feet from Tobias smiling in a slightly chagrined way. It also carried a bit of the charm and alacrity that Tobias was glad to see back. "Let's just take a minute and celebrate that we made it here."

Tobias brought the key down to waist level, rotating it by the toothed shaft, looking at the nondescript head. Breaking his gaze from it he smiled at his friend. "Well, we should at least check if there's a cooler inside." Red brightened his own smile in return and the pair walked up to the cabin.

Tobias unlocked the door and pushed it open on creaking hinges before he crossed the threshold. As they peered inside Red asked, "And you were worried about me tearin' it up?"

It could be seen that the cabin had once been divided into several smaller rooms, but the walls separating them had been torn down, leaving only standing pieces of drywall, load-bearing pillars, and a few pipes of unknown purpose. What had once been the kitchen, mostly only identifiable by a sink and cabinets, stood in the corner furthest from them. Tobias found himself grateful for that. It's dirty dishes, empty bottles, and neglected surfaces promised insects and disease.

Directly to the left of the front door was what Tobias guessed was the area that served as a bedroom. Although no mattress was present there was a stained and once over-stuffed comforter bunched up into a large enough wad that any good drunk could hit it on the way down. Dirty clothes lay on the floor around the padding. A couple of stacked milk crates looked to act as a night stand topped as they were with a naked lamp.

The half of the house not occupied by the kitchen and bedroom was a mess of collected things seeming to enshrine the dark television that had been placed into the fireplace centered in the cabin's right wall. In the far corner was an American flag, wrapped around a blackened brass pole so that it was impossible to tell how many stars were on its field. It partially blocked floor-to-ceiling bookshelves that sagged under the weight of everything from large, hard-cover atlases to the tiniest of paperbacks; there did not appear to be any real logic behind the collection. Whatever books Zeke had been reading last seemed to have ended up on the floor along with empty food containers and wrappers which formed a chaotic circle around a weathered recliner in the middle of it all.

The stepped mantle above the fireplace was adorned with photographs of various sizes and ages, haphazardly crowded onto each of the different shelves. Amongst those pictures Tobias saw some familiar faces and many more that weren't, some obscured by the distortions of age.

"Jesus wept. Open a fucking window," Red swore, reflexively putting a hand to cover the bottom half of his face. Whatever he smelled, for whatever reason, didn't bother Tobias, but he stepped behind the ajar door to open the front window there. Like the fireplace, the window was surrounded by photographs, each crowded onto a tiny shelf that flanked the window in rising levels.

Stepping back, Tobias saw Red opening all of the windows, only to stop to put the beer in the kitchen's refrigerator with a pair slipped into the ice cave of its freezer. This completed, Red stepped away and towards the front door telling Tobias, "Let's give this place a chance to air out."

Without any deck chairs, the two sat down on the splintered and dried wood of the front porch. Red reached into his breast pocket and produced a roach, gesturing to Tobias for his lighter before sparking it up. A few minuscule puffs later the pair were contentedly passing what little remained of the joint back and forth.

Holding onto the THC in his lungs, Tobias spoke around the smoke in his throat, "Well, we're here."

"Yes we are," was Red's toothy reply, smiling in victory.

"So now what?" Tobias asked, seemingly to no one in particular.

"We look for the gold." He elbowed Tobias as he took the joint from him, trying to shunt some of his enthusiasm onto him. Tobias looked at his friend with a deadpan expression that told him it hadn't worked.

"What?" Red gave Tobias a hurt look.

"I can't believe you talked me into this."

"You mean like you did that time with the ROTC?" Red gave Tobias the grin of co-conspirators.

Tobias himself couldn't help return it, a snort of a laugh

escaping as he thought about how close the pair had come to getting the beatdown of a lifetime. "That didn't have much to do with talking anyone into anything. I just ranted till they didn't know what to do."

"Acid-fueled screeds will do that," Redmond said from the edge of giggling, remembering his friend's drug-enhanced quick wit challenging the plebes on the constitutionality of who owned commons such as marching fields and mascots and what rights did they have to defend any of these things with violence. Tobias had gotten such a full-head of steam going none of the cadets had even thought to ask if the pair were students at the university.

"Yeah, well," Tobias smiled himself at the memory, but remembering the confusion and anger of their faces didn't feel great about it now. "That got us out of trouble. You're getting us into it."

The pair sat on the porch for a few minutes, trying to feel the commonality the Red's reminder might give them about their friendship. When that didn't seem to change anything, Red retrieved the two beers from the freezer. They were still mostly warm, but were a great relief to the day's driving, exacerbated by the dryness from the smoke. Watching the sun begin to move towards the western horizon, Tobias wondered if there was anything edible in the kitchen.

Finished with his beer, Red drained his can and tossed the empty out into the brown soil. Tobias watched the arc of the can and then gave a mock disapproving stare. "I'm gonna have to pick that up."

"You shittin' me?" Red smirked.

"You see any other trash out here?"

Red stood, still smiling. "Well then pick it up and bring it inside where no one will notice."

Tobias did just that, finding that in the short interval it took him to throw the cans away Red had entered the cabin and had begun rooting around. Seeing his friend poking about the debris of the bedroom he asked, "You're still serious?"

Red straightened himself to look at his friend, shrugging in an attempt to look nonchalant, but Tobias could still see the cast

of obsession about him. "Why not?" He shrugged, crossing into the kitchen, "What else are we going to do?"

"Go home?"

"Sun's going down. Do you really want to try and find our way back in the dark?" Redmond asked reasonably, crossing to the kitchen. Tobias grunted uncomfortably, the thought of scrambling back to civilization with only the light of the wildfires to guide them back making him feel very unsure.

"Besides you don't want me to driving back drunk do you?" Red continued, handing Tobias a beer from the fridge in the same smooth motion. Tobias gave his friend a distrustful look, which only caused Red to laugh when he took the beer. Watching him return to the bedroom corner Tobias popped open the can and hoped quietly that wherever Zeke was, he couldn't come home tonight.

Not interested in rooting around in the filth of the bedroom, Tobias wandered into the cabin's other half, around the recliner, to examine the photographs on the fireplace. He was surprised to find a framed picture of his parents there, looking impossibly young and cheerful as they held their new baby for the camera. Tobias had seen pictures like this before, so he didn't dwell on it long. One did cause him to stop, though. After a time he heard Red ask, "What are you staring at?"

Tobias gingerly picked up the photo by the frame to more closely examine the tall, craggily faced elder in a worn suit. "It's a picture of my grandfather."

Without looking up from whatever he was examining Red replied, "No shit. I didn't know you had a grandfather." Tobias broke from the picture long enough to give his friend an expression of reproach. Sensing this without needing to see it Red continued, "You know what I mean – I didn't know you knew him."

Tobias set the frame back. "I never met him," he lied, this easier to explain than the difficult last memory he had of his mother screaming at the old man. Saying it out loud, though, felt like an admission of guilt, or at least negligence. Needing to assuage this Tobias shared most of everything he remembered

about the old man. "He was a Sooner. Brought the family to California."

Out of his peripheral vision Tobias saw Red stand up quickly as if something from under the soiled sheets had tried to bite him. Whatever it was must have been harmless as he asked, "Is he dead?"

"No," Tobias shook his head. "At least I don't think so. Last I heard he was living somewhere in the interior."

"Ha," Red moved to another pile as he barked. "Then he might as well be."

Normally that would have made Tobias laugh as well, but now he just felt for the old man in the photo, isolated from his daughter, his one son transformed into an unrecognizable mental wreck, a stranger to his only grandchild. "Maybe when we're done here another road trip is in order," he said more to the picture than to his companion. The mysterious pang in his chest got to be too much so Tobias turned to the one item on the wall that wasn't a photograph, an old newspaper article that had been framed.

"Are you serious?" Tobias heard Red say. Tobias looked up from the article with little more than a "Huh?" Red seeing something new in his friend's hand asked, "What's that?"

Tobias examined the article more closely, it's venerable typeset announcing the extirpation of wolves from California. "It's an article from the *Times* about wolf killing."

Curiosity struck, Red walked over. "How the Hell old is that? Only time I hear about wolves is people arguing over whether they should be endangered."

Tobias checked the date and let out a low whistle. "1924."

Red stared at the article. "Wow," he seemed to appraise the clipping for worth. "Do you think this is print out he framed or from the actual 'paper?"

Tobias fluttered his eyebrows, unsure of the answer and unsure if it mattered, but he remarked, "I don't see a printer around here." After a moment's examination of the headline he added, "They do seem really proud of killing all those wolves."

Red headed back to examine more of the cabin's contents

saying, "Well you can't have God-damned wolves running around L.A." Tobias thought about packs of wolves descending upon Los Angeles, pushed out of the mountains by the fire, forced to raid Orange County suburbs. It was a fascinating thought and one that brought a moment of sadistic pleasure as he imagined wolves bounding over fences and making off with children by the nape of their necks, parents screaming.

But it also brought up worries about the fire. He shoved those thoughts out of his mind by quickly finishing his second beer. Making his way to the kitchen for a third, he watched Redmond go through some of the cabinets, occasionally making disgusted noises at what he found. Tobias left him to it, smiling at the idea that his fool friend was looking for gold but finding the decaying matter of Zeke's life. He returned to the other side of the cabin to examine the wall of books.

Tobias wasn't surprised in the least to find the small library very interesting, mostly a combination of reference and narrative non-fiction, including translations of *The Iliad* and *On the Nature of Things*. One of the more modern works, Tobias noted anxiously, was on the subject of panning for gold, a title he quickly covered up. While panning for gold would require water, enough to make a stream, and this section of the mountains hadn't seen any of that in a long time, he didn't want even the mention of gold to harden Red's undiminished obsession.

That title properly hidden in the stacks Tobias perused the remaining ones, stopping to admire those that caught his attention. Two labeled as atlases were remnants of, Tobias was sure, dreams of world travel. Next to these was a third roughly bound tome with no title. The only one without such, Tobias noted as he pulled it out. The book was so large that it required him to set down his beer to handle it and after a few moments of carrying the book's weight he considered sitting down in the recliner to read it. Examining the chair's possibly infested surface, though, he resolved to keep standing, propping the book between himself and a shelf on the bookcase.

Flipping through the pages, Tobias was immediately charmed by the book's archaic information, acclivities and

coordinates laid out on repeating grids, blue lines imposing order on a sea of green curves. The seemingly inaccessible information almost immediately began to make sense causing him to forget about his beer entirely. The rise and fall of elevations, the mention of bodies of water such as Little Fawn, and the occasional station name like Yellow House, told Tobias this wasn't a normal atlas but a collection of survey maps of the San Bernardino mountains, bound by hand.

Perusing the pages Tobias began to encounter scribblings and notes in red ink. Most of these seemed to be around or near blue islands floating across the green plains of the map, but the red ink was laid down in a nearly indecipherable script that was sure to be Zeke's handwriting. Tobias was trying to unscramble one such passage when a loud screeching caused him to jump. He nearly knocked over his beer as he swung with the big book to see what it was.

In the section of the cabin Tobias had come to think of as the den Red was wrestling with the large recliner, trying to move it. A yank of the chair's skids across the wooden floor resulted in a noise that sounded like a seal barking. Book still in hand, beer unspilled, Tobias asked, "What the hell are you doing?"

"Moving the chair."

"Why?"

Red crouched to grab the chair by its armrests, giving it one last twist as though he were trying to pull it off an invisible axis. Stopped, he panted for a moment before answering the question. "To see if there's anything underneath it."

"Like what?" Tobias asked in astonishment, worried on some adolescent level that his friend would damage the floor and he would get into trouble.

"I don't know," Red replied from the edge of exasperation, which was apparently on the floor next to the chair. "I was thinking maybe there's a hatch into the basement or something."

Realizing his anxiety stemmed from a childish fear of authority, Tobias tried to settle himself, feeling like the boy who throws a party in his parents' house only to run around putting

coasters under everyone's drinks. Shrugging back into the book he replied, "This place doesn't have a basement."

"Shit." Red looked at the few inches his exertions had moved the chair. "Seriously?"

"Yeah."

"You sure?"

Tobias flipped a page, looking up to examine the expanse of the cabin that hovered only a crawlspace's height above the dirt it was built on. "Pretty sure, yeah."

"Shit," Red repeated. "That doesn't leave much," he said, eyes wandering around the cabin while the rest of him stayed on the floor.

Tobias could see his friend deflate, his longing and obsession having run into the physical limitations of the cabin. A lot of effort and gas had been spent dragging his companion to a place where his hopes were dashed by less than an hour's worth of searching. Whatever belligerence Red had displayed on the drive up was forgotten by Tobias in a moment of small pity. So he said, "Well, here's something." Red clearly brightened, even though it was obvious that Tobias was referring to something in the book and not a secret door.

Hopping up Red walked over to join his friend by the book cases, leaning on one until a groan escaped from it that caused him to think better. Trying to look casual, he stared down at the open page, its contours somehow familiar. It took a moment for Red to realize it was a map of the immediate area. The depression out front was still marked in blue, having apparently been once called Elysium Lake, and was the prospect for the development of more cabins, judging by the scribbling in the margins, until some time around 2008. Red laughed at the ostentatious name of the dried up bed and the idea that such a modest place would be transformed into some kind of paradise.

But with a long finger Tobias drew his attention to a red circle that appeared to be urgently drawn, bent around itself several times. Red titled his head to examine it, confirming that it indicated a place in the nearby forest. "What's that?" he asked.

Tobias gave his friend a wide, cryptic smile. "I have no

idea."

Red stood up straight, his deflation in sudden reversal. "Do you think there's a shovel around here?"

Tobias looked around the cabin and tried to think of another way to clean it, ending with, "I hope so."

The inside of the house yielded nothing, but at the back of the cabin they did find a coffin-sized tool box that held a number of rusty instruments, including a single shovel. Red snatched it up, immediately getting splinters in his hand from the spade's dried-out wooden handle. Watching his friend shake his wounded appendage, Tobias said, "You realize there's no way to tell exactly where this red circle is. I mean, we don't have survey or cartography instruments. Hell, I don't even have a compass."

"So?" Red turned to the east, the general direction of the circle. Facing the woods, he pointed through the cabin to the dried-up pond on the other side. "The lake's north of the cabin. So the red circle," he moved his pointing hand out directly in front of him, "is that way."

"Yeah, well," Tobias faltered, increasingly unsure if he should have shared his finding with Red. "If you're hoping it's the X that marks the spot," Tobias shrugged. "I mean, you could be digging for a really long time." He didn't bother adding that he'd be digging with almost no chance of success.

Purpose restored, Red hoisted the shovel onto his shoulder, giving his friend a smile that was so engaged it seemed victory was pre-ordained, that failure to find the treasure was not even a possibility. "Only one way to find out," Red said, striking out to the east and towards the trees. Tobias watched him walk for a ways and sighed, grateful that the hottest part of the day had gone.

Once passed the edge of the clearing around the lake, the going became much tougher, the course grass became dried out vegetation, entangled with itself over rocky ground. Whatever low bushes and other plant life that had been amongst the trees had been reduced to an ankle-height bramble. Trudging along became a careful march of where to put their feet with the occasional swear and curse. There were enough trees, though, that the cabin

quickly passed out of sight and with it any point of reference for how far they had gone. Tobias was grateful for the cool shade of the trees, but found their constant movement in the wind to be unsettling, not use to having anything over his head but a roof or a Californian sky. Undaunted by these things, Red continued marching east looking very much like he had some idea of where he was going.

So focused was he on the direction forward that it was Tobias who noticed the change in vegetation, the trees becoming short bushes that seemed to have consumed the underbrush around them. At first Tobias was so grateful that the ground was clear, he didn't notice the distinct demarcation between it and the rest of the forest. Once he no longer had to watch his footing, though, he looked up to see that the large trees that had dotted the landscape were gone, as were many of the large stones. The ponderosas and eucalyptus had been replaced by dwarf versions of the pines, which caused Tobias to stop when he recognized the familiar multi-fingered leaves.

"Red," Tobias said simply, causing his sweat-soaked friend to stop.

"What?" Red turned back, the smile held on his face, a talisman against whatever his friend was going to bring up to call for a retreat. As he turned he saw the withered, but blooming, plants that were unlike everything else in this place, spaced out at regular intervals and all a uniform, not-quite-shoulder height.

"What the...?" Red added the definite article to his question but let it trail off as he took in the horticulture around him. As he finished Tobias did the same.

"It's marijuana," Tobias stated, his tone holding a reverence that others might have held if the pair had, in fact, found Zeke's apocryphal gold.

"No shit." Amazed as he was by this discovery Red's response fell somewhere in between the acknowledgment and awe. The shovel dropped from his shoulder as he reached out to gently take one plant by a leaf. Examining it his voice held the hallucinatory tone of someone who wasn't quite sure if what he was seeing was real. Seeming to forget his statement from a

moment ago, he asked "What is this?"

Tobias laughed lightly, knowing that his friend referred to the field, what it was doing here, how it stayed hidden, if Zeke was its proprietor, and all the dozen other questions its existence brought up. "I think it's Zeke's gold," he replied with a smile that was almost proud of his uncle's endeavor.

Nearly so. Whatever pride Tobias may have felt at Zeke's felonious efforts was quickly tempered by the condition of the plants. Dried out, the weeds had been planted with plenty of room to bloom, but the lack of water and harsh conditions had curtailed their attempts. It was, in Tobias' estimation, some of the saddest looking marijuana he had ever seen.

"If it is, Skunk got a pretty bad deal," Red said, clearly sharing his friend's estimation of the crop. "Still," he examined the plants with an eye that was meant to appear professional, Red trying to look like the expert grower and criminal that he was not, "there's enough bud on these that come harvest Zeke stands to pull in a good chunk of change."

Tobias snorted, both at his friend's pretense of knowledge and his estimation of the harvest's potential yield. Each nugget he examined was no bigger than a dime and the outer edges of each sphere crumbled into dust, like a dry autumn leaf. The pride in his smile quickly turned to the familiar familial disappointment he so often associated with his uncle.

Looking at the tinder in his hand Tobias felt the wind shift and pick up again, carrying with it the acres and acres of burning forest that could be spreading this way. He reached out to take the shovel from his friend, gripping by the part of the shaft closest to his hand. "If this dried up patch of dirt weed is his gold, then it's time to go home."

Red didn't relinquish his hold on the shovel, pulling it back to him. "What are you talking about? This grow op didn't happen on its own. There's seeds and water and equipment to buy – all of that cost money."

Tobias tightened his grip on the shovel, but didn't pull on it again. He looked down at his friend, the cast of his face clearly showing his patience was at an end. "So?"

"So?" Red repeated the question with an echo of incredulity, mildly stunned his friend didn't see the crop as he did. "That means there has to be gold around here somewhere. Ole Zeke didn't pay for this from carpentry jobs."

It was Tobias' turn to look dazed. Had Red spent too much time in the hot sun? After determing his friend wasn't suffering from heat stroke, Tobias' mood finally resolved into anger. "Yeah, he did. Or he begged or stole it, just like he always does. This is a small time plot, Red, it's not Humboldt County." He ended by giving the shovel a tug, his ire growing when Red refused to release it.

"We don't know how big it is." Tobias recognized his friend was trying to sound reasonable as Red continued, "Let's walk around the patch and see."

"Why? What're we going to find out? That this is another one of Zeke's shitbird projects, waste time while the fire comes down on us?"

"What fire?" Red indicated the forest around them with a sweep of his free hand. It blocked off the horizon leaving only the swaying of the trees and a false sense of safety. "It's miles away! We didn't even see it on the way here!"

"You can smell it, you idiot." Having finally lost his patience Tobias gave the shovel another yank, using his superior height and reach as leverage. To his surprise, Red managed to hold onto it which only provoked him further.

Red grabbed the shaft with both hands, dragging both it and Tobias back towards him. "You can smell the fire from San Diego!"

Prepared to wrest the shovel from his friend and start back to the Eldorado, or at least the beer, Tobias was surprised to find himself pinwheeling towards Red as Red suddenly fell away from him, and both of them collapsing to the ground.

Lying in the dirt, half-hearted curses and punches were thrown, the shovel shoved about, banging into both wrestlers as they moved it between them, the bruise it left on Red's abdomen angering him enough that he gripped its haft in both hands, using it to force Tobias off. Looking down to see what he had tripped

over, Red saw the three black hoses that lead from the marijuana patch back to the lake. Free from his friend's weight he looked down at the tubes he had tripped over, asking, "What the fuck?"

Rolling away, Tobias followed Red's gaze to his feet. He sighed in exasperation, his head rolling back to rest on the dry ground, upset with himself for not making the connection before. "They're irrigation for the grow. The lake didn't dry up – Zeke stole the water." Tobias opened his eyes again to see the normally blue Californian sky above had been replaced with fast moving clouds of ashen gray. To his disconcertion, he thought he could detect hints of flaming red and orange reflecting from the leaden depths.

Red sat up, looking at his feet, an admiring smile on his face as he said, "Well, that son of a --" But he was cut off by a loud boom that wasn't quite thunder, but somehow more immediate and frightening.

Both boys rolled onto their bellies and looked in the direction the resounding blast had come from, not sure what to do. A second expulsion of violent sound drew their attention in the direction of the cabin. Red began to mutter an excited question, but Tobias hushed him and said to listen. It was faint, but after the sound faded amongst the wind as it swayed the treetops he was nearly certain he could hear something else.

It could be heard through the distance and the movement; a faint hollering, a human yelling, and for a brief, relieved moment Tobias thought that someone from a fire team had found the car and was calling out to them. But then another explosive sound sent both the boys' heads instinctively to the ground, only to come up again when its echo had faded to be replaced by more yelling. As the voice came back up, Tobias recognized it, his face sinking into the dirt with the fulfillment of negative expectation. "It's Zeke," he said into the ground.

Red lifted his head with a surprised, "What?"

Tobias rolled over, pushing the shovel out of the way. "Zeke. It's Zeke. He's home."

Listening intently Red began to make out the string of profanities that was carrying through the forest towards the field.

"Oh yeah," he nodded, "I guess that is him."

Without another word Tobias picked up the shovel and began to follow the black irrigation tubes back in the direction of the cabin. Red looked up, but didn't immediately follow, almost certain the explosive sounds they had heard before had come out of the barrel of a gun. When Tobias didn't respond to his name, Red pushed himself out of the dirt and followed him in a slight crouch. Catching up to his flank he whispered, "I think he's got a gun."

Tobias snorted, remembering Zeke's shooting lessons, the lens of adulthood focusing their lack of safety. "Zeke's always got a gun," he replied.

"Aren't you, you know, worried about that?"

"I'm more worried how someone in Zeke's mental state manages to purchase firearms." Tobias shook his head loose from the bigger civic issue to respond to his friend's more immediate concern. "Just stay behind me and don't say anything until I introduce you."

"I've met Zeke."

"Bunch of times," Tobias nodded his agreement. "But we don't know where his heads at, so just stay quiet until I say so." Red looked at his friend questioningly then dropped his stance by a few degrees before falling in behind him.

Near the edge of the clearing there was another loud boom that caused Tobias to hope the hot shells would land in the dirt and not on something flammable, but it did remind him to raise his hands when he was fairly certain they would be visible from the cabin. Tobias made only his hands visible, though, standing behind what he hoped was the safety of a desiccated tree. "Zeke! Uncle Zeke!" he called out before he could see the man himself, "It's your nephew! Tobias!"

The barrage of cussing and commands that had been coming from the direction of the lake ended. "Toby?" Tobias closed his eyes with his own mild curse: He had always hated the diminutive of his name but never had talked his family out of its use.

Putting aside his own fear and irritation, Tobias stepped

out from behind the tree to see his Uncle Zeke, his mammoth Ford 3500 parked not far from the Eldorado. Pulled to the same height as his brother and his nephew, Zeke stood tall as he looked out into the tree line, a wide-brimmed hat casting his own scruffy visage into shadow. Held across his front was an old Mossberg which, judging by the lopsided carriage and shattered windshield, he had been using to shoot holes in the Cadillac. Tobias felt his heart sink at this sight, but he was more bothered by the voice that called his name again. Tremulous, it was always Zeke's tone when he was uncertain as to what was going on and how it blended with his current state of reality.

Despite Tobias' warning, despite the shotgun, Red yelled something that Tobias didn't catch, pushing past him to run into the clearing. Headed towards the Caddy, perhaps hoping for the damage to be as illusionary as the gold, Red drew up short when a surprised Zeke leveled the barrel of the gun at him. Even as time seemed to dilate the space between his heartbeats, unsure if Zeke might fire, Tobias felt a kind of mad admiration for his friend who looked at Zeke and said, "You crazy asshole! What the Hell did you do to my car?"

Zeke took his eyes off the sights, moving his head away from the barrel to examine Red, something that Tobias hoped was recognition in his eyes. "I shot it," Zeke answered, the uncertain tone gone from his voice.

"What the Hell did you do that for?"

Zeke slung the shotgun across his shoulder, leveling an incredulous eye at Red and his effrontery. "I come to my property, find my door open, a strange car parked on my lot – you want to tell me what the Hell did you expect me to do?"

"Not start shooting things!" Red approached the Eldorado like a murdered prize calf, hands out before him, as if he might beseech the damage away. He tried to say something else, but it just came out as piteous muttering.

Coming up from behind Red, Tobias kept an eye on Zeke. Within the pair's orbit he laid a sympathetic hand on Red's shoulder, making the same kind of empathic frown one wears at a funeral. With the flattened tires and whatever unknown internal

damage the beast had suffered it didn't look like even the monstrous Ford could tow it out of there.

Given a moment to consider the outcome of his brash impulse, Zeke began to shift his weight under the shotgun, a telltale sign that Tobias recognized as one of discomfort. His voice a mixture of angry pretense and the beginnings of honest regret Zeke asked, "Toby, what the Hell are you two doin' here?"

Examining the Cadillac Tobias made a show of sympathy for Red's loss, which he genuinely felt as the automobile was Red's most valuable worldly possession. But he was also examining the Eldorado in the vain hope it might still make it down the mountain and save him from hitching a ride with his uncle. "We just drove up to get out of the heat," Tobias lied and told the truth all at the same time.

Zeke looked skeptical. "There's a fire on, boy." His voice was not devoid of concern.

"Thought we might make take a dip in the lake," Tobias replied as though this answered everything. Realizing the damage to the car was such that it would not be taking them anywhere Tobias gestured toward the cabin and added, "There's some beer in the 'fridge."

"Well, that's a mighty nice peace offering after this misunderstanding." Zeke licked his lips, then turned back to his truck to toss the shotgun in the back of the cab. "But there's work to be done." Reaching in, he spoke loudly enough to be heard from within the truck's muffling depths. "I'm glad you boys are here, now that I know it's you." Unbending his long frame he began to pull out tools; a shovel and a large pair of gardening shears only in slightly poor condition. "I could use the help."

Red looked at Zeke in such a way that Tobias could feel it from behind him. He kept his hand on his friend's shoulder. "With what?"

"You came out of the woods," Zeke shrugged. "You saw what I've been doing back there."

"So?"

"So, the fire's getting bigger. Might be headed this way."

Zeke tossed down the shovel and shears. "I could use your help with the harvest."

Tobias paused, feeling the dry wind pick up and slacken like a tensing string waiting to break. "Uncle Zeke, the fire isn't maybe headed this way," he gestured to the north where the glow on the horizon clearly wasn't the setting sun, "it might be here any minute."

"Well then we'd best hurry up," Zeke replied, heading to the rear of the truck. Tobias saw in the back a white plastic water tank, large enough that it took up the entire bed, another black tube extending from an inserted valve. Remembering the other blue circles from the survey maps, he realized they must have been Zeke's targets – he had been stealing water to feed his crop.

Opening the rear gate, Zeke paused, the shadow from his hat hiding something that might have been guilt. "Look, boys, I'm real sorry about your car, but I'm not leaving here without my plants and...well, I don't think you're leavin' here without me."

Tobias was about give a disbelieving reply when he felt Red's posture change, as quick and solidifying as a sudden epiphany. "You shot my car." Red looked at Zeke but somehow Tobias knew it wasn't with an anger, but something else. "You've destroyed the only way we had out of here that's faster than the fire." Indignity rising in his voice, Red continued, "And you expect us just to pitch in like good little campers and help out?"

"Hey Zeke let me ask you a question – what would you do in our situation? You always this much of a team player?" Red walked the confrontational tone he was using right up to the line that Tobias was pretty sure would result in violence if crossed.

Zeke shifted his weight and did his best impression of a Clint Eastwood, former mayor of Carmel-by-the-Sea, his eyes glowering out from his gaunt face.

Red's tone change, became more assuaging. "But hey, I get it, we intruded on your space and you," Red gestured toward the Eldorado with a dismissiveness that Tobias knew must have taken an incredible act of will to simulate, "overreacted." Red held up his hands palliatively, "I get it." Tobias felt himself deflate

internally as the pressure let out of the conversation, Red shrewdly creating tension so backing away from it appeared conciliatory. Zeke would be at his most reasonable if he thought he was getting his way.

"We'll help you and you get us out of here." At hearing Red agree to this condition Tobias felt his internal bellows push stress back into his chest, his eyes pulling inexorably towards the horizon to look at the burning hills. Listening to his friend, he tried with mental exertions to force him to change his course. Red, however, was already on his way to making the agreement he wanted to make. "But you can't just take us hostage against the fire. We help you, you use part of whatever money you off this patch to help fix my car." Red laid on another condition before Zeke could interrupt. "And we get a piece." Tobias felt like screaming at his friend that if the fire came this way there probably wouldn't be a car to fix. While still alarmed at the course the negotiations had taken, part of him was happy to see someone, anyone really, holding Zeke responsible for his actions.

"A piece?" Zeke's hands seem to flex looking a bit like he wished he still carried the shotgun. "You want a piece of my hard work? You have any idea how many months I've put into this?" Tobias knew that the blooming cycle for marijuana was somewhere between six weeks to 4 months, and that if his damn fool of an Uncle had asked he could have been helping him the entire time and that if he had all of them probably wouldn't be in this position. But he kept his mouth shut as Zeke concluded with a hard eye on Red, "I think you may be underestimating how much you boys need a ride back."

In an emotional shift that Tobias always found amazing, Red smiled a beatific smile, one that was both forgiving and friendly, one that said 'No hard feelings'. "That's OK, we understand." He waved to good-bye while taking a step backwards, Tobias moving out of the way. "We'd best get started back then. I'm sure we'll run into the fire department sooner or later." He gestured to Tobias who almost started following him out of reflex, something about Red's charisma making it seem like the natural thing to do. "But don't you worry Zeke, we'll make sure to

let them know you're here when we do." He was halfway through a pirouette that would point him back down the drive when Zeke told him to stop.

"You've made your point." Zeke hooked his thumbs into his belt to hitch up his pants, looking none too pleased about being suddenly outmaneuvered by this youngster. "Help me get the plants into the truck and I'll see to your car." He grunted, adding "If there's anything left we'll see about the rest then."

Red smiled, victorious but somehow not gloating, and offered his hand to Zeke who shook it as Red said, "You got a deal."

Looking over the handshake Tobias felt very left behind while standing in the trio, an impression that had a sense of finality to it he was uncomfortable with. But watching both madmen he was with join in resolution he saw no choice — only that now he had best get the plants into the back of the truck as quickly as possible if he wanted to escape. He stared up at the northern horizon again, boiling clouds of gray joined to the horizon in a fiery line, pushing in his direction.

He turned to the loons, both grinning at each other in an attempt to hide their internal states, and said, "Well, then let's get started." Tobias walked to the back of the truck and opened the bed stating, "I'm assuming we have to get this thing out of here first." Looking his way the others' expressions changed, Red looking almost distraught that his agreement would, in fact, require work from him, while Zeke appeared to notice the reservoir for the first time. His features shifted to disappointment then, realizing he would need to leave something here, possibly to burn. Tobias wondered if it even occurred to Zeke that he would probably lose the cabin in all of this, or if he had somewhere to store and dry the plants once they got them out of here. But he quickly chose to believe that didn't matter to him, only getting the plants in the truck. With that in mind he spoke more urgently to Zeke's disappointed face, "Well?"

Zeke hitched his belt up again, taking his hat off to wipe the grime from his face, making Tobias wonder what bender he'd been on while the fire had raged. Instead of asking that, though,

Tobias just stared at him until Zeke replied, "Yeah," and joined him at the back of the truck.

Zeke hadn't entirely emptied the tank from its last usage, so it was even more difficult to remove than expected. Doing so required Red to climb in and brace himself against the back of the cabin, pushing with his feet as the other two stood along the sides and slid it out. One rounded end bit its way into the dirt, gravity pulling all of the water there and making it almost impossible to move. Red hopped out of the truck and Zeke climbed into the cabin, driving the truck out from under the tank rather than attempting to pull it any further. Feeling like it was a pointless gesture, but unable to resist, Tobias opened the reservoirs drainage valve, letting out its contents to water what little of the parched grass that it could.

That accomplished, Zeke wheeled the truck around and for one panicked moment Tobias thought he was going to leave them there. But instead the truck bounced towards the tree line where he whipped it around and parked it with the bed towards the patch. Tobias and Red watched until they were certain that the truck was stopped, then gathered the tools Zeke had dropped. Walking towards the tree line, Tobias asked his friend, "How big do you figure that patch is?"

"Dunno. Someone wouldn't let us walk around it."

Tobias smiled despite himself. "Asshole."

A return smirk on his face Red answered, "Seeing Zeke again, I'm beginning to understand where you got some of your interpersonal skills."

"Gaping asshole."

His smile became a laugh and Red said, "Seriously, though, if we hadn't come up here Zeke would be trying to harvest this entire crop by himself. It might have taken him too long."

Tobias knew that his friend was, as he most always did, trying to look on the bright side, but his optimism inadvertently brought up the question of whether or not it was a good thing that they were here now. Tobias wasn't sure if he would have preferred to help his uncle to safety or leave him to his own devices and the

burning fate that could possibly entail. Arriving at the truck's new position Tobias decided not to dwell on that.

The tools retrieved, the trio set out for the plants and began what Tobias did not think of as a harvest, but a reaping. With time an unknown factor no attempt was made to take the buds off the plants, to leave them whole for another cycle. Once at the patch Zeke immediately took a shovel and dug into the first plant he came to, pulling it up roots and all. Red and Tobias looked at each other and followed suit. Red moved to dig up the plant next to the one Zeke had chosen and Tobias bent down to work the garden shears against the trunk of one tall weed. While cutting through the plant itself appeared to Tobias more difficult than digging it up, he was grateful that he didn't have to haul back the additional weight of roots and dirt when it was time to take each to the truck.

As the trio continued the sun began to set in earnest, bringing up in Tobias' mind the extra time working in the dark might cost them. He didn't see a point in sharing this, though, as the increased tempo of his fellow workers seemed to indicate that they were aware of it as well. Or perhaps it was the fact that even as the sun went down it wasn't getting truly dark, the reflective light of the fire from the north gradually sublimating the setting sun in the west.

It wasn't quite so dark to be necessary, but by the time Zeke reached in to his truck to retrieve a headlamp the bed had begun to fill. Tobias guessed half of the patch remained. "That's a lot of plant," Tobias began, pretending to admire how many weeds they had piled in. "Do you think we have enough to –?"

"No," Zeke slipped the lamp on around the band of his hat, igniting it with a flick of a switch, causing his head to glow. The rest of him disappeared into silhouette. "We're getting it all."

Tobias indicated the truck again and that its bed was nearly full to the gunwale. "Yeah, but -"

"All of it," Zeke cut him off with a dangerous edge of obsession that Tobias recognized, causing him to cease asking. He watched his uncle stalk back into the field before moving forward to look into the cab. Zeke had left his keys in the ignition.

Tobias stood by the truck, pretending to rest until Red made his way through the litter of holes they had created in digging up the plants, carrying another sad looking specimen. As he dumped it on top of the others, causing it to roll away from the pile's high center, Tobias said, "The keys are in the truck."

Gripping the side of the bed, bending at the waist as he panted from exertion, Red looked to Tobias and said, "Yeah?"

Tobias nodded, his intent clear even in the dim light.

Red considered this, then looked into the back of the cab to confirm the shotgun was still there as well. After a moment's contemplation he shook his head. "What are we going to do? Hit him on the back of the head with a shovel and steal his truck?"

"Take a look behind you," Tobias said indicating the horizon with a jerk of his head. The flames were visibly closer than they had ever been, crawling their way over the hills that surrounded Elysium Lake. "We need to get out of here," he said simply and emphatically.

"C'mon," Red didn't look back, "we're almost done." Tobias was fairly certain that was a lie. "And look at all this," Red gestured at the plants in the bed, "we get Zeke out of this and this could be a pretty good haul for us." He smiled in what appeared to be a reassuring manner, but Tobias could see the shallow reflection of Zeke's own obsession there, a desperation to get something out of this day, out of this trip, from the destruction of the Eldorado. Maybe even the loss of the gold.

Tobias had heard stories of fire scouts near the frontline of blazes who had died when the unpredictable and swift fires had surrounded them. He had never given those stories or the fighters in them much thought until then, but the obituary picture of one such man came into his mind as he stared at his friend headed back into the field. Tobias imagined the bearded, hardhat-wearing man from the obit trapped in a vehicle not dissimilar to the Ford, screaming or praying or resolved, but dying all the same, from asphyxiation if he was lucky, burned alive if he wasn't. Tobias looked at the keys again, to the crawling chaos of the fire, and back towards the crop. The temptation to hop in the truck and

leave was too great to pretend it wasn't there and when Tobias imagined his friend left behind, the shame of it caused him to run back into the woods.

The remaining plants were shifting outlines now, cardboard cutouts caught between the faint glow of the fire and Zeke's bobbing headlamp. Breaking from his run Tobias slid to a stop in front of the next one, placing the blades on either side of its trunk, reaching forward to grab the opposing handle while kicking the one closest to him until the blades closed, felling the weed like a tiny Christmas tree. Even as he kicked up dirt while stomping the blades shut, downing the plant took longer than Tobias wanted. The erratic light caused each row beyond the first to blend with each row past it, making it impossible for Tobias to know how many remained. His brain multiplied the numbers of these plants the brighter the scene was lit by the fire.

Something that felt like relief began to form in Tobias as he noticed Red and Zeke were moving at the same quick velocity. Delusional as the two might be, it appeared they were aware of the fire's effulgence, the announcement of its final approach. Each row of plants fell in a pattern better than the grid they were planted in, the three speeding in a synchronized rotation between crop and truck. Confidence seemed to build that this could be done, that the entire crop could be retrieved without a single loss to the fierce Californian twins of drought and fire.

Tobias found himself smiling in a heady adrenaline haze when he paused in the frenzied pace of the work. Stopped before a plant, he paused to grip his splitting sides and breathe deep. He looked up and even his panting stopped: Something huge and massive stood afore the fire. It walked as a man but had the head of a beast. Its snout was upturned as a silent howl escaped it, the wail unfolding its body upward into a stance that spoke of an untold anguish. Tobias would never know how much time, great or little, he lost to wondering at it.

Blinking, the image resolved itself into the shifting of the trees and undergrowth dancing in the fire's path. Startled to realize it had moved so far so fast in the time they had been working, the wonder of Tobias' awe fell away to leave only the fear. The fire

had descended the hills surrounding the cabin and arrived on the valley floor. It had the look of a superior mirage, distorting the air around it, seeming to move on its own magic carpet, rolling forward without touching the ground, only consuming it. Everything disappeared into it without transition, a plant one moment and part of the orange blaze next.

Tobias found himself transfixed as he had been a moment ago by the image of the creature, carrying with it the same kind of unreality, his mind not able to grasp its annihilating beauty. He watched it transmogrify everything in its path into a roaring light that gave off columns of black smoke that rose to the sky and blocked out the stars. It was only when his eyes had completed this ascending journey that Tobias realized he could see nothing beyond that wall and that nothing that remained in this place would escape it.

Turning in the dark he stumbled back towards the truck, moving in an erratic zigzag, trying to locate Red in the shifting shadows. Found, Red was grabbed by the sleeve and dragged several feet towards the truck by Tobias' panicked energy before he fell over, swatting at Tobias' hands as his friend tried to pull him up. "Jesus, man, what the hell?" Tobias only needed to point at the closing wall of fire and smoke for it to melt his friend's obsession. Nothing else was said and they ran.

Tobias nearly collided with Zeke, somehow not seeing the headlamp in his focus on the truck. Running in opposite directions they spun around each other for a moment, separating by flurrying arms. Finished, Tobias bent at the waist with panic and fatigue, looking up as his uncle to pant urgently, "Zeke, we have to get out of here."

His face hidden behind the glowing of the lamp, Zeke replied, "No. There's a few left."

Tobias stood straight, Zeke's inflexibility in this moment shocking even someone who had grown up with it. "Uncle Zeke, the fires nearly here. We have to get back."

Zeke turned his gaze from the direction of the plants to his nephew. "Get back to what?"

Confronted with this question, Tobias felt himself border

on hysteria, his head swiveling between Uncle and fire, unsure of what to do or say. The seeming eternity that this confusion held him in was only broken by the visual confirmation that each time he turned away from the fire, it had grown closer by the time he had looked back. Pleading in his eyes and voice, Tobias said to his uncle, "I don't know," he pushed past him, the only thing he could think to do to demonstrate his seriousness. "But I want to be alive to find out."

Red was already in the truck, banging on the driver's side door as he watched for his friend. Tobias ran to it, opened the door and pushed his friend over, reaching forward to make sure the keys were in the ignition, his frightened mind telling him he might have imagined them. He gripped them tight, expelling a breath of relief as he felt the jagged bunch of metal in his hand.

Looking back, Tobias could see the long form of his uncle moving before the few remaining plants, bending and shoveling to move them from their position in the earth. The fire didn't care what Zeke was doing. It kept moving to him.

"What are you doing?" Red's own fanaticism had burned out under his instinct for survival, his voice going high with fright. "Start the truck! Drive!"

Tobias watched the silhouette of his uncle, hoping for some change in the scene, but then bowed to the pressure of peer and blaze. He bent over the wheel, clutching the keys as he turned them in the ignition, stomping on the clutch to hold it down as the old truck labored to life, sucking what oxygen it could out of the air. Its pistons and cylinders rumbled loud enough to be heard over the crackling of the blaze. He looked back for his uncle then and even as he moved his vision from back window to side mirrors to rear view, the lanky form of Zeke couldn't be seen.

Tobias felt Red swivel next to him, mirroring his movements, and when their eyes met Red pleaded with a savage piteousness that Tobias had never seen from him or anyone else. "Drive man!" was his exclamation, his hand trying to move Tobias back and forth.

Tobias turned forward then, readying his position as driver for them to escape, but his eyes darted back to the rearview

mirror, hoping to see Zeke appear out of the fire. His friend continued to sweat fear next to him, urging him to go.

Through the cacophony of noise and light a question rose up in Tobias, unmistakeable in its clarity: What would Zeke or his father do now? He sensed the question like a solid structure that he could see or feel, the framework of it a lifetime's experience of neglect, regret, and disappointment. Tobias couldn't conjure a scenario where his patriarchal relatives stayed within its confines. Forcing them as he might in his imagination to do so, they each seem to wait until he blinked and then exited his mental arena.

Tobias took his hand off the stick shift and turned to place it on the back of his seat, looking out the rear window for Zeke. Red, panic compounded by confusion at his friend's sudden and smooth change in direction began to reach for the wheel, dragging himself towards it as if he could swap places with Tobias. Tobias only pushed him back to the passenger side, commanding him to stop.

Red, his back against the door, leveraged himself against it to begin kicking at his friend. "Go man! Let's get out of here!"

"We're waiting for Zeke."

"Fuck Zeke man, that asshole got us into this!"

Tobias stopped his friend's kicking with a gaze, leveled at him with a calm that was so alien to Red that in that moment he was unsure who was driving the truck. "No," Tobias told him, then turned back to search for Zeke, his face so lit by the fire Red was afraid to look back himself and see how close it was. "We got us into this."

True as that statement may have been, Tobias search for his uncle wasn't untouched by fear, compounded by worry that his near panic was keeping him from seeing the other man or, worse yet, keeping him from seeing that Zeke was already downed by the fire and he was waiting them here for nothing, only bringing them closer to their own deaths. Tobias, without realizing, repeatedly stomped his on the floor mat next to the accelerator as though it had some phantom cousin that would speed Zeke.

But Zeke came running and stumbling out of the flickering light and shadows, having abandoned the shovel to carry

two plants in each hand, the heavy, dirt encrusted roots dragging along the ground. He was cackling, which coming from Zeke was not a joyful sound, but Tobias was glad to hear it anyway. He had the truck moving before Zeke was all the way inside of it, holding the gate with his hands, taking long loping strides to keep up before hopping his feet onto the fender and rolling himself onto the pile of plants in the back. Laying on the fibers of his earthly reward Zeke pointed back at the fire and laughed more, like he had escaped an enemy that had been after him and him alone.

If Tobias had wanted revenge on his friend for the wantonly careless driving he had displayed on the way up the mountain, he was granted it with the descent. Unsure of what directions the fire had spread in or even how to find their way back to the city he simply pointed the truck downhill, taking the fastest trajectory away from the blaze that didn't seem to be moving much slower than they were.

An acutely sharp turn caused several plants to roll off the back of the truck, but Tobias didn't see his uncle go with them so he kept driving. A moment later Zeke's palm began to beat against the cabin's rear window, only stopping when another turn required the use of both of his hands. "Should we stop for him?" Red asked, looking out the back window.

Far enough now that the orange glow of the fire wasn't illuminating the car's interior, Tobias took the chance of taking his eyes off the road long enough to look out the rearview mirror. His uncle's angry, demanding face convinced him that he was, given the situation, better off where he was. "He's fine," Tobias said and kept driving.

The only thing that stopped Tobias, and nearly his heart, was a manned checkpoint. Composed of yellow flashing lights and trucks as big as the Ford he was driving, uniformed people moved about in shadows, working on what must have been important things. Tobias managed to bring the Ford to a halt before plowing into any of them.

Tobias heard Red curse next to him, the focal point of their fear suddenly and unexpectedly shifting from the fire behind them to the roadblock in front. He felt more than saw Zeke hop

out of the back, which also attracted the attention of the fire marshal approaching the truck. The side-view mirror showed Tobias that his uncle had produced a tarp from somewhere in the back of the truck and was tethering it over the plants.

Tobias gave a start when the bearded fire marshal knocked on his window, the fact that it was rolled up somehow having escaped him. As he cranked it down, he realized the man wasn't in fact bearded, but covered in so much soot, sweat, and dirt, that he looked like he was wearing commando face paint. "What the Hell are you boys doing out here?" was his understandably angry question. He hopped his vision around the truck's occupants, staring them down with a hostile suspicion that all people doing dangerous work have for the stupid.

Dazed by the day and everything that had happened in it, there was a part of Tobias that wished he had let Red drive, if for only the reason that he'd be the one talking to the fire marshal now. Instead of dwelling on that, though, he tried his best to imitate Red's most innocent smile and stuttered for a moment before coming out with, "We have some property over by Elysium Lake. We wanted to check on it."

Watching Zeke with a greater interest than made Tobias comfortable the marshal said, "This area's been closed off for days."

Tobias felt his smile melt into something more comfortable as he replied, "Has it? Wow, it doesn't feel like we've been up there that long."

The marshal narrowed his eyes in the almost universal signal ofauthority figures when they suspect there's more going on than is readily apparent. When Zeke hopped into the back of the cab without a word the marshal lifted the end of a flashlight he was holding to raise the edge of the tarp. He tilted his head slightly, unsure for a moment in the dim light what it was he was looking at. His expression turning to disappointment as he saw it. He brought his face back to Tobias who only smiled more broadly, his attempt to copy Red's charm mixing with the multi-purpose fear he now felt, resulting in something that looked more like mental illness than friendliness. Turning back to look in the

direction of the fire, the marshal seemed to take stock of it, then sighed. He faced Tobias again, but spoke to everyone in the truck. "Get out of here, you idiots."

Red nearly whooped, letting out a happy but muted exclamation. Tobias was grateful Red kept that mostly to himself as he smiled at the marshal and said, "Yes sir." The firefighter stepped away from the truck and pointed to a gap in the line of vehicles blocking the trail. Grateful in that moment in a way he would never be able to describe, both Tobias and Red thanked him and drove on, feeling like small children allowed to leave the principal's office without punishment.

Away from the fire and danger Tobias felt the first of the adrenaline begin to drain away from him, leaving tremors in his heart and in his hands in its wake. He tried to breathe this out of himself, though, when they descended from the mountains somewhere in Yucaipa. The flat valley of mobile homes and white trash was a long way from his mother's. Safe from the fire or no, there was still a lot of driving to do before they got back to Orange County and any inch of it could be covered by a cop who didn't have his hands full the way the fire marshal did. Busting three rednecks with a truckload of grass would make for a good story.

But even that threat felt like a cool drink of water compared to the dangers of the fire. Tobias took his time and was grateful that his companions were silent. After awhile a part of this thankfulness broke off and became surprise that Zeke didn't demand control of his truck. Tobias looked in the back to see him, soot and dirt encrusted, exhausted and napping, his body only moving with the slight vibrations of the vehicle.

Tobias stayed off the main roads, turning the trip back into an even longer one than it would have been normally. But the need for vigilance kept him awake as he kept his eyes out for any law enforcement, feeling like he had used up his luck for the decade and not wanting to test that.

The drive also gave him time to think and he was grateful that his companions were quiet. He suspected that he would have a hard time forming words at this point and most of his thoughts floated around his head in abstract concepts. Somewhere along

the line one of those turned into a specific destination and he laughed a bit at himself as he realized he had been subconsciously heading back to the diner.

At an indeterminate time that could only be defined as very late or extremely early, Tobias pulled the truck up to the tiny bungalow his mother had lived in his entire life. Turning off the engine, neither one of his companions stirred, so Tobias slipped out of the truck and made his way to its other side, knocking on the window to wake both Red and Zeke. Red worked his jaw in a yawn and smiled in a sleepy way that made Tobias grin. He noticed his uncle start awake but ignored him in favor letting his friend see him chuckle.

Red rolled down his window as Zeke exited the truck, asking, "Where are you going?"

Tobias laughed, not sure what other answer there could be to Red's question. "I'm going to bed." Despite the fact that his arrival time almost guaranteed an argument with his mother, Tobias found he was grateful to be home. He turned to grin at the bungalow, thinking of the man who bought it. "And I'm going to sleep the sleep of the just. Or the dead. I don't care which."

"I'll take you home," Zeke said to Red, stepping out of the truck. Standing next to his nephew he continued, "I'll let you know where we can setup shop and get these plants trimmed. Get ready to turn these into some money."

"Thanks Uncle Zeke." Tobias wondered what the odds were that he'd actually even hear from him in this matter, but decided he didn't care. Instead he backed up a step or two away towards the house and smiled. "But I don't think I want to see you for awhile."

Zeke didn't look insulted by the statement, but a bit put off and confused. Tobias left him with that and turned around to go inside. A part of him felt mildly guilty about leaving his friend with such a madman, but his fatigue lent itself well to honest reflection. He suspected the pair were in good company.

The bus ride into California's interior wasn't as boring as Tobias expected. Haven't actually been this way in awhile it was

different than he remembered it. Once they had driven through the same blackened landscape he had just recently escaped from the highway passed into desert, dusty brown hill country covered with the occasional patches of buckwheat and sage. Tobias busied himself with looking out the window and pretending he was running along side the bus, moving with impossible speed and agility to jump over any obstacle or terrain.

He got off the bus near Barstow and started to walk, headed south towards Daggett. The long distances of the open space seemed to drag out forever as he walked them, only cut short by a Mexican man in a truck who was kind enough to offer him a ride.

The modest ranch house was the same colors as the earth it was built into and seemed well maintained even under the harsh conditions of the Mojave. He waited outside the short fence that surrounded the property for a time before pushing open the gate and walking in. He only hesitated once before he knocked on the door.

The tall man who resembled a fuller version of Zeke answered the door. He looked at Tobias with eyes that weren't unkind. His own hesitation hung there but then something changed and the older man asked, "Tobias? What are you doing here?"

Tobias had no idea how his grandfather recognized him, but it surprised him so he blurted out what he had been planning to say even though it made less sense to do so now. "I'm your grandson."

The older man gave a small, happy smile. "I know." He stepped back from the door. "Why don't you come in?"