You Fucked Up #3

by

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In memory of Demetri Demas

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The story so far:

(You Fucked Up #1)
Following a world wide pandemic that ravaged the earth and decimated mammalian life, Taffy, usually a wandering punk musician, finds himself alone in a house, everyone left with the government relocation and quarantine program months ago. The city is completely quiet and empty now. Taffy finds himself descending into madness. He resolves to wander in search of companionship, and discovers the only anarchist punk house left in the city. Here, a small group of survivors hunker down to spend the long Minneapolis winter in their new found utopia of loneliness.

Taffy and a sassy-drunk-geek-high tech-nerd-cross dresser named Franklin became lovers and help each other make it thru the long winter thru endless variations of debauchery. The abundance of free alcohol from abandoned liquor stores brings them all to a state of perpetual drunk. Winter came to an end. Along with spring, signs of civilization returning to the city began appearing: robotic aircraft patrolling the
skies, helicopters circling the city, closing in on the random survivors, closing in on the house full of anarchists who had been living in isolated freedom from the rest of the evacuated refugee population.

The pastime of choice for the besieged group of friends became sitting on the roof drinking cocktails, watching the machines of civilization closing on their world.

(You Fucked Up #2)
The mysterious forces continue their re-occupation of Minneapolis, and stress about the future builds among the tenants of the Last House. Eviction seems imminent. Julius is sexually assaulted during yet another drunken night. The perpetrator is finally discovered and forced into exile by car- Aston must leave the city and face the unknown.

Taffy and Franklin decide they’ve had enuf of the pressure cooker and try to make a break for freedom. They drive a car west to escape into the country, hoping to slip thru the military curtain. Their car is attacked by a helicopter and they flee thru the storm drainage system all the way to the Mississippi River where they meet the remains of the new Minnehaha Tribe, Trelah, Flaming Vomit, and Rail Rhodes. They
all walk back to the Last House and find it deserted. A man in a sports car shows up, Jimmy. He is a liaison for the military, whose job is to convince people to peacefully join the new government that is reclaiming the city. Trelah and Flaming vomit disappear into the city. Taffy, Franklin, & Rail Rhodes allow themselves to be taken into custody. They are processed and given contracts to work with the new government, the Corporate Coalition. They are bused into Minneapolis to take up their new jobs and give birth to the new civilization. The government is issuing standard happy pills for people to deal with the grief. Taffy begins taking them. Franklin continues to be an alcoholic and stops dressing femme. Taffy and Franklin grow apart and are no longer friends. Taffy becomes dissatisfied with his job working at a cafe and decides he must leave town. Interstate travel has been legalized again and he boards a train headed south. On the train he meets an outgoing woman named Louise who shares her bottle of booze with him. They debark the train in Winona, Minnesota, and spend a night on the town. While relaxing on the bank of the Mississippi River they see an abandoned boat floating down the river, which they swim out to retrieve, and decide to take it down the river.
Sexy legs
I woke up on the beach with the sun was blazing on me. I sat up. There was the boat, nudged up on shore, a line tied to a tree trunk was taught, the water had gone down in the night. Little wind blown waves on the water, rocking the boat slightly. The east bank, across the river, was still in a cool shade formed by the trees that hung over.

We didn’t plan that out too well.

I got up and took my clothes off, walked into the cold water, my droopy eyed morning stupor vanished. The shore dropped away fast and I was swimming, head underwater, then dog paddling. I swam out and turned, seeing the world from the beaver’s eye perspective. Louise was still sleeping on shore, somehow under the sun, slow cooking in her sleep. I had to act. I swam back and walked out to where she slept.

“Louise!”

She moaned and turned, brows turning down as the sun burned into her eyes. I took her hand and pulled, “You’ll thank me for this later. You’re getting sun burnt!”
She stood up, still asleep, and stumbled groggy down to the water, her feet entered the flow.

“Ah, shit!” Louise stepped back, tore her clothes off and dove in, coming up with a scream. I laughed and joined her. Our heads bobbed as we let the flow cool our skin and wake us. We crawled out and lay on the beach, sun evaporating the river from our skin.

“Cold water immersion hangover cure.” I said. We lay a long time, listening to the wind move the trees and water lap on the sand, endless slight waves licking the shore.

Out of the stillness I heard a distant noise, a motor, that oscillating tone. I looked over at Louise. She hadn’t moved.

“Hear that?”
“Yeah.”
“A boat?”

“Yeah. Probably a patrol. Or a fishing boat. You know they started fishing the river for food supply? Everything fresh they can get their hands on.”

“What if it’s a patrol, shouldn’t we hide? I mean, what’s our story? I’m not supposed to be here, technically.”

“Don’t worry. Let me do the talking.” Louise propped herself up on her elbows.
“What if it’s Patriots or Pirates, or some random crazy people terrorist psychos?”
“Dammit Taffy, you have got to relax. Stress all the time is really bad for you. Bad for everyone around you. No way to live. Everything works out, so you might as well not stress about working it out. Enjoy the process of everything working out.”
“I’m trying to maintain a healthy level of stress to keep out of really stressful situations like prison, torture, and immediate death.”
“Oh, I don’t think death would be stressful, I’ve heard it’s more relaxing, a lifting of every burden you’ve ever carried. The white light at the end of the tunnel. Peaceful. Being alive is stressful! Minimize the worry, cut it out. Here we go. Just breathe now guy, alright? This is where we are supposed to be. You gotta think like that to manifest the reality of it. I know that you know what I’m talking about.”
The boat was closing, in the middle of the river sending a wake out from the bow. A small boat, it turned towards them.
“Ah, good. Now we can find out some information. Maybe they have some snacks for us.”
The boat slowed as it got close to shore, nudged up on the sand and the engine cut. A man came out of the glassed wheel house dressed in Merdeavion uniform.

“Hello!” his hand was on his holstered gun, “Good to see folks out enjoying the nice weather. I almost hate to interrupt. But, it’s my job.”

“I know all about your job.” Louise said, holding up her Merdeavion badge.

“Oh hell! Welcome to pool 19! Haven’t seen you around before, what’s your orders?”

“Doing a survey of security systems. Any comments you want to offer?”

The officer shrugged, “Things are pretty mellow out here. Not like in Red Wing, patriot activity. Here, just a few old guys fishing, hermit river rats that survived on their own. Harmless.”

“Potential terrorists.”

“Oh yeah.” the officer laughed looking up the river, “You never could trust everybody. The patriots have good propaganda, don’t they. Sometimes makes me sad. I know they’re crazy, we cant go back, that time is over. But, it makes me sad for the way things used to be. So many good people gone…” he looked thru us, thru the trees on shore, looked into the abyss of the past.
“Yeah. Lot of good people.” Louise said, “Are you a drinking man?”

“Now that it’s legal again. Yes.”

Louise reached into her bag, “Half a bottle of imported Ouzo, good stuff!”

“Wow, old stock. They don’t import this anymore.”

“Enjoy, friend.”

“Thank you, I will.” Louise walked up and handed the bottle over. The man looked down at it, then at Louise, “My name is Mark Oberlin.”

Louise shook his hand, “Louise.”

“Taffy.”

Mark Oberlin smiled, “Really good to see you folks out here. This is the way the river used to be, people just living, sharing what they had, family. I thot I would never see it again.”

“Things are getting better.” Louise touched his arm.

“Yeah. Well... Back to the job, I guess. Give me a push off?”

“Sure!”

Louise and Taffy took the bow of the boat and heaved. The man started the motor and reversed into deeper water, waving and smiling.

“He hardly noticed me.” Taffy said.
“That made me sad. I feel like I might have gone to high school with that guy.”

* * *

The next day they were awoken by the same Merdeavion officer. Their worries were dispelled by a smile on the officer’s face and the waving of his hand as he pulled up on the beach.

“Bad news, campers.” The officer spoke of a major attack that had occurred in the night downriver and warned against continuing on.

“It’s worse than ever now. They’ll cut you to pieces.”

“Should we wait it out?”

The officer frowned and shook his head, “Could be months. These people are fighting a guerrilla war against the Corporate Coalition. That area of the river is a kill zone and could be that way for a long time.”

“Dammit.” Taffy said, “Too bad we can’t portage the boat around them.”

“Yeah. Well, actually,” Officer Mark Oberlin pointed a finger up into the air, “There is a convoy of Merdeavion trucks heading south, going thru Kansas City. I could put you and your boat on a flatbed and
have you dropped off at the Missouri River in Kansas City. Then you could continue on down the Missouri River, which on the far eastern side of the state of Missouri flows into the Mississippi River. Security is stable from St. Louis on downriver.”

“Serious?” Taffy let his jaw drop.

“Brilliant!” Louise exclaimed, “I can continue my surveys!”

“Exactly!” Officer Mark Oberlin winked at her, “Merdeavion business, we can put you right on there, no problem.”

“We are in your debt.” Taffy said.

“We’re all playing on the same team. I always wanted to go down the river myself. Too busy working, raising a family, all of that. Maybe a little part of me is going with you. Send me a postcard when you get to St. Louis.”

The Merdeavion truck driver was a stoner. His name was Bill, and as the three of them drove thru the night, the boat having been lifted by forklift and secured to the back of a flatbed trailer, they smoked excessive amounts of weed and listened to a never ending cue of
adventure metal blasting from the speakers of the
diesel truck.

“We’re going to Kansas City.” Taffy said to Louise.

“Kansas City, here we come.” Louise answered,
punching him in the arm, they laughed outrageously.

* * *

The lights of Kansas City rolled over endless hills and
the night air trembled with summer. The potential for
enlightenment emanated from everything in this
blown out town. The spirit in the trash blowing across
the street sparkled with wild life.

As the truck that cradled them rolled into town
with the windows down sounds of machine gun-like
explosions reached their ears. Bill explained that many
of the city’s streets were being de-paved with
explosives to create urban gardens. Vegetables. Collard
greens, kale, chard, tomatoes, beans, bell peppers and
such. Under the supervision of Merdeavion Security,
the sunny sides of entire streets were being cleared of
pavement and the soil tested. Sometimes they added
certain chemicals to bind the heavy metals and toxins
together on a molecular level, clumping them so they
would be too large to be absorbed by the roots of the

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vegetable plants. The soil was then amended with manure and roto-tilled to facilitate the planting of the gardens.

“People gotta eat! Gas is too expensive now for food to be shipped across the country, even by train. It’s not reliable either, even if it was affordable.” Bill’s voice changed as he became excited about the subject, “Turns out that 50% of the land in the average city is used for streets and parking lots. Half of the land covered in pavement! People started doing this with pick axes and shovels. Some genius got a hold of a case of explosives and took out a whole street in one day. That was it! It’s like a new gold rush. The green rush! Everyday it sounds like damn world war six or something, but you smile knowing what’s really going on. Anybody who wants a job can get paid work doing this de-paving stuff. It’s pretty sweet. I’ve seen some of the streets that have been planted, it’s amazing. Country in the city! I’m thinking I might settle here someday. Who knows.”

The Missouri River slid downhill below them. The My Baby IV floated in the current of this new river, the same river, the drainage basin for the heartland of the North American continent. On this water they transgressed spaces. Normal people didn’t do this.
Climbing into forbidden zones, socially inexplicable. Fascinating to the work-every-day-world. What sort of wild ass would do this, float down the river like that, with no job to get back to, no destination to arrive at.

The wild river. Behind fences. Thru the broken and abandoned dangerous rusty places. The state has no control in these places, there is nothing that the state values there. We win! Hidden from the eyes of it’s agents we have a free space where the fluid connection to nature exists, plants grow from the cracks in concrete & brick, trees grow out of broken windows, rain falls thru holes in the roof. The tentacles of the state have withdrawn here, the war against nature has been lost in these places. Is that why we like it? I find myself here with a friend, fascinated by this possibility, the end of wage slavery, has the tap been closed on the spigot of industrial pollution? No longer the invisible gun at our back, exploitation has failed, we are free to misbehave, to love who we want, to live as we want, to laugh when we want, and no more ‘Can I help you sir?’ or ‘Have a nice day.’ Nothing but a rusting warehouse with an empty snack machine. What are we gonna eat now? Walking thru that abandoned, decrepit place we face death as the transformation, death as revolution, the wind and water and earth and animals
and plants move back to the ground they once lived on, in the death of the factory they spring to life. We stand there amidst this, trespassing, transgressing, our people don't want us here, a part of us doesn't feel right being here, wearing the clothing that the oppressive industrial machine made for us. The clothing rots off our bodies. We'll find something else to wear.

Here we are to see and understand the living world of wide open possibilities, to live with it and not against it. This must be what the death of the state looks like: vines growing luxuriously up the ugly gray concrete walls, vibrant brown, red, green life.

How could anyone imagine that a factory would be a good thing to make? The silent smokestacks now fill with sparrows at twilight, circling around the tall hollow spire, they enter down into it one by one, into that dark tunnel, a great brick birdhouse erected by human masons who passed away when the world was different.
Taffy woke up in the shade with the smell of wood smoke tingling his sinus. No hangover today, the last of the booze had been drank during their all night boat launch party on the banks of the Missouri River under the city lights of Kansas City. Bill and the other convoy drivers took a layover to spend the night and managed to bring a mess of people from the city. The bonfire raged until replaced by the rising sun.

They were not much further downriver from Kansas City, but there was no hurry. Louise was down the beach breaking twigs to fuel a small cooking fire between some rocks. A stainless steel pot on top of the rocks was steaming. The sun hadn’t reached small patches of fog drifting on the water and in the trees. Taffy felt the sand underneath his body, the warm July sand of the summer that the winter ice laid upon, that the spring high water covered. This was Taffy’s favorite time to spend with the river beaches and he smiled as he pushed himself up off it, cracking his spine and stretching, shaking of the years of wage slave torment that had gone into muscle and bone. Perhaps this was retirement, nice and early, enjoyably early.
“Damn. I really like the Missouri River. I’m happy we came here.”
Louise looked out at the river, “Yeah.”
“What are you cooking?”
“Wild greens. Wood nettle. Evening primrose. Goosefoot. Are you ready to taste the flavor that the river has to offer?”
“Yes. How can I help?”
“Pluck these leaves off and put them in the pot.”
Taffy did so and soon cursed, “Damn this got stingers on it!”
“Oh shit, sorry. It only burns a few minutes. Kinda good replacement for caffeine which we don’t have much of, eh? Wake you up!”
“Where’d you learn all this? On the farm, right?”
“Some on the farm, we harvested wild plants that grew there as well as the stuff we cultivated. I mean, think about it. Why pass over a weed that is edible and nutritious in favor of something you planted and grew? If the weed is just as nutritious as the cultivated plant, it’s less work to eat the damn weed. I love all kinds of free things. Free food is one of the best.”
“I noticed that fishing rod on the boat. Do you know how to fish?”
“Yeah. I’m a country girl, you’ve figured that out by now.”
“T’ll be a city kid. The only thing I’ve fished with was a magnet on the end of a string, down into storm drains and anywhere else there might be cool metal shit to find.”
“Catch anything good?”
“I caught a cell phone once. That was a lot of fun. Prank calls! I kinda feel bad about it now that I’m old and mature.”
“That’s hilarious. We should try fishing today. We need something for bait. Nasty, stinky bait for the catfish. Maybe we can find a rotting carcass somewhere. Catfish like it nasty.”
“And some water to drink. A little foray up to civilization?”
“Sounds good. According to the charts there’s a little burg up there not too far. But first, breakfast.”

(Sixty one)
Louise and Taffy followed a deer trail up thru the Japanese Knot Weed, thick mosquitoes assailed their
flesh, tiny wings riding the humid waves of summer air.

“I’m dying!” Taffy said, “They’re not so bad down on the river, but up in the bush, fuck! What’s up with that?”

“The wind blows them away on the river, and the sun scares them off. They like the dark stillness of the woods. You know, just like a barfly. Everything looks fine from the sunny and windy street, then you take one step in the bar and they’re all over you.”

“Yeah. What can ya do, huh?”

Tiny wings buzzing as they dove for the exposed flesh on their ears, the mosquitoes swarmed around their warm bodies, their frantic hands perpetually slapping the targeted flesh.

“I think we should make our own wind.” Louise said.

“How?”

“Fukn run!” Louise began sprinting up the trail, leaving confused mosquitoes chasing after and knot weed broken and swishing behind.

Taffy kicked into gear. At first the mosquitoes persisted, chasing their prey. And then it was working, Taffy was jogging thru the air, they couldn’t keep up, bumping into occasional confused mosquitoes that
bounced off his face and went spinning off into the night.

“It’s damn working!” Taffy said, catching up to Louise.

“We’ll see how long our sitting-inside-all-winter bodies can sustain this trot.” Louise huffed.

“I’m totally motivated.” Taffy gasped for air.

“Have you ever camped up north, in the real woods?”

“Nope. I really am a city kid.”

“Biting black flies, no-see-ums, leeches, ticks, mosquitoes, and sometimes swarms of big ass flies that didn’t bite you but just walked with scratchy legs and licked your skin, just walking all over, licking.”

“Oh my god. Fuck.” Taffy began to breathe heavy, “I don’t know how much longer I can go. This winter really did take it out of me.”

“Yeah. Kinda hard to be enthusiastic about life when it seems like life doesn’t really want you around. I think we’re almost out of the woods, just a little further!”

They burst out of the shadows and into the light of an open farm field, last years crop of sweet corn still standing there unharvested, dehydrated and sun bleached bone white. A carpet of weeds had sprouted
up under those corn skeletons, a heavy border of goose foot grew on the road surrounding the field, fringing the dead crop.

“Wow. There’s no corn sprouts!” Louise said.
“What’s that mean?”
“Well, this whole crop left unharvested, and not any corn seeds sprouting from cobs that feel to the ground? There’s only one reason, must be terminator seeds. Genetically Modified Organisms. Fucking shit. We could be eating corn right now, but for some greedy bastards who didn’t want this farmer to be able to save enuf seed for next year’s planting."

Taffy looked up and down the road that surrounded the corn field, “Well, left, right, or thru the corn?”

“Let me climb up on your back so I can see over the corn.”

“Uh, yeah, alright. Piggy back. Give me a count.” Louise got behind Taffy and he hunched down, “One, two, three!” She landed perfectly up with her legs wrapped around his waist, “I can’t see anything! Another foot! Pull my feet up while I push on your shoulders!”
Taffy grunted and wobbled on his recently jogged out legs, “See anything? Whoa!” They went down in a pile on the road. “Sorry.”

“I’m alright.” Louise said laughing, “I saw what looks like some kind of civilization over there, but you know in farm country when you think you see a town it’s usually just a bunch of grain silos or an abandoned house.”

Taffy rolled up onto his feet, “Let’s check it out.”

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The town was empty. A small water tower, a hundred houses. Nothing moved except the wind pushing around leaves on trees. They walked down Main Street, looking for groceries. A dog barked, answered by other dogs.

Taffy tensed, “Shit.”

“I’ve got a gun and dog spray. It’s a real problem in some areas. Merdeavion people getting chewed up bad. Fuck that. You survive the worse plague in human history and then a dog bite takes you out with a fatal staph infection? That aint no way to go. We’ll be alright Taffy.” Louise patted him on the shoulder.
“How about you give me one of those things. I’d like to be able to pull the trigger on something.”
Louise took off he pack and took out a black canister, handed it to Taffy.
“You don’t trust me with the gun.”
“It’s my gun. Why would I give it to you?” she said, locking his eyes.
“That makes sense. Alright. Anyway, the first time I shot a gun was last year.”
“I grew up shooting guns. Wisconsin farm.”
“Alright. I’ll rock the dog mace. Does it work on anything else?”
“I think it works on anything that has a nose.”
“Awesome. That about covers it.”
They walked on.
“Here we go, the hardware-grocery-gas store. One stop shopping.”
The windows of the corner store were blasted out, the front doors jammed open by mounds of broken safety glass.
“Looks pretty old.” Taffy said.
They entered the bombed out store. The shelves were stripped of product, the isles littered with trampled packages of corn chips coated in fluorescent
cheese powder and dangerously slippery grease stains from Little Debbie snacks.

“Looks like someone blew thru here in a hurry.” Louise said.

“No bottled water.”

“Check the tap.”

Taffy stepped up the the small sink between the nacho cheese dispenser and the rotating hot dog cooker. Turning the cold stainless steel knob, water gurgled and shot out in spasms, then flowed free.

“Water tower is still kicking,” Taffy said, “We just gotta find some empties to fill up with.”

“Check that off the list. Now how about some food. We might have to go house to house. Oh hey, check out the hardware isle, a garden cart!”

“We’re gonna push that thru the mosquito gauntlet?” Taffy balked.

“We can jog down the trail with it, all the way to the river.”

“Oh yeah, totally.” Taffy went into the rear of the place and found a small office and break room with a water cooler topped by a five gallon carboy. He grabbed the empty carboy and filled it at the sink, then headed for the front doors. Walking by the cash register he stopped. There on the counter sat a mason
jar with several fresh flowers in it, yellow petals and black centers. The skin on the back of his neck tightened and blood began pounding in his ears.

“Louise! Check this out.”

“Oh shit. Are those real?”

Taffy touched one of the yellow petals, it fell off.

“Wow, that’s creepy. Why would someone even do that?”

“A survivor who was close to someone that worked here, maybe, it’s like putting flowers on a grave. No body, no grave. The last place they were seen.”

“Well, that’s creepy. I say we hurry out of here.”

“I think it’s alright.” Taffy said, “Someone that would do this has compassion, right? They’re not psycho. I mean, probably a little crazy for sure. But not psycho.”

“Let’s score some food, Taffy.”

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In the basement of a church they found a cache of apocalypse food, dry beans, rice, oats, grains, and several charcoal water filters and first aid kits. They loaded up the garden cart and headed towards the river.
The droning sound of a car engine in the distance, coming closer, brought their eyes together.

“Let me guess. You’re going to do the talking?” Taffy said.

“I don’t much feel like talking.” Louise said, “Not without an appropriations order to explain this looting. Let’s bug out!”

Louise ran with the cart down a side street into neighborhoods of houses, turning left and right, trying to gauge where the river might be accessed. The car buzzed thru town behind them, down Main Street. Rows of trees in the distance, it seemed to be the bank of the Mississippi River, but getting to them they found the woods was only a few trees wide, a cultivated row of trees to act as a wind break between farm properties.

“We are lost.” Louise said.

“Could be that line of trees over there.”

“Or it could be the border of another farm.”

“Got a map?”

Louise pulled out her mini computer, flipped open the screen, “Batteries are dead.”

“Oh, life. Hey look, it’s getting dark!”

“Nice.”

They looked around at the horizon of possibilities.
“Okay. The sun is going down over there, so the river is the opposite way. We need to turn left.”
“Sounds reasonable, in a general sort of way. But there is no left to turn.”
Louise looked at the wall of dead corn, “I don’t think this stuff has got much fight left in it. Let’s do as the crow flies.”
“What?”
Louise gave a cry like what you might say to get a horse to start running and dove into the corn, pulling the wagon behind her. The corn stalks fell like dominoes under her burning body. Taffy ran after, grabbing at random cobs, yanking them from their stalks. “I wonder if this is popcorn?” He tossed several into the cart in front of him and pushed the cart as Louise’s momentum slowed.
They emerged at last onto a road faced with woods.
“We made it!” Taffy said.
“And now: right or left?”
“I think left.”
“I have no idea.”
“Let’s go left.”
“Alright.”
They walked down the road.
“There, the knot weed!” Louise said.
“Yeah but, this knot weed stretches for miles.”
“This is it. Pretty sure.”
“It’s really getting dark.”
“Let’s go down. At least we can make a fire and camp on the beach, right? Even if we don’t find the boat.”

They turned down the narrow trail, wheels of the garden cart crunching thru the juicy stems of knot weed. Soon the path curved around and up to a ridge that ran to the river.

“I don’t remember this ridge.” Taffy said.
“Your turn to pull the cart, guy.”

Taffy pulled the cart into the darkening mosquito laden woods, dripping sweat, insect stab wounds swelling and itching, both hands locked on the metal handle of the cart, toes burning and blistering from the furious trek, unseen branches slapping his face. Then the night was blown back by the power of several million candles whose light had been caged by a long gone wizard, blazing down on them in a narrow beam from the top of the ridge. A voice from behind the light called to them, “I have a gun! Don’t make me use it!”
After getting to know each other for several hours they found Gregory to be a hospitable man with a beard. He untied the rope from their wrists and offered tea.

“That would be great. Thank you.” Louise said.

Taffy stretched his arms over head and rolled his neck, “I appreciate your restraint. It would have been much safer for you to shoot us on sight. Times are strange, I couldn’t blame you.”

Gregory shuffled over to the iron cook stove, opened the front and laid a few sticks on the coals, closed the door and put the copper tea kettle on the burner.

“I live a solitary life here. Whatever happened out there didn’t reach me here. I still don’t understand it too well, the sickness, why everyone disappeared.”

Gregory looked out the window of his shack, “I noticed the change right away on the river, the weekenders, all the white people in their white speedboats. I knew something was up that Saturday on the river when it was dead calm, quiet, just me and the fish splashing. It was so quiet I could hear the river moving downhill. That’s when I knew. I had plans to
go into town that Saturday, but I didn't go anywhere near town for as long as I could."

Gregory reached up to a shelf made out of an old piece of river driftwood and pulled down a large mason jar full of some dark tea, “I used to try. I worked real hard. Organizing. Out reach. Radical shit. After a dozen years of that I took stock. Seemed like the machine had the upper hand, seemed like eventually all my hard work with people would be wiped out. My whole life wasted pushing that rock uphill. A miserable task that would drop me off at the curb, old and bitter. I got out of the game a little too late. I am old and a little bitter now. Mostly I’ve been happy out here, watching the seasons, the natural cycles, the circles, everything is here. Feeling connected to the world around me, feeling good about that.”

Gregory poured the tea into small mason jars and set them on the table in front of Taffy and Louise.

“You might have been naturally immune to the disease, or maybe you were never exposed to it.” Louise said while cupping her hands around the warm jar, “If you want, I have the antidote with me. I could leave a kit with you, in case you started to show symptoms.”
Gregory smiled, “That’s some river hospitality you’ve got there. I wouldn’t turn that down.”

Louise reached into her bag and pulled out the sealed packet, “If you start feeling sick, it’s a horrible burning in your guts, like no other sickness I’ve felt. The feeling has been compared to acute appendicitis—”

“I had my appendix removed when I was younger. I know what that feels like.”

“It’s got to go in the bloodstream, the whole dose.”

“I can handle that too. I used to be a junkie.”

Gregory’s smile was framed by his dark beard, “You folks hungry? It’s not often I have an opportunity to entertain guests.”

“I’m so hungry I forgot that I was.” Taffy said.

“Count me in!” Louise said.

The table was soon spread with food, illuminated by candles at the center. River potatoes from the Wapatoe plant, wild rice harvested nearby, catfish from the Mississippi, a salad of greens taken from the fields and woods. Wine made from wild berries, fermented by Gregory.

Taffy ate and felt his skin tingle with a wave of heat passing over his body, “This is the best food I ever ate.”
“I enjoy it.” Gregory said, “I like seeing where the food I eat comes from, taking it out of the soil and water where it grew with my own hands and feet.”

gregory
“Feet?”

“That’s how you get the wapatoes out of the river mud! By dancing on them. Doing all of this makes me feel like I’m a part of something. One of the animals.”

“Seems pretty lonely.” Taffy said.

Gregory quaffed from his mug of wine, “It was hard to get used to after spending most of my life surrounded by people. Out here everything is slower, but when you slow down, then you can start to see everything that’s going on, the slow things happening all around you. This forest and river is a bustling city of animals and plants and insects. The weather and the movements of the sun, moon, planets, all these things that civilization neglects or looks at like it’s a problem because it can’t be controlled. With civilization there’s not enuf hours in the day! Rain is something to run from, people hide under roofs! The sun is too hot! The snow is too cold! The wind is wrecking your hairdo! Bugs bite and trees fall on cars! So people live in these space stations, get in the car and push a button, the airlock opens to the outside world, they drive to work, park in the parking garage and walk on a skyway into the high rise, like they live off planet. Out doors equals danger and death. Uncontrollable. That’s why I love it.
Keeps you on your toes. It’s fun. Helluv a lot better than staring at a tv screen.”

* * *

After dinner Gregory went on a walk for purposes he wouldn’t explain. Taffy and Louise sat on the porch of his shack listening to heat bugs in the dark woods, stomachs full and faces red from the unfiltered wine.

“Food high wine buzz.” Taffy said.

Louise laughed. “Isn’t he great? I’m happy to find out there’s at least one river rat left.”

“What do you think of this going back to the land stuff? I know some people who’ve done this. They’re probably still out there, if they figured out what to eat. Just living. Is it wrong? Turning your back on humanity? Do you think it’s right, knowing that people are suffering, using your privilege to duck out the back door?”

“Right or wrong, whatever, I think being a hermit looks a little fucking boring.” Louise said, “Watching the seasons go by? I’m a country girl, but from the country where there’s bars on Friday night. Jukeboxes. Dancing.”
“Right. Party time. That reminds me. I thot you should know that I was on the happy pills but I had stopped the day before I met you on the train. I feel a little weird. Little crazy. I know you’re not supposed to stop cold like that, but I wanted to be done with it. I wanted to feel again, you know? Even if I do freak out and cry or break shit.”

They stared silently out at the sky from the ridge top, the moon rising in the east.

“Alright. So what do you think?”

“Oh right. You want me to say something reassuring now. Well, there’s probably enuf distractions in your life now to offset the lack of drug. I mean, yeah, you’re gonna freak out when someone points a gun at you. It might all come crashing down later tho. Try to give me a warning okay? I have some pills with me, I don’t take them anymore, but I have them. If you need it, let me know. Like you said, times are strange. Don’t feel bad about asking for help. I like you. You’re a friend, a week old friend! So, I help you, you help me, like that. We’re friends. Traveling with someone really accelerates the relationship. I think we’ve already moved beyond the possibility of romance, don’t you think?”
“Oh, I think so. Personally, after my last lover, I’m taking a good long break. Fuck that shit.”
“What was her name?”
“His name was Franklin.”
“Oh.” Louise shifted her body.
“What about you?” Taffy asked.
“I’m feeling pretty nonsexual now.”
“Wow. That sounds crappy.”
“I don’t wanna talk about it.”
“Alright.”
Silence.
Want some more wine?” Taffy said.
“Yeah.”

(Sixty-three)
I have this memory of staring up at the wooden floor from below, laying on the cold concrete floor of the basement, faint moldy smell, too much beer and liquor gurgling in my stomach, spun down to the ground. Staring up at the dark floor boards of the living room above, watching them vibrate. The entire party was dancing, but I couldn’t hear the music coming from the
stereo, all that reached my drunk ears was the
stomping of feet above, stomping in mysterious time,
dancing along to an unheard song. The stomping was
a performance of it’s own, just a beat, a rhythm that I
realized could be used to create a completely different
song. I was the only one focused on this unintentional
performance. I laughed! I laughed and I gasped for
breath, my head was fat with drunk lying there on the
concrete floor the basement of the Rocket Shit. I tried
to get up but could only manage to roll on the floor.

“My friends! Those feet are all my friends! Ha!” I
rolled on the floor, trying to go find someone to share
the performance with. The stomping went on. The
song changed, the dance became a shuffle, softer now,
I could hear the wood of the floor creaking under the
weight of my friends and all the liquor that was in
their bellies. The dancing went on and on until I
couldn’t think of my friends up there anymore. I began
to envision some hideous marching band, some
athletic achievement, and then soldiers marching in a
random way, a beat of chaos. The sound of chaos.
“Stop it! Stop the war!” I was too drunk to get up. The
stomping now terrified me. Nobody knew I existed
down there, it was the sound that the dead hear,
buried in their graves. I lay there alone in a dark basement, I could die.

A catastrophic failure of moderation! Yes, this could be it. Now would come the stumbling battle against walls, stone, wood, random attacks on plants just trying to grow out of tiny square between the concrete sidewalk and the paved street. Trapped by my own choice. Unfortunately drunk. My body mind entrusted to the booze.

It was funny. Ha! No chance I could die alone here in this cold stinking basement, not while imbued with superpowers of booze. Just a few moments to recover from the strength of the stuff and then I decide to fly again under the stars, surrounded by white teeth smiling. No big deal. No stress. I'm drunk right now. Drunk! My friends are all of the same body. I take your hand and pull you my way. Which way did the sea creatures go, we can ride the fish home! Let's go for a walk. C'mon. The street carts are hopping tonight, dirty stainless steel, hot steam hot dogs, big fucking chickens, some with pink feathers, wearing aprons and working those street carts downtown, hustling and clucking at people walking by on a busy weekend night, riding high on something in the bloodstream, cooking deep fried breaded pickles, the best thing I
ever tasted. We are laughing together, and the chicken is telling us funny jokes-

“Taffy!” Louise whispered, “Are you falling asleep?”

Taffy opened his eyes to a canopy of trees overhead with stars shining down between the leaves. They had laid out on Gregory’s porch in sleeping bags, “Shit… I was asleep.”

“No, not yet.” Louise said, “Don’t go to sleep yet. I want you to tell me a story.”

“I was just dreaming about some crazy shit.”

“Dreams can be so off the wall. I bet you know what it means, if you allow yourself to admit what it means. You know what I mean?”

“Yeah, I do. But I don’t want to think about what it means.”

“Tell me a story then,” she said.

“A story. Alright. I remember being at the dermatologist’s office, I was living in my first punk house at the time. The psoriasis on my skin was broken out like never before, all the possible triggers for a breakout of the rash were present in my life. Totally broke and stressed out every month about paying rent. Depressed. No food, bad diet. I was eating whatever I could get my hands on, a trash bag full of day old
dumpstered donuts would last me a couple days. That would be breakfast lunch and dinner. Lots of alcohol. No wonder I had angry little red spots all over my body, itching like mad, I had no access to any useful anti-inflammatory salve. One night I could not sleep, the itching was killing me, my back bleeding from itching, dried blood on the sores sticking to the sheets. Not pretty. The next day I make an appointment with a dermatologist, some rinky-dink clinic. I go in there like a week later cause that’s the earliest emergency appointment they had, so there I’m naked in the dermatologists office and he’s taking pictures of me to use in some magazine article to show how fucked up psoriasis can get. He asked permission, and I’m like, sure, If you think it will help other people with this horrible curse, then take pictures. And help me out while you’re at it, give me something for god’s fucking sake before I loose my mind. So he prescribes some cream for me, twice a day, and I say, “How am I going to get it onto my back? I can’t reach there.”

“Have someone help you. A friend or family member.”

“I really don’t have any friends. I live with strangers.”

“There’s nobody who could do it?”

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“Well, not really…”
“A girlfriend?”
I laughed at the one, thinking of the low point my self esteem had come to. Who the fuck would want to date a giant bleeding wound?
“No. There’s really no one I could ask.”
The doctor seemed confused.
“Well, you must find someone. If not, you could come here, but I don’t think you want to come here twice a day.”
“No. That would totally suck.”
Louise giggled, and then felt bad and made a sad noise.
“I remember thinking how he didn’t GET it. Sure, a rich doctor could fly a hundred dollar bill on any street and find someone to do anything in five minutes. Then there’s the rest of, people like me, feeling like shit and already thinking maybe nobody really likes me, and I’m going to ask someone who is tentatively my friend to rub a salve on my bleeding wounds twice a day? Not only was my back covered in psoriasis, but it was also hairy. I think I asked someone to do it once, and they did, but it was awkward. That never happened again.
I forced my arms into strange yoga positions to reach the unreachable, I used mirrors to see the layout. I tried to use a stick dipped in the salve. It worked. I could sleep again. Over the years I have figured out how to deal with it in better way, preventing a breakout before it gets to that state. Two things still piss me off: when it shows up on my cock and in my ears. For some reason it seems impossible to get out of the ear canals. The best treatment for it now is not reliance on doctors but the practice of preventative medicine. A healthy diet, meditation to dissolve stress, and the ultraviolet rays of the sun which is probably why it still won’t leave my ears, cause the sun don’t shine there, just like on my ass and cock. For a person who isn’t rich, it’s actually difficult to find a place to lay out naked in the sun frequently enuf to keep the psoriasis away. The sun is everywhere, right? You wouldn’t think it would be so hard, but in this society there is a taboo about naked bodies. It’s illegal! Not that I give a shit about breaking the law, I used to break the law every day, running stop signs and red lights, buying booze for minors, smoking weed, and saying shit like, “How come nobody shoots presidents anymore?” I’m pretty sure that’s illegal. Anyway, the thot of having to talk to a cop while naked is a
nightmare scenario. God damn law and order interfering with natural healing! They would say, “Oh, just go to a tanning salon, what’s yer fucking problem, cockroach?” Money, you fuckheads! God damn born-with-money-in-fer-pocket fuckheads! God damned capitalists! Fucking up everything that was ever good! Making laws against exposing our skin to the sun.”

“Whoa, you just ranted like a crazy person. You’re drunk.”

“I know. I’m trying to pass out, remember. God damn. Ranting about a system that doesn’t exist anymore.”

“Go to sleep.”

(Sixty-four)
They awoke to the sound of metal on metal orchestrated by human flesh, a pleasant clang.

“Breakfast is ready.” Gregory stood above them.

Taffy and Louise ate the excellent food Gregory had prepared and then left on a stroll down to the water to see how their boat was doing. The boat was not there anymore. A piece of rope tied to an old cottonwood
tree was all that was left, it’s frayed ends lay near the Missouri River’s edge.

“That rope was fine.” Louise said.

“Something chewed thru it.” Taffy said.

“Cut thru it.”

“Maybe.”

“What are these tracks here?”

Taffy looked down, “Musk rat? Beaver?”

“A person could have cut it.”

“Yeah. I guess it doesn’t matter either way. The boat’s gone.” Taffy looked downriver, watching the mellow current swirling down.

“We didn’t even have a chance to re-name the damn thing.” Louise lamented.

“So long, My Baby IV. So now what.”

“Let’s take it easy. Hang out with Gregory a bit, if he allows it. He’s got some knowledge, you know. We could learn some things.”

“Yeah alright. Foolish of me to get attached to anything. You think I would know that by now.”

They walked back up to Gregory’s place and told him the news.

“What did you loose?”

“Well, just the boat really. There wasn’t much on it.” Taffy said.
“I left a bag that had my identification papers on board. I have no ID now. If we get stopped by Merdeavion Security, we could be detained.”

“Merdeavion.” Gregory said, “Those are the cars I see driving around with the emblem on the side.”

“Yeah, the security operation of the new Corporate Coalition government.” Louise said, “You’ve never been in contact with them? They’ve never stopped you?”

“They’ve never seen me. When I’m out in the canoe fishing or harvesting plants and I hear the motor of a boat I hit the shore and drag the canoe into the bushes. People are crazy. I want nothing to do with them. Most of them, anyway.” Gregory looked at Louise and Taffy and smiled, “You two didn’t give me a choice. Came right up here and found me!”

“Sorry.” Taffy said.

Gregory laughed, “It’s good to find out I can still talk to other people. It’s like all walls they built to hold this river in it’s course, keep it from flooding the lowland fields, but the flooding is what delivered the nutrients that made the land fertile. I been the same way, closed off from the big picture. Protected by the walls of the forest and my own psychic defenses. It’s
good to have you visit here, it's good to feel like I'm a part of humanity again.”

“We would like to stay. For a little time. We won't overstay our welcome. We were thinking maybe you could teach us about finding food and medicine plants, other things.”

“We’re runaways.” Taffy said while grinning thru his gap toothed 38 year old face, “Maybe a little like you.”

“You’re welcome to stay.”

* * *

For a week they trekked the woods gathering wild foods: stinging nettle, wood nettle, and up by the farm fields Sheep Sorrel and Goosefoot, Evening Primrose roots and greens, down in the back channels of the river stomping in the mud and pulling up Wapatoe tubers and Cat Tails. Fishing for catfish. They laid out on sandy beaches in the summer sun listening to the gurgle of the water going by.

One night they had a fish fry of flathead catfish fillets rolled in spiced flour and deep fried in a cast iron skillet over a small driftwood fire. The evening sun set everything glowing.

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“Where do you think you’ll go when you leave?” Gregory asked.
Taffy looked over at Louise, “Back to civilization? Sounds terrible. I want to continue living on the river.”
“You need a boat. A boat that you can hide from people. A stealth boat.”
“A boat for runaways.” Louise said, “A canoe, like you have. Where can we find one?”
“I know just the place.”

* * *

They went into town at night. Even with all the technology that Merdeavion employed, darkness still had it’s use. The human eye still could not see in the dark unless those machines were turned on and someone was looking thru them. Webs are full of gaps.

The three of them stole into town and circled around to the farmhouse Gregory was looking for.
“It’s in the back, by the garage out there.”
They found the thing under a growth of tall grass and grapevine, a ten foot long plastic molded canoe.
“It’s small and very lightweight. You should be able to drag it out of the water fast and get it into hiding, even with cargo on board.” Gregory spoke in a
low voice tho it seemed the town was abandoned,
“There’s paddles and even portaging wheels inside so one person could roll it down the road.”
“Sweet.” Taffy whispered.
They loaded the items into backpacks and locked the wheels on the canoe, “Hold on here a second, I gotta get something out of the house.” Gregory stole into the backdoor of the place and soon returned carrying a long satchel, “A tent for you, the skeeters get pretty bad sometimes, hard to sleep.”
“Thank you.” Louise said.
The cool night air and thieving business made Taffy’s skin bump up and the smells in his nose sharp, “Gregory, who’s house is this?”
“An old friend. An old friend I haven’t seen in a long time.” Gregory looked up, at the second story windows.
“We got what we came for, right?” Louise said.
“Yeah.” Gregory replied returning his face to them, a faint shimmering of water now in his eyes illuminated by the blinding moonlight, “Let’s go.”
Taffy looked at the river. Water slid by, two days of rain coming down from every watershed within the range of the thunder storm. The river rose 4 feet. They spent those days with the canoe pulled up under some big cottonwood trees at the top of the bank.

“Bad luck to have a boat with no name.” Louise said from her side of the evening campfire.

“Any ideas?” Taffy asked.

“The Slipper.”

“What’s the inspiration for The Slipper?”

“The canoe is comfortable and elegant. And Gregory is Prince Charming.”

“Ha! I give it a thumbs up. The Slipper.”

The first day was spent in the tent, reading books, drawing pictures, playing Exquisite Corpse: drawing on part of the page, folding that part down so that just the edges of the drawing showed, then handing it off to the next person. The results were hilarious and illuminated their thots and feelings. Taffy drew a lot of liquor bottles and human body parts, Louise drew faces of humans and dogs.

“I miss my dog.” Louise said.
“I miss my liquor and my lover. You never realize what something means.”

“Until it’s gone? Cause when it’s gone you can romanticize about how great it was, even if it was actually terrible. How long has it been now?”

“A week? I lose count of the days out here.” Taffy stretched out, “It’s all fluid now. I found myself thinking in terms of season and weather, cause that’s what we need to think about, for the availability of food and shelter. Is it the weekend, is it time to party? Who fucking knows! Everyday is a weekend now, it’s all slack. Do what you will. I love it. And that’s why I haven’t even hardly noticed being sober all this time. The bottle of whiskey I found in that old farmhouse—damn, that was a week ago.”

“And what a fine time that was.”

“Yeah. Thanks again Louise.”

“You can cry on my shoulder anytime, Taffy. Someday it will be my turn, you’ll be the one doing the listening and comforting.”

“Whiskey sounds good, doesn’t it?”

“A bottle a week, that could be functional. You don’t have to be all good and evil about it. Just be aware.”
“Yeah. That’s how I used to be, it wasn’t such an essential part of my life, and then the Catastrophe. We forgot everything. It all went out the window. What are we doing with our lives? I dunno, what is life? We turned into these half alive zombies, lurching around drunk, hungry and hopeless. Sometimes you never realize how sad and fucked up things are until you get out of the situation. Then when you do get out, you praise the fucking universe that you did. There’s always another way.”

“Thank yourself. Things are always changing and you seized a chance, a door opened at some point in the movements of people, and you went thru it. You have yourself to thank, and whoever else reached out their hand thru that door and helped you thru.”

Taffy continued looking at the river sliding by, gurgling as it rounded a pile of boulders extending into the current. Louise continued to carefully place sticks on the small cooking fire burning in a hole dug in the sand, a covered cast iron pot sitting over the hole, steam puffing out. Rays of sun shone from behind a cloud. Louise looked up and smiled.

“Why the fuck are we out here?” Taffy said.

“Eh?”

“What the fuck are we doing?”
Louise leaned back and looked to where Taffy was looking. “Living. Like people have been doing since nobody remembers when. Living. You might have heard of it.”

“Living. I feel like I should be doing something else. I feel like I’m cheating my friends by just living. My friends are probably in jail for their political activities, or at least still under thumb of this government, and what am I doing to help? Neglecting my friends is what I feel like I’m doing. That doesn’t feel good.”

“What could you do to help them if you were there?”

“I have no idea. Probably end up in jail along with them.”

“It’s out of your hands. It’s not something you can control. My suggestion is, let it go. I’m not saying you should forget about your friends, but just recognize that you have no power over that situation. The only situation you have any power over is on this beach in front of this fire right now. You’re not a god.”

“You suggest that I be happy while knowing my friends are suffering.”

“If you think about it, there are people all over the world suffering every second. Every fucking second,
every moment of time. And here you are, with the opportunity to be happy, and you make yourself miserable thinking about the suffering of others which you have no control over. That’s no way to live. Let it go.”

“I used to think that someday I would be really happy. Live in a nice place with friendly people, have good food to eat, not have to do what other people told me. The older I got, the more that didn’t happen. The suffering just continued, the shit got even worse. I retreated from everything to avoid getting hurt. The more alone I was the less likely I would be injured by other people. It’s hard enuf to figure out how to not hurt yourself. Then I came out of my isolation cause I realized I was going crazy, and where had my friends gone to? Totally out of touch. I started traveling again and wound up in Minneapolis, things were alright. Then it all crashed again. Total suffering and not even looting the gas station was fun anymore. Drinking bottomless liquor. Boring. Eating, art, sex, nothing. And then when the people returned I think we were all secretly happy just to have something going on, anything going on outside our little community of counter-cultural misfit perverts. What culture was left for us to be against! Even goose stepping fascism,
bring it on! There’s nothing like resistance to make your community come to life! We put down our guns and shook hands with the dotted line, eager to get started on all our little revolutionary plans. Attacking the system oppressing us but never really succeeding in toppling or changing it. God, what would we do then?

We ate pills or got drunk every night possible, and sometimes both. Ah! Normality! Everything was perfect again. I couldn’t take it, and here I am, watching the river go by. Hanging out with my awesome new friend and considering being happy. Happy. Right now happy.”

Taffy turned away from Louise and looked out again, across the rippling water, to the line of green trees on the opposite bank, to the new blue sky after two days of rain and the swallows dancing in the sky.

“I think it is possible. And maybe even right.”

(Sixty-six)

Days passed. Maybe a lot of them. It was hard to tell after awhile. Sun goes up, sun goes down. Food in, turd out.
One afternoon they floated along a bend in the river and saw a scene of fishermen out on a sandbar under a steel highway bridge that spanned the river. It was too late to try and hide, they were eyeball to eyeball instantly. The fishermen had lines in the water. Tense moments followed, they stared at the canoe and the canoe stared back at them. Taffy and Louise continued on, but only made it a few miles downriver from the sandbar with the men before the sun set.

“Should we keep going?” Louise asked, turning to look upriver.

“I’m tired.” Taffy said, “Let’s camp. We can pull the canoe up and skip the fire. They would never find us.”

All night long a raucous party roved up and down the river in small aluminum john boats, shooting shotguns, zipping around the river with over-powered engines and shining a high powered spotlights on shore. Taffy and Louise remained hidden in the willow woods, hunkered down in a mosquito-proof tent.

In the morning Taffy sipped coffee on the beach. A john boat was moving around the river pulling up jugs that were attached to trout lines, checking to see if anything had been caught in the night.

“Here they come.” Taffy said. The boat roared towards them and impacted the beach they were
camped at, wildly killing their engine in the shallow water. A white guy sat in front, a black guy in back working the engine. Not your typical rednecks. They were still drunk from last night.

“Haaay!” the white guy in front said.

“Howdy!” Louise and Taffy replied together.

“We thot we would come by here and see what you were up to, and since by looking at ya’ll you seem to be of the hippy sort, we were wondering if you had a joint you might sell us.”

“Oh. No. No weed. I don’t think any of us would identify as hippies either.”

“Ah!Oops! Sorry. No offense.”

“That’s alright. You catch any fish?”

“Yeah, a few.”

“What are ya hunting?”

“Deer, rabbits. Anything with four legs just about fair game. Winter will be coming on, like to have a store of dried meat.”

“Yeah, good idea.”

“You been fishing off that boat?” the guy craned his neck to catch a glimpse of Louise.

“We’ve been trying. I’m not so good at it. She knows what she’s doing tho.”

“Oh yeah?”
Louise looked up and caught they guy’s glance, he smiled and waved, then looked back at Taffy, “Well shit, you don’t have to be GOOD, you just have to be HUNGRY.”

“Ah! There you go.”

The man back by the engine spoke, “Come by our campsite up on the sandbar tonight if you want to hang out. We’ll be doing last night all over again.”

“Alright. We might do that.” Taffy said.

The man in back started the engine and the guy in front pushed off the shore with a long stick, they reversed into the river and then tore off at full throttle heading back upstream.


“No no no. We’re getting the hell outta here as soon as breakfast is done, and we’re gonna motor all day long.”

“Party pooper.”

“Have you ever been the only woman at a party?”

“My sarcasm went right over your head.”

“Keep your sarcasm away from my head.”

“Breakfast?”

* * *

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Taffy and Louise learned how to fish decently, trailing a thick line with a few hooks on it loaded with stinking meat bait while drifting down the river. They used live fish for bait too, tiny squiggling things they caught with a cast-net that Gregory gave them. Foraging along the edges of old farm fields became easy, but the deep woods near the river had been soaked by the spring floods and mosquitoes lived there in clouds, large sprawling cities of winged parasites waiting for a tourist with blood in their veins to come strolling thru.

The rest of their food came from an occasional riverside farm house or abandoned vehicle. Once on a highway bridge that spanned the river they found a truck with a shipment of cheese puff snacks, formerly destined to clog the arteries of some small town further west, but now in the hands of two runaways. They opened bag after bag, stuffing handfuls into their faces and then dumping the rest over the railing of the bridge. An orange cheese powder precipitation, a gift to the fish and river for all the bounty the two had taken.

One afternoon drifting in the canoe, Taffy was reclined with his hat over his face and Louise was eating the rest of the pan fried tortillas and spicy beans.
they had made. An unfamiliar noise reached them. The far off droning whine of a boat engine, a high powered one.

“Doesn’t sound like a fishing boat.” Louise said.

Taffy sat up and scrambled for the paddle. Louise tossed the rest of her taco into the air and spanked the water with her paddle. They cranked on the paddles wildly.

“Shit! The current is too strong. We have to go around that wing-dam.” Louise said from the back of the canoe.

“We’ll never make it before the boat sees us, that fucker is hauling ass!”

There was nothing else to do, it was the closest shore so they laid into it. Louise felt the oar strain under the pressure of her violent stroke. Taffy locked his feet to the sides of the canoe and leaned forward into the stroke, put the paddle in the water and thrust back with his entire body, spinning spirals of water slurped out behind each power stroke, the two of them causing a boiling of the water behind them. They rounded the wing-dam, scraping the bottom on some barely submerged rocks, then aimed for shore. A tall beach lay ahead of them, it would be a haul to reach the camouflage of the trees. The powerboat rounded a
bend in the river and they could hear it now loudly, directly, it bore down on them like Death’s supernatural chariot. Death from above! This could be it! Taffy wondered—should we run? Louise made her own assessment, eying the machete laying in the canoe. Fight!

The boat was upon them. They wouldn’t make the shore without being seen.

“This is it. I can reach the machete if it comes to that.” Louise said, trying to look undisturbed for the approaching visitors.

“Let’s play it cool to get close enuf. I’ve got an oar to swing.” Taffy said.

The power boat pulled up within a hundred feet, then powered down. An amplified voice commanded them to keep their hands visible. Louise and Taffy held their arms up, unenthusiastically. Smiling even. The boat moved closer. A Merdeavion Security logo on the side became visible.

“I’ll do the talking,” Louise said.

“As usual.”

“That’s right. I’m turning you in now, because you kidnapped me and I lost all my identification papers in the fight.”

“What?”
“Shut up!”

Taffy shut up. Was she really going to double cross him? No. Right? The situation was terrifying. Two men in bullet proof vests and mirrored sunshades stood behind the glass windshield of the powerboat, surveying the canoe with stern faces. One piloted the boat, the other stood near the rail with his hand on a holstered pistol.

“Do you have any weapons?” he called out.

“No weapons.”

The boat edged closer and bumped the canoe, “Hold onto the side of our boat.” the cop said, “Both of you, hands on the railing.” Taffy and Louise did as told.

“Any papers on you?”

“No. But let me explain.” Louise began, “See, I was-

Whoa! What’s that?” Louise stared at the officer’s arm dumbstruck.

“You mean the FLAG of the United States of America?”

“Yeah.”

The cop glanced quickly at his partner and then back to Louise, “My god.” he said, cracking a huge smile, “How long you people been out here?”
“We kinda lost track.” Taffy said, glancing at Louise he shrugged, “A month?”

“Well, there’s been some changes. The USA is back. The C.C. collapsed and we ran them outta town. There’s a new arrangement of business and government now. Mostly like the good old days. You’re old enuf to remember that, huh?”

“Oh hell yes!” Taffy said enthusiastically, “Are you telling me we’re back in business?”

“That’s right, son.”

Taffy and Louise looked at each other, then released a long and loud hoopla with a couple ye-haws thrown in, “Praise god and pass the ammunition!” Louise said and finished by clapping a little and pumping some fists into the sky. Taffy clenched his fists and held them in the air while looking up to the sky, “Thank you.”

“Always a good day to find a couple lost patriots and tell them the good news.” the officer with his hand on the gun said.

“But what’s with the Merdeavion logo too?” Louise pointed to the side of the boat.

“Oh, we’re still Merdeavion Security. The company severed it’s contract with the C.C. as the Patriots seized power, and Merdeavion did the right thing and signed
contracts with the new government. The transition was seamless. Like a greased bearing, Bam! All we had to do was sew some flags on the old uniforms and the next day we’re in business!”

The silent pilot of the boat grinned and handed something to his partner, motioning towards the canoe.

“Here you folks go, a couple of your very own.” and handed Louise two brand new embroidered patches of the old stars and stripes.

“Oh wow.” Taffy said, “Been a long time since I’ve seen one of those.”

“I kinda thot I never would.” Louise said, staring down at her patch, she handed one to Taffy.

“Like an old friend, eh? We’re back! Still number one. Know what I mean? Take more than some bug to knock America out. Listen, ya’ll want a lift into town? Nearest post is about five miles down.”

“We can just paddle down there, we’ll be alright.” Louise said, “Thank you for the patches!”

“Yeah, thanks.” Taffy said.

“Got enuf food? Water? Life jackets?”

“Yeah, we’re set.” Louise smiled.

“Alright then.” the cop smiled broadly, “God bless America.” his partner started the outboard engine on
cue and revved it. Louise and Taffy waved as he reversed, then dropped into forward and gunned it, leaving the canoe rocking in their bubbling wake.

“We passed!” Taffy said.

(Sixty-seven)

Louise balanced on a huge bare log, stripped of it’s bark by beavers and the action of the river’s current that brought it to this resting point, suspended between the bank and the twenty foot high sand bar island they had camped on. The three foot thick base of the driftwood log was chewed down to the heartwood by beaver action, adding to the slight thrill. A collaboration between life and death, Louise put one foot in front of the other, sliding out on the bleached wood, still holding the long stick in her right hand which she used to clear the spider webs from between the small bushes as she walked. Better to leave the spiders dangling from their bush than to have them wrapped around her head and transported to some undesirable place. Having spider webs glued to your face is annoying. She walked on the log, confidently
over the water, in the middle her footsteps rhythm set
the waterlogged tree trunk bouncing up and down.
  “Oh shit! Whooa!”
She tried to walk out of step to keep the log from
possibly breaking from the rhythm waves. She made
the other side and surveyed the bank, looking for an
access to the woods above, and found a deer trail.
Louise followed hoof prints up under the shade of the
canopy. It was passable, no massive growths of vine to
be cleared with the machete, and she strolled carefully
thru the underbrush, small frogs leaping away from
heavy feet. Holding the spider stick out before her,
waving it up and down, she conducted the spell of
walking in the woods, politely respectful, and also
moving fast enuf to stay ahead of the mosquitoes.

A stand of green illuminated by a shaft of sunlight
beckoned ahead thru the towering brown tree trunks.
Louise moved towards the green life, a field of Wood
Nettle. Many of the big plants had already been eaten
by something which knew the nutritive value of the
prickly plant. She stepped to the perimeter of the
Wood Nettle field and spied some younger plants yet
uneaten by insects and began plucking the green top
leaves, dropping them into her side bag. A buzzing in
the ear- she swatted it automatically.
“They found me.”

She swished the spider stick more aggressively, swirling it around her head, trying to disturb the flight patterns of the mosquitoes, moving to another side of the field, continuing with the harvest of nettles. When her bag was halfway full and a swarm of mosquitoes was sucking a fair toll from her exposed flesh she trotted hastily back the way she had come, a short sprint ditched the cloud of insects.

A flash of light further up the forest attracted her, away from the river. She headed for it, turned up another deer trail towards a bald area where an old dyke rose up to protect some farmland from flooding, it was frosted with grass and small plants. She stepped out into the light, looked left, right. A party of edible Goose Foot plants beckoned and she went to them, tasted a green leaf with its white powdery texture, and found it palatable. She filled another pocket on her side bag with Goose Foot leaves, then climbed to the top of the dyke. It was covered in vibrant tall grass and stretched endlessly to the left and right, parallel to the river. When she reached the top, her spider stick leading the way again in lower arcs as fine filaments of spider silk flew from the grass in the rippling breeze, a view of the countryside struck her. A massive field of
soybeans reached across to a distant line of trees and a dirt road. A clump of old trees stood around what seemed to be a barn or farmhouse. Louise hunched down in the grass seeing this. Those soybeans were not volunteers, someone was farming here.

“Do they even make seeds that would re-seed themselves anymore?” Louise wondered, “It’s all genetically modified terminator seeds now, right? Makes more money for the corporations that sell the seeds. A guaranteed market.”

Somebody was back in business here. Patriots. Louise took out her binoculars and surveyed the field and road, the tree line, the house obscured under huge trees. Nothing moving. She stole down the other side of the dyke, into the soybean field. The plants were bursting with seed pods. They weren’t as big as they could have been, but close enuf. Louise pulled out a pillowcase from her backpack and began plucking bean pods from the furry plants, thinking about the steamed Edamame soon to be eaten with Taffy. Such a simple thing becomes extra delicious in this situation. Scarcity makes you appreciate small things, Louise thot.

She finished harvesting and then looked towards the house on the other side of the field. It was early in
the morning, a slight mist still floated across the field, too soon to go back and wait for Taffy to wake up. She set her loaded bag down and tied a scarf to the stick, thrust it into the ground, and strode off thru the soybean field, the plants brushing against her legs.

Louise felt the dew soak in thru her pant legs, by the time she reached the tall stand of old trees she was soaked up to her thighs. It was quieter under the shade of those old trees, birds were out flying over the river now, eating insects and cavorting. Under the shade lay a small farmhouse, one story, painted vibrant yellow once but now faded like an old newspaper. A new looking truck with no rust sat in the driveway, one of it’s tires completely flat. Several pieces of farm machinery stood engulfed in grass next to a steel shed, the shed looked newer than anything else. A wooden bird hotel with a dozen holes for birds to enter their suites sat atop a pole in the front yard next to a mulberry tree. A plastic child’s truck sat in the front yard, grown over by grass.

Louise walked to the front door, on the small porch a cloud of wasps flew in mysterious formations, a globe of their paper city dangled gracefully from the ceiling above the front door like a light fixture. Louise walked carefully around to the side yard, down the
gravel driveway and into the backyard where a luxurious garden spread forth beyond the clothes line, wild and un-weeded, volunteer vegetables were growing there along with the weeds: tomatoes and hot pepper plants, corn and collard greens, perennial herbs. It was more than Louise could hope to carry in one trip. “Maybe we could hang out here awhile,” she thought, but the big field was obviously being tended, even if no one was living in the house. Or maybe someone does live here and has just let the place go. Or someone else is tilling the field, the government perhaps. There were no tracks around the house, the grass had grown up around the front and back door. Her own footsteps were like dog prints in wet cement across the yard, bent grass all the way.

Louise went to the garden and began collecting fresh vegetables, drooling from her lips while she sampled the booty. Tomato juice dripped from her chin and onto the front of her shirt. Fresh! The cherry tomatoes were particularly amazing. The basket was full, it would be a trek to get that and the bag of wild greens back to the river where Taffy was waking up with his bottomless stomach. Louise smiled thinking of this man who had somehow become so brother-like in such a short time. One-on-one around the campfire,
they spoke of everything, in that way of communion that only occurred face to face, with no distractions or possibility of easy escape. The chemistry concentrated in this container of a journey, fermented in the summer heat and mutual desire. Life is shit, long live life!

Louise looked at the back door of the house and headed for it. The garden was so good, there had to be something great in the house. Even just a backpack or something to carry it all in, and maybe a small stock pot, they could use a small stock pot for making soup, enuf for leftovers the next day. She parted the grass and trod the creaking wood steps. The screen door had no latch, and the doorknob was not locked. “Ah, life in the country.” Louise thot as she stepped into the kitchen to be greeted by a wretched smell.

“Ho boy! Somebody didn’t take out the trash!”

The kitchen was a mess, looking like someone had experienced a psychotic breakdown in there. She opened a few drawers and found a couple cigarette lighters which she pocketed along with a micro radio and batteries. She stepped into the small living room, also trashed, but strangely quiet as her feet moved on the soft green carpet. Civilization was so weird. Carpet! A yellow light shone thru the dusty curtains to illuminate a scene of broken furniture, an imploded
video screen, and random items strewn everywhere like pepper on scrambled eggs. Louise went for the closed door which looked like the bedroom. She stopped. A noise? Waiting to hear the sound again, she stood frozen. Patience was something she was learning well on the river. Quietly she let her breath go in and then out. There was no other sound. She shifted her feet on the floor and a board underneath creaked. She froze again and listened. Nothing. Paranoid. Paranoid is good tho, healthy paranoia. She turned the brass knob and swung the door open- a rancid cloud rushed out. This was not some dirty dishes or a neglected bucket of chicken wings. Spread out over the floor of the bedroom was a mess which made the hairs stand up on her neck and all the blood in her head surge and pound in her ears, glands secreted and adrenaline flowed. There on the green carpet lay a human body, a few scraps of clothing on top of a shrunken carcass of bones, black knobs of gristle that even the maggots were having trouble eating. On top of this unidentifiable body lay a rusted shotgun, still clutched in the bones of it's hands. The skull was perhaps scattered across the far wall.

Louise let out her breath and made a noise of disgust, unable to take her eyes off the scene, she
stared. There was another door in this room, to the right, and as she stood there a loud thump came from behind that door and the wood itself bumped outward, straining against the hardware holding it on. Louise shook involuntarily, hands and feet spasmed, the shaking activated her legs and turned her around, propelling her back the way she had come, slamming the back door as she exited the house she turned and stood there by the garden looking at the house. The basket of vegetables lay where she had left it. Louise grabbed the basket and ran for the field, stopping to look backwards and listen every hundred feet. She made the dyke at last and scrambled to the top, turned and held binoculars up to scan the house again, followed the path of her steps all the way to where she stood presently. Nothing moved. Quiet.

“Raccoon, dog, cat, squirrel. Could have been anything. Or, something fell over cause I was walking around and disturbed it. After so long…” she dropped the nocs back in her pocket and looked about, back at the stand of old trees, the house, the barn, her shoulders tense.

“Fuck it. Fuck it.” Louise lugged her booty back thru the woods.
The sun was in the afternoon sky as Taffy and Louise paddled down looking for a beach to camp on. All the shore line was rocks and solid bushes because heavy rains had rose the river. The nice beaches were underwater. Louise scanned the horizon thru her nocs, the left and right banks. The heavy current was taking them down quickly.

“There it is,” she said, “Check it out.”
Taffy reached back and took the binoculars.
“Oh the inside of the bend, way up there.”
Taffy looked, balancing the nocs on his glasses.
There it was, a small patch of light brown under a swath of dark trees- a little island maybe, a pile of sand dredged up to deepen the shipping channel and dumped in a massive pile on which soil and plants and trees eventually sprouted. A beach to camp on, the rest of the bank was over run with vines and poison ivy and the sort of overgrown habitat that vicious mosquitoes loved to populate. A little beach was better than a lotta rocks and mud.
“Let’s get over there.” Taffy said, “Think we can make it before the current takes us down?”

“Oh yeah. It’s a mile down at least, we can make it across the current.” They began paddling with enthusiasm.

Nearing the island the saw it was blocked off by a wing dam and they aimed for the tip of it. Reaching there, Louise stuck the oar in the water on the right side and spun the canoe hard to the right, just around the last jutting rock of the wing dam swirling water around it’s edges, and they launched perfectly into the spiraling back current behind the wing dam.

“Yeah, yeah!” Taffy bobbed his head wildly.

Both paddled hard on the left side to turn the canoe to the island and avoid being sucked along in the whirlpool behind the wing dam. The upstream side of the island loomed, a sand beach all the way up to a decent pile of drift logs and a young willow grove.

“Ya! Ya!” Taffy shouted as they slid up gently onto the sand. He jumped out and drug the canoe halfway out of the water and then Louise climbed to the front and was out. Taffy was already up in the woodpile, scoping out any floating treasures that might have come to rest along with all the wood.
“Looks empty up in the willows. Shall we explore?” Taffy said.
They clambered over the woodpile, stepping and jumping from big log to big log, balancing along lengths of entire trees to reach the tree line where Taffy looked up and froze. A bathing towel hung from a tree limb just inside the woods. He nudged Louise and pointed.

“Oh shit.” Louise whispered close to his ear, “What do you think? Should we bail?”

“Let’s announce ourselves.”

“Alright. It’s probably just some river rat hiding out from the world. Maybe we could hang out and trade with him.”

“Hello?” Taffy hollered, “Anybody home? Hello?”
Silence. Taffy shrugged and looked at Louise. They continued up the hill and stepped into the wood. There before their eyes was a willow forest of trees no more than 10 or 15 years old, hardly thicker than an arm, and a floor beneath them entirely of sand. There were benches and tables made out of raw driftwood logs arranged around a fire pit, and a rain pavilion made of logs and covered with some scavenged piece of heavy tarp. Bar-B-Q pits made of rocks that looked like they had been gleaned from the wing dams, and a pile of
those crappy store-bought tiki torches. Surrounding the fire pit was a circle of sticks planted in the sand and topped by the heads of massive catfish, now dried and black. In the distance, at the crest of the island, they could see a large structure made of drift logs.

“Wow.” Taffy said.

“A river rat playground.” Louise said, “C’mon, let’s check out that thing up there!”

They walked thru the sand of this strangely tropic feeling place in the middle of Missouri to the wooden palisade. Drift logs had been buried in the sand with the tops uncut and leering into the sky, there was no apparent roof. They circled round it, there were no square corners to be found, the roundness of the structure echo to the roundness of the logs. They found an opening, two wildly curved logs magically linked together at the top forming an arch. They entered a six foot high tunnel of wood that stretched out before them, dark and winding along the inside of the wall.

“What is this?” Taffy said.

“What do you think it is?”

“A maze? A labyrinth!”

“Maybe a huge catfish trap for when high water floods over the island.” Louise said.
“Well Lou, that does not make me want to go in there. Got a light?”

Louise took out her headlamp and turned it on, “Hold on a sec.” She dashed out and grabbed a stick then came back, “Alright.” Holding the spider web wand in front of her she sauntered down the tunnel. They paused in the dark passage to admire graffiti that had been carved in the vertical logs, some of the pieces fantastic and detailed, some crude and perverted, giant cocks penetrating spread legs, human faces with giant coiled shits on top of them smiling goofily and someone’s name written under it. Graffiti of the Lover’s Mathematics type: names carved in the trunks with plus signs between them, and equals signs at the end, totaling Love. Some had been edited with a minus sign and an addendum below such as “Free at last!” or “Asshole!” or “I miss you.” Some names were followed by “Rest In Peace”.

“Damn. This has been here a long time.” Louise said.

“Hold the light on this blank spot.” Taffy said, and he took out his buck knife and carved. After a minute he stood back and was done: “Louise and Taffy Survived.”

“Fuck yeah.” Louise said.
They continued down the wooden tunnel until light shone from its end and then stepped into an open air circle. The drift log roof of the tunnel they had walked thru was the floor of a balcony that could be reached by climbing a ladder, from the balcony it seemed you could look over to top of the circular log wall. In the middle of the place a fire pit was bordered by flat rocks. A large round iron grill which seemed to fit over the fire pit was hung against the wall.

“This is like fish fry central right here.” Taffy said, “I want to live here! String up some tarps to make a roof.”

“Looks like no one has been here in awhile. There’s no footprints at all, the rains have completely covered everything up. I wonder if everyone that knew about this place is gone.”

They looked around at the walls. Taffy climbed to the balcony and leaned on the wall, looking out at the island. Louise followed him up.

“That thing I saw the other day.” Louise said, “It’s still got me. I can’t shake it. I think about it constantly. Just walking around here makes me tense. I keep thinking there’s gonna be another body.”

“Time will make it better.” Taffy said.
“No, it’s bigger than that. It’s pulled the cork out of all these feelings I’ve bottled up. I keep thinking about everybody back home, people I know who might have survived, missing people, my mother and father. My sister. People I know are dead. People who’s bodies I have seen, and I know they are dead, but the memory of their faces, my experiences with them, keeps getting mixed up with the people who might actually be alive, and I question who’s really dead and who’s really alive. Are they really dead? Did that really happen? Did I really witness that, or did I make it up? I don’t trust my memory. What if my people are back there, struggling and suffering, and I am out here, sunning myself on a beach just watching the world turn like nothing else was going on.”

“You thinking about going back?”

Louise looked up at the open sky, “Yes. I mean no. I’ve been thinking. Thinking too much I guess. Starting to have nightmares when I finally do get to sleep.”

“Shit. You’ve been laying awake while I’m laying there asleep? Do I snore?”

Louise smiled, “You snore a little. Nothing that a little kick or punch doesn’t fix. Sometimes it helps me get to sleep actually, listening to you snore. Like listening to running water helps some people pee.”
“Nice. Well, no charge for that. So you’re thinking about leaving. It’s alright. Everyone is always coming or going in my life, I wouldn’t feel normal if someone was a part of my life for too long.”

“I don’t know what to do Taffy. This situation seems to have no resolution. I can’t do anything about it except think and feel it, so I do that everyday, like trying to figure it out. But there isn’t a solution. Not right now. There’s just the fucking image I get of people I know, holding shotguns to their heads. The body didn’t have a face, so I put the faces of people I know where his head should be. And that’s what I think about all the time.”

Silence.

“I don’t know what to say.” Taffy stepped on the ice and heard it crack.

“You don’t have to say anything. Just telling you about it makes me feel a little better. Makes me feel like I’m not alone.”

“Fuck those demons.” Taffy said, “Don’t hesitate to unload on me if you need to. Even if I seem like I’m having the best day ever, and there’s a golden smile on my face. If you need to, then do it. Spit it out.”

“Thanks.”
naked lady laying down at night
“I have feelings that are similar. I think about Franklin every day. Every hour probably.”

“Your former lover? You don’t talk about him much.”

“I don’t talk about it because it’s not a very happy subject. He degenerated into a full blown alcoholic and I became the guy who helped get him drunk. I was just the guy. I was a second thot, booze was number one. That’s why I had to leave town, mostly. I couldn’t do that anymore. Booze was still illegal then. I saw myself going to prison for it, but how could I say no? He was the first person to hold me after the Catastrophe, this bond happened between us. It felt like that was it, like that was all there ever would be. Totally isolated. Everyday we thot we would die too, that the virus would finally get us.”

“And he’s still with you.”

“There’s no running away from that. Give it a few years, huh? I’ll move on. Is it right? Should I go back and try to help? Is that what’s right? He chose to drink and who am I to say he’s wrong. Who am I to change him. It’s his damn life and he’s gotta live in this fucked up world so if that makes him happy, how can I tell him to stop. I just cant be a part of it anymore. Already am a part of it, just thinking about it everyday.
That’s enuf a part for me. It’s like he’s running full speed towards death, and I just wanna float down the river towards it slow like, easy. Different styles. He makes my head spin. Everything was different when we were alone. Relatively alone that is, when we were hunkered down back there at the end of the world.”

“Too much thinking about the past.” Louise said, “If only you could wipe certain memories clean or put them in some memory vault that only opened once a month, cause forgetting someone you love would be fucked up, but having their memory constantly torture you is not something they would want either, if they loved you back. Just to be able to put the past in it’s place, and live here now, to live here in fish fry central and be happy. Hey- We should go fishing and make use of that grill over there. This old castle must have some magic we can spark up, eh? Let the catfish swim in our bellies and send us dreams of the deep water. Are you in?”

“Sounds real good.”
The day had been hot and as evening came the clouds dropped from the sky, embraced the Earth. The humidity loomed on the horizon of the river in a smoke-like haze. Sweat formed around Taffy’s eye sockets, moisture trapped behind his glasses, the synthetic lenses fogged up in the corners. The clouds sat on the ground and did not move. A mosquito found his arm and stabbed.

“Dammit. This is wretched.” Taffy swooned.
“I think we’re pretty close to town.” Louise said.
“Shit fuck.”
“There’s a water tower right after that bridge.”
They paddled on. A truck drove over the bridge, it’s red running lights phantom across the newly dark sky.

“Civilization.” Taffy said.
Rounding a bend under the bridge a light shone out on the river.
“That’s it. Place is blazing.” Louise said.
They drifted along close to the starboard bank, pulled by the current, listening to the music, voices, clapping hands. A waterfront park came into view full
of large tents under floodlights, hordes of people, random fires.  
“Dear god.” Louise said, “Is this a holiday?”  
“Looks like we’re just in time.” Taffy said.  
“Are you up for it?”  
“I think I smell bratwurst, or steak, or something.”  
“Let’s go.”  
They took the canoe to shore and strode up to the waterfront park, stretching out from a long day of boating.  
The low cut lawn was strange underfoot, like a living lace doily that their mud crusted boots would soon dirty. They came upon two people laying on the grass, kissing, empty bottles strewn around them. Further into the light a picnic table full of loudly chatting people, the table decorated with beer bottles, a flag on a small stick from a bucket full of sand sitting on the table full of bottles. They continued talking and laughing as Taffy and Louise passed. A woman sitting astride the bench noticed them and raised her beer bottle, “Happy Fourth of July!”  
Taffy waved.  
“What did she say?” Louise asked.  
The woman at the table turned to her companions, “They seem a little sober!”
“Musta just got here.” the man sitting next to her said.

“This is September, isn’t it?” Taffy said.

“Yeah.” Louise shrugged.

Now they strode into the thick of it, smoke from barbeques wafted around peoples heads, and folks stood in circles drinking from bottles, cups, jugs. A group of six older people were dressed as clowns, red, white, and blue clowns. They were converting people into clowns on the spot by painting the faces of children, teenagers, and wasted adults.

“This is completely terrifying. Let’s get away from those clowns.” Taffy said.

They stopped at a barbeque, a fifty-five gallon steel barrel turned on it’s side, cut in half with a torch and hinged, a home-made work of art. This particular grill was spewing some delicious smoke. A muscular man wearing a voluminous apron with tongs and spatulas protruding from the pockets stood next to the grill, drinking from a bottle and talking to another man.

“Hello there.” Taffy said, “What’s cooking?”

“Well alright!” the man turned towards them smiling wildly, “I thot everyone had switched to straight on booze by now! Thank God someone is still...
hungry! We got pork ribs, bratwurst, and turkey legs, what are you looking for?”

“How about one of each!”

“That’s my man, yeah!” the man grabbed the tongs from his pocket and twirled them once on his index finger, in the style of a rock star drummer, ending with a flourish of the wrist and elbow, “One of each comin’ up! And for the lady?”

“Double down on that order.” Louise said.

“Here we go!” the grill flew open under his touch and a massive cloud of smoke erupted in a roiling mushroom cloud that disappeared up towards the stars, “Whoa buddy!” the Grill-master exclaimed, then swiftly put two paper plates heaping with meat in their hands.

The Grill master’s companion gestured at them with his bottle, “Where ya’ll coming from? I haven’t seen you here yet tonight.”

“Been out on the river fishing.” Taffy said.

The man smiled, “Fishing! Catch anything?”

“Flat Heads. Had ourselves a fish fry last night.”

“Fishing!” the Grill master said while lowering the lid on the grill, “Things really are getting back to normal, when you can go out and catch yourself a fish. You folks can find some sauces and condiments over
there in the pavilion along with all the salads and baked beans and deserts. You gotta taste that cherry pie my sister made, it just makes your mouth do this thing, like a tangy firework going off in there. Take one bite, you’ll eat the whole piece!”

“I’ll be sure to try that!” Louise said, “Cherry pie has always been my favorite.”

“Get yourself a beer! Here!” the Grill master’s friend said, “I know your hands are about full but you gotta get a hold of one of these, made right here in town, micro-brew. Quality stuff!”

“Thanks.” Taffy said, balancing the huge plate of meat and bottle, “We better find a table Louise!”

“Go on!” the Grill master said, sliding his tongs back into his apron.

Taffy and Louise went to the buffet pavilion, full of ladies talking vigorously about everything, and children helping themselves to more cake, pie, and rice crispy treats. They loaded up another plate at the buffet, then took the loot out to a bench on the path that overlooked the river. From the other side of the park sounds of an amplified cover band reached their ears, along with whistles, screams, and clapping.

Taffy had a bratwurst slathered in dijon mustard, Louise had her’s with deli relish, cole slaw, and baked
beans on a toasted cheese roll. The ribs were ready to go wearing a coat of grilled sauce, the turkey leg had been rolled in some magical spice which included cracked peppercorns and crispy bits, a decadent breading that elicited many flavors.

They ditched the bench after the meat was gone to sit on the grass and stretch their stomachs, the second plate of delicacies had to fit in. Halfway thru this plate Taffy slowed his intake, suddenly realizing that they were definitely not going to be ejected from the celebration, that Patriots looked just like any other person. Taffy pulled in the river air, “Hmm, what do you think about getting a flag tattoo?”

“They probably have a booth set up for it.” Louise said.

“Ah, god, the United States of America! This little town makes it seem alright, you can’t see the whole world of fucked up shit from here! Ah, but now we know what it’s like to be the rest of the world, we’ve been humbled by the Catastrophe. White america has felt the reality of an unstoppable genocide. Now I think we can relate to the feelings of indigenous people when we stole this country from them.”

“A disease possibly of our own invention. That’s the sad part.”
“The USA is still kicking tho. Right here in- damn, are we still in Missouri? It all looks the same form the river.”

“Still in Missouri. Wow, how long have we been out on the river?”
Taffy shrugged, “Don’t know, don’t care.”
“I guess I don’t either. More a habit to be questioning everything. I think it might be getting near to October.”
“You’re food high!”
“Pumpkin pie with whipped cream on top-“
“Are you gonna finish the rest of that rib?”
“Should we go get seconds? That guy at the grill will pin a gold medal on us if we do.”
“Food high!” Louise pointed a finger at him.
Taffy looked down at the plate of bones, “I think I could do all this again.”
“Happy Fourth of July. I guess cause the country was still in the hands of the Corporate Coalition that they couldn’t celebrate the 4th on time, so they just decided to celebrate it now. Weird.”
“A perfect entry into the world outside our world. It’s all madness out here.”

“True. You know what I was starting to think, that all my friends back in Minneapolis have become Patriots now, like the Corporate Coalition was so fucked up and authoritarian that a restored Union seemed like total freedom to them, embracing the nostalgia for the good old days when booze and weed were legal and people weren’t required to have a job contract! So much for the new counter-culture. Back to party hearty, rock-n-roll, drink a fifth, smoke a bowl. The sedated rebels recline in sumptuous oblivion. History always repeats. Cycles. Nothing to get worked up about, right? Enjoy the barbeque.”

Louise threw a bone at Taffy.

* * *

Taffy awoke before Louise. It had rained much of the morning, each drop a little drumbeat on the dome of the tent. An hour after sunrise the rain slacked and stopped, a quiet of dripping sounds from the branches and leaves of trees. He unzipped the tent window and looked out on a world of wet, crickets singing with the cello of their hind legs, frogs heading back to their
happy places after a night under the open sky
watching the rain fall and fucking on the driftwood
piles. The tree bark was extra dark and the leaves of
plants extra green, washed of dust and dirt, everything
reflected brilliantly for the eye. A few leaves lay
plastered on the dome of the tent, their silhouettes like
a plant identification book. Bloated mosquitoes rested
on the inside of the dome. Taffy swatted them and saw
the blood they had taken splatter on the nylon.
“Fuckers!”

He unzipped the door and stepped out, zipped it
closed behind. The beer was good last night, a slight
pressure in his head and looseness in the bowels from
that and the rich feast that had passed thru. Taffy
strolled to the canoe and found a water jug, drank
deeply. A gust of wind blew, scattering raindrops from
the trees, he shivered. The river had risen a small
amount, the canoe was floating now tied up to a tree
on the bank, yesterday it had been beached. Taffy felt
movement, something had turned in his bowels, he
looked quickly thru the canoe for the small folding
shit-shovel. The shovel was somewhere in the bottom,
waiting to be found under six inches of rainwater
waiting to be bailed out. Dig hole! Release! Urgency
was upon him.

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“The park!” Taffy remembered the Fourth of July in September celebration, there had actually been some porta-potties there, tiny plastic shacks with that lovely chemical floral smell wafting up from the holding tank. He walked swiftly up there and found a scene completely altered from the night before. Flags hung soggy from their poles, the red, white, & blue bunting had gotten soaked and ripped away from its moorings by the wind and lay muddy on the ground. The grills were cold and silent, the ground littered with rain washed beer bottles and plastic cups.

“Wow. Even the clean up crew got drunk.”

Taffy hit the pavilion and found all the porta-potties had been tipped over by some brutish behavior during the night. He wondered if the shitters had been occupied when they were tipped. The brick house containing permanent bathrooms was unlocked so he entered. Someone was sleeping on the floor there, dry and out of the night’s rain. Taffy stepped into a stall and looked down at the clean water in the bowl. “I don’t even shit into that dirty old river out there, and here I go dropping a deuce into drinkable water.” Taffy sighed and unleashed the digested barbeque and beer from the celebration and then got the Hill out of there. “Sorry guy.” he said to the sleeping body.
Taffy decided to stroll around town before anybody woke up, it’s what he had gotten used to, emptiness. There were antique stores, a coffee shop diner, a grocery store, a post office. What was the currency now, old dollars? Taffy wished he had kept some of those wads he had found stashed in empty houses. It couldn’t be old US dollars, could it? That would be total chaos, some people would be instant millionaires, some people would be penniless. There would be blood bath and beyond!

Taffy heard some noise, and turned to see a store down by a small dock on the waterfront, it looked interesting, a giant carved wooden fish hung in front and a sign above the door said, “Beer, Bait, & Bullets”. A haggard old man was there, humping some cardboard cases from truck to store. Taffy said hello.

“How you doing?” the man replied, “Surprised to see anyone up so early after last night.”

“I’ve gotten used to waking up with the sun. Been living out on the river for more than a month now.”

“A month? Not around here.”

“Oh, we haven’t been around here. Been going down the river, started up in Winona.”

“Going down the river.” the old man’s eyes twinkled, “Used to see people all the time, going down
on all sorts of craft. Me and my buddy went from here
down to New Orleans, back when gas was cheap! Took
two weeks. Sold the boat down there, hitch-hiked back

jacob johnson
up here. Wish I still had that little boat. Loved that thing."

"We're going down in a canoe. Kinda rough in heavy weather, but we can go anywhere, all we need is about six inches of water."

"Yeah. Nothing wrong with that. Well, unless you put the hammer down and get south real quick, it's gonna get cold up here. You need to stop for the winter or get a boat with a cabin on it."

"Hmm." Taffy gazed out at the river as if to see a cold cloud full of snow rolling in, "That would be great, a nice boat. We're totally broke tho. Just living off the land. Didn't even know the Patriots had won until a few days ago when the water patrol found us."

"No kidding. Ha! I can't hardly stand that politics."

"What are they using for money now anyway?"

"Oh, it's all plastic, digital bullshit." the man grimaced, "I don't trust it but what am I gonna do? Everything can't be all good all the time. Well, I got a boat you could have. And maybe a little motor too. The motor is worth something. Work out a trade maybe, you interested in some work?"

* * *
Taffy had gone halfway thru the trashed out park picking up bottles, folding chairs, and hanging the bunting up to dry when Louise showed up.

“What the FUCK are you doing?” she asked.

“I got a job.”

“Oh boy.”

“This guy is gonna trade us a boat and motor! It’s got a little cabin, a bed, space for a kitchen, windows! A few days of work. Then we can stay warm and dry, and since we’re not on the run anymore, we can just fly the flag and float on down. What do you think?”

“Huh.” Louise looked around the park, “So this boat is currently floating?”

“Oh yeah.”

Louise grabbed a trash bag and started picking things up.

“After the park is clean let’s take a break and go see if that diner is open.”

“Ah, civilization.” Louise said.

“Isn’t that my line?”
The boat was a fixer-upper. It had been home-made by the man Taffy had met, Jacob Johnson. He built it for a party pontoon years ago. Old plywood and framing lumber, the outside sealed with resin, the insides stuffed with plastic 5 gallon buckets, the rubber gasket lids hammered down tight.

Jacob loaded Taffy and Louise into his john boat and they went up a tributary to the place it was tied up. Some friends were currently using the boat as a duck blind. Jacob took down the camo netting and there it was, ten feet wide by twenty six feet long, a 10’x10’ cabin right in the middle. Some of the windows were missing, the glass broken out to facilitate the shooting of ducks with shotguns. The boat was a bit filthy, but the pontoons seemed solid and totally floaty. Louise got down in the water to inspect the underside of the pontoons with her hands.

“There’s a river rat.” Jacob said, laughing.

“Got it from my parents on the St. Croix river.”

“It should be solid under there, I built it for a party boat but you know I guess I never was much of a partier. Never crashed it into anything, and built it
solid to begin with. Lot of good times watching the sun set.”

Jacob hooked up a tow rope to the boat and they hauled it down to the Missouri River. Taffy and Louise spent a week working for Jacob Johnson. In their off time they refurbished the house boat. There was another patriotic themed festival coming up and they helped Jacob get ready for it, cleaning up the store and stocking the shelves.

The day arrived when it seemed urgent to take care of some paperwork, so Taffy and Louise located the government office and spent far too long in the throes of bureaucracy. The good old days had truly returned.

At the end of the day they walked away with identification papers and a plastic computer photo ID card each. The citizen re-start package. Enuf money on the card for two months, a list of government jobs that needed filling, and commercial opportunities for rebuilding.

“I think they’re trying to re-open one of the fast food places up on the hill. You could apply there. Lord knows this town needs people in it! Good place to settle down. Family town.” She smiled, her eyes darting between them as if to weave a web of
marriage, “Let me go copy these documents and then you can be on your way.”

Taffy and Louise looked at each other.
“She thinks we’re and item.” Taffy said.
“I’m not having anyone’s babies.”
“You couldn’t even get my babies if you tried.”

Taffy replied.
“Every sperm is sacred, Taffy.” Louise raised an eyebrow and looked him up and down, “You better get that vasectomy reversed before you die or you’re going to hell. You know who the demons tormenting you are gonna be? All the babies that would have been conceived if you hadn’t got a vasectomy.”
“Oh my god. Me and all my gaybies in hell.”

The office worker returned, “You both look very happy right now, that’s exciting to see. If you like, come to church service this Sunday, eleven a.m. at Main and Jefferson. We lost a lot of parishioners in the Catastrophe. There’s plenty of room! Free food, free clothes, lots of free baby clothes, everything you could want.”

* * *
A week later they were ready to go in all ways. Taffy and Louise had decided the boat should have a name before they launched it, and settled on “Jacob's Party”.

Jacob Johnson gave them his home built long tail engine for all the work they had done, plus more bait than they could use, a case of the local beer, and two crates of assorted vegetables from his nephews farm.

“You’re all taken care of. Good luck. The damn trip of a lifetime, you know. Living the dream!”

* * *

They were a few days out on the Missouri River when the small rain cleared and there was nothing falling but sun. The current was good and they shared the river with a bunch of logs that had floated loose with the high water. It was at that moment Louise told Taffy that she had to go.

“I can’t do this anymore. I have to go find my people.”

“You can search on the link at every town we stop it, at the libraries. You know I’ve been obsessed with writing to Franklin every chance I get.”

She shook her head, “Not good enuf. It’s time for me to go back. With all the changes now, maybe
there’s a possibility. If my family was in hiding from
the old government, they might come out now. I have
to go. I have to trust my intuition.”

Taffy had no argument against that.

They passed a small river town where a train was
stopped before crossing the river, freight with a single
passenger car hitched behind the unit. They took the
boat to shore and Louise grabbed her few things and
left. Taffy watched her get on the train and felt a hole
open up inside him. He stared as the train blew it’s air
horn and slowly rumbled over the steel bridge and
northward, back from where they had come. Taffy sat
on the roof of the boat, watching the empty tracks in
silence, trying to understand what had just happened,
and how nothing made sense.

(Seventy-one)

Taffy held the wooden stick that was the rudder
handle as the little twelve horse engine chugged along
at half throttle. His arms were tanned the color of
baked bread, he wore a funny looking broad brimmed
hat woven out of some tiny willow twigs and grasses, it let the air thru and kept the late summer sun off.

Taffy stared at the massive industrial area running along the river here, steel barges being loaded with some powdery substance, obnoxious clouds of it blown over the river. The powder was being moved in great truck sized buckets attached to a conveyor belt, which dumped into huge yellow dump trucks which moved the powder around. Towers with steel tube connectors, a high pitched droning sound, small clouds of diesel exhaust jetting out of machines. A mad abomination! Gunshots rang out as he stared at the hellish scene and he saw splashes of water near the shore. Grabbing the nocs he saw a group of men standing on a barge admiring and shooting off large guns into the water. Maybe they were fishing.

“What is this place?” Taffy thot. A landscape churned up by men inside machines, like dogs kicking in the dirt, establishing their hierarchy, digging holes and looking for things to kill, “Is this necessary to our survival? Is this somehow making people happy?”

Slowly drifting past, Taffy imagined spending all day working there, a dusty wasteland on the riverbank, so close to the cool river, such a potential paradise. The entire length of the river could be turned
into this terror. A sewer flowing between industries. Taffy heard the rumors of what waited, after the Missouri joined the Mississippi, this industrial vision realized in Louisiana where they called the river Cancer Alley, one industry after another, tv sets and refrigerators and tires floating in the water, used condoms and sewer discharge, all the concentrated fertilizers and pesticides that entered the river as run-off from farmlands now floating down into the gulf, concentrated now at the bottom of the pipe, flowing into the Dead Zone in the Gulf of Mexico where nothing could live anymore.

“Maybe I don’t wanna go all the way.”

* * *

Days passed and the miles of industrial nastiness passed until there was again nothing but sandstone bluffs and trees again. Then a large city, houses up on the hills, bridges across the water. Further downstream, the birds and trees once again surrounded him.

Taffy watched a big log float by with a great blue heron riding it down. He shut off the little engine and drifted alongside, pulled the 35mm camera out of it’s
rubber case and snapped a few shots of the bird. Franklin would like to see this. Someday they could sit at a table in the evening with a couple drinks and look at the photos together and Taffy could tell stories and bridge the gap of time that had grown between them, the time and space that might have allowed them to become friends again. Taffy felt some confidence in this ability of time to heal. Time. Not too much time, tho. The day would come to find each other. When the river ended so might his floating on it, and that might be the time for a reunion. If Franklin was gone, then fuck it. The photos would be beautiful to share with other people too. A solid marker for memory so that this time of freedom would not be lost in a future full of possible madness that could not be presently foreseen.

Taffy laughed, looking at the blue heron gracefulliy gliding on it’s log boat down the river. Today, this could be it. A photo to capture his last moment alive. That would be fine. He would meet it with a fist and a smile. I knew you were coming! Taffy looked up, followed the horizon. In the distance a giant cottonwood log stripped of it’s bark appeared from the trees on the left bank, crossed the river, and then disappeared into the trees on the right bank.
“What the fuck? Hold on now. What is going on down there? Some tributary dumping logs into the Missouri?”

Nobody answered, only the sound of the gurgling water talking along it’s long journey from the high peaks to the ocean. The scene ahead loomed larger, and Taffy saw it was no tributary to the Missouri River.

“That’s the god damn Mississippi River!”

He watched the parade of driftwood go by, floated up from it’s rest by the high water that was now roiling and boiling and swirling from the confluence of the two great rivers. Taffy looked to the right, the wind was blowing him down the broad channel of the main Mississippi river, where he had heard the Chain Of Rocks lay, stretching across the entire river, a dangerous water fall. He needed to make the far bank to hit the channel that bypassed the Chain Of Rocks.

Taffy went to the engine and pulled the recoil a few times. It wouldn’t start. Checked the tank for gas, only half full. The long tails run while being tilted in the water, so he decided to fill it up with gas to be sure. He grabbed the five gallon can, filled the tank, and pulled the recoil again with some haste now. The current of both rivers was whisking him along, spinning
whirlpools opened up in front of the boat and spun
him in circles.

The engine finally coughed to life and buzzed. The
boat moved forward, Taffy heaved the rudder hard to
the right and headed for the sailing channel. On the
island separating the main river from the sailing
channel was a large billboard-like sign. A big red
arrow painted on a white background pointed to the
left. That arrow, a symbol of international
understanding, a point is a point, a simplified
abstraction of the human finger extended, saying,
“Look over here.”

Taffy entered the canal, motored down the narrow
chute until the lock & dam loomed ahead. Beyond was
St. Louis and perhaps more wild Patriot parties. Now
in this safe channel Taffy felt a momentary sadness.
Louise should have been here for this.

He sidled up to the lock wall, aiming for one of the
tie down posts, the bollards, inset to the reinforced
concrete wall. There was no one else to help, he would
have to cut the engine at the perfect time and grab a
rope to throw it around the bollard. Taffy cut the
engine, flipped the rudder to come up parallel to the
wall. He made it and drifted along after a small bump.
Then the rope, he looped it and waited for the bollard,
as he floated with the current along the wall here came the bollard, he tossed for it once, missed, then again. The bollard was out of reach and the boat continued along with the current, pulling him towards the giant steel doors of the lock ahead. The longtail motors had no reverse, only forward when the engine was on and the 8 foot long shaft was dropped in the water. The longtail also had Neutral, when you pulled the shaft and propeller out of the water or turned the engine off.

Taffy looked down the tall imposing concrete wall for the next inset bollard, it was about fifty feet down. After floating out in the wide open river for days and weeks, to be floating next to this sheer cliff was disturbing, the scars of huge steel barges marred it’s surface and moss grew in the cracks. The place was like being in the gigantic moat of a castle.

The next bollard was upon him, he tossed once, at last the zen shot! He hauled back on the rope, pulling the boat to a stop, and tied the rope to a cleat on his boat. Now the river flowed around the back of his boat, without pardon, the river continued downhill. The steel doors of the lock now stood tall above, and in the recessed concrete bollard area was a steel ladder painted yellow that rose up thru endless cobwebs to the top of the lock wall. Also in this recess was a pipe
with a small cable dropping out of the bottom end, the cable had a small metal ring attached to it. Taffy pulled on the ring. An air horn sounded on the control tower of the lock. Taffy waited. No one came. The stop light for boats was visible on the control tower, it remained red, and the lock doors remained shut. A long time passed.

The lock workers always seemed to get pissed if you yanked on their chain twice. Taffy took out the book he had been reading. Ten pages later he closed the book and pulled the cable again. No sign of life at all, the lock light still shone red. Looking at the ladder he noticed huge spiders inhabiting the space between the rungs. In the shanty boat's cabin he took a wooden spoon from the kitchen and used it to clear the cob webs as he climbed to the top. The top of the lock wall was sunny and gave his skin goose bumps, at the same time Taffy dropped the spoon and shivered out the willies, “Spiders!” he shouted, while his arms and legs spasmed as if he were experiencing a seizure.

After taking in the sunny scene a moment, Taffy strolled to the control tower and eyed the dam that spanned the channel to the far bank, the water roaring out the bottom of it. Still nobody in sight. Taffy felt strange, exposed. The place was powered up, but no
one seemed to be on duty. Had there been an attack? Would he find a pile of bodies inside the control tower? Had the lock master and everyone else just walked off the job?

Taffy knocked on the door, then opened it, “Hello?” he entered and climbed the stairs. No blood. No smell of gunpowder. He knocked on the door to the control room. Nobody home. He went inside, a board of small levers, lights, switches, computer screens, a bank of monitors with a joystick and keyboard. On one of the video surveillance monitors he saw the Jacob’s Party tied up to the lock wall.

Taffy checked the bathroom. Empty.

“Well, shit. How hard could it be? Water goes in, open doors, boat goes in lock, close doors, water goes out, open bottom doors, boat goes out. It’s probably computer controlled, so how could I fuck it up?”

Taffy looked at the controls.

“It’s not like landing an airplane.”

Taffy approached the controls. Some of them were even labeled. The lock chamber was currently at the level of water in the pool below the lock, so he had to fill the chamber. Both sets of doors were closed, so he pushed the fill button. Water in the lock began to ripple. To fill such a bathtub would take awhile. He
looked around for something to do. Opening a metal shelf he found a training manual and started thumbing thru it. Flow charts, procedures, technicalities. Suddenly it seemed a lot more complicated.

“Too late now!” he looked out the windows, played with the remote cameras using the joystick, zooming in, zooming out, searching for the absent lock master or anything else interesting. A loud beeping emanated from the control panel and a red flashing light on the panel drew his attention.

“Shit!” Taffy thumbed quickly thru the manual, “Oh. Lock is done filling when red light indicates automatic shut-off. So, the water level is now equalized to the upper pool level. Ha!” He looked out the window, all seemed well.

“Open upper doors…” he pulled on the lever slowly, the doors cracked open and slowly swam thru the water. Taffy jogged out, looking left and right. Feeling sketched out he climbed down to his boat and untied, floated into the lock chamber, letting the current gently slide him along the lock wall, past the massive steel doors now open and flush in the walls of the lock. The wind was mellow inside the bathtub, he hooked the bollard easy and climbed up again, battling
cobwebs the whole way, then climbed back to the control room, looking furtively about.

“This would be the perfect time for someone to show up.” Taffy thot. He hustled at the controls, closed the upper doors and pushed the buttons to empty the chamber. The boat went down. Taffy waited anxiously for the beeping and flashing, nervously looking out the windows.

“How mad could they be? What was I supposed to do, grow fucking wings and fly over this thing? Grow a beard?” The beep and flash came. Taffy opened the lower doors after visually checking the water level. A whole new world awaited, his shanty boat floated out on it, the sun now shining into the lock chamber.

“Pool Number 37, here I come!”

He put the operators manual back on the shelf, grabbed a case of soda pop from the mini fridge in the corner and climbed down to the Jacob's Party. Starting the engine he listened to the noise of it echo off the wet, black, slimy concrete walls as the open river grew larger before him.

*   *   *

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The Mississippi River at St. Louis turns into a bottle neck and Taffy found himself hurtling past a steep bank made from piles of large jagged boulders.

“This is kinda crazy. Really wish Louise was here now.”

Bridges loomed ahead, giant black rusted iron things, the banks of the river topped by tall concrete flood walls, a foreboding city from the river. The tall arch monument was there, towering over everything, a monument to colonial expansion across the country, built with a sturdy foundation of indigenous people’s bodies, unrecorded millenniums, a metal arch tall enuf to hang 500 years of genocidal nooses from. Below the arch a hill of white stone steps dropped down to the rough stone paved bank that sloped gently to the Mississippi River.

“There it is! The old riverboat landing!” Taffy turned towards it as the current pulled him rapidly down, “Fuck! Hope I can make it!” His anxiety had no relief, Louise was gone and his works hung in the air without answer. A rain swollen current whisked the Jacob’s Party along rapidly.

Taffy surveyed the shore, a number of people sat on the steps leading up to the arch, watching the river and now watching him as he motored his shanty boat. He
turned the Jacob’s Party upstream, angled slightly
towards shore. The current was still slowly moving the
Jacob’s Party downstream, rapidly towards the granite
stone landing. He looked at people’s faces on the ledge
above the landing, a serious looking bunch. Four feet
from shore Taffy cut the engine and pulled the shaft
out of the water, dashed to the front of the boat thru
the open cabin doors in a well thought out maneuver,
grabbed the anchor and tossed it on the stone landing,
grabbed the shore line and jumped to the landing.
Taffy dashed up the bank looking for somewhere to tie
down. The line went taut as the wild current pulled the
Jacob’s Party. Taffy braced his heels in a gap between
the paving stones and held the boat, looking right and
left.
“Over here guy!”
Taffy turned, a young man had come down and
gestured towards a large rusted iron ring embedded in
the landing. Taffy scrambled over to the ring which the
young man was now holding up and slid the rope thru
it, pulled up the slack. The young man stepped down
and pulled the rope to hold the boat so that Taffy could
easily tie a knot.
“Got it!” Taffy said.
The young man dropped the rope.
“Thanks!”

“Not many boats on the river these days, especially now that it's flooded! Look like you’ve been out there awhile. Where you coming from?”

“Well, it's getting to be a long story. I started in Minneapolis tho.”

“Minneapolis!” the local repeated, looking up the river, “You like it there?”

“It’s like anywhere. Kinda cold in the winter. I live on that boat now. I’m thinking of spending the winter on it, somewhere south.”

“Wow. Can I check it out?”

“Sure.”

They stepped aboard and sat in the shade of the cabin. He introduced himself as Darius Chevaroule.

“What’s it like out there on the river?”

“Mostly just sitting, watching the world go by. Nature. Birds, fish, clouds. Reading books, exploring cool little beaches and driftwood piles, some driftwood piles are like a mile long you know. Turtles, foxes, coyotes, wild dogs, beavers. Vicious insects. Coyotes howling at night, owls talking to each other. Weird river people. Sometimes the people even howl! It’s pretty cool. I like it.”
“Damn.” Darius moved his head to look at every corner of the Jacob’s Party.

“Then there’s that small amount of time when it’s really hard and terrifying, like about five minutes ago, the landings can be terrifying sometimes. Since I’m alone on the boat it’s extra wild because there’s no backup. If I fall off the boat, there’s nobody on it to turn around and come get me.”

“Yeah. Damn. I would like to do this. Did you build this?”

“Me and my friend remodeled it. A guy we met upriver, he built it.”

Darius nodded, “Doesn’t seem too hard.”

“Naw. Building a boat is easy. Figuring out the river and the weather takes a lot more thot.”

“What are you doing in St. Louis?”

“Fill up on food and water. Beyond that, who knows. Any suggestions?”

(Seventy-two)

Darius Chevaroule walked with Taffy up into the city and they caught a trolley whose tracks led to the south side where Darius lived.
"After the Catastrophe it was like they could finally do what they really wanted, have downtown for the rich people and run out the poor. Now the poor finally had someplace to go, cause there wasn’t a bunch of people standing around wishing they had work, anybody could get a job. Anybody still standing on two feet was a king. You could walk off a job one day and walk right into another one the next day. No problem. If you were alive, that was all the skills you needed! Sometimes you go somewhere and find the place closed cause everyone quit at the same time and went to work somewhere else, just the asshole owner still there trying to run the business. Some kind of fucked up paradise. Things are getting worse now. There’s a draft, mandatory registration for everybody. What the hell is that? I survived the Catastrophe to be killed in some dumb ass civil war with religious fanatics? Hell no. Even my mom had to register, everybody. My mom! Shooting a gun!”

Taffy looked out the windows of the trolley at the strange red bricked city outside, “I had to sign a thing to get my benefits and ID from the Patriots. Selective service. Whatever. I’m not gonna kill anyone just because some authority tells me to. Hill no. I cant
believe they would want me in the military, I’m too old, too opinionated. They must be desperate.”

“The patriots want everybody. Two arms, two legs, they want you. Got a finger to pull a trigger? They want you. Watch out! Fuckers will snatch you up, right off the street. I’ve heard stories. The patriots haven’t won the war yet.”

“Really? Everyone I talk to acts like it’s all over and done.”

“No way. Separatists all over, west coast, east coast, Midwest, south. They got their own thing set up and they don’t wanna go back. It’s all crazy out there right now. Patriots fighting a war on six fronts. They got a big chunk of the pie, but there’s a dozen factions who want a bite of that pie. Some of them actively fighting, some just waiting, you know? Waiting for the right time to drop their shit.”

Darius opened the window of the trolley and shouted at someone walking on the street, trading friendly insults.

“Watch out for the box trucks.” Darius warned Taffy, “That’s what the recruiters have been using. Big white box trucks, they have a locked cage in the back of them. Couple of thick necked meat heads driving. If you look good, like you have money and friends,
they’ll skip over you. We gotta get you outta these fucking river rat clothes. You look like a target right now. Look at what I’m wearing, I look like a fancy asshole, I look like I could be a lawyer. You know what I’m doing for a job right now? Washing dishes. I like it. But if you don’t dress nice like this, they’ll get you. Maybe tho, the army decides one night to come up the alley behind all the restaurants and kidnap all the poor dishwashers, big pile of dirty dishes in the morning and a brand new army out on the front lines. My plan might play out, you know. So maybe you have a good idea. Stay out on that Mississippi. Be a hermit! I’ll give you some more advice tho: if they find you, act like your leg is paralyzed or something. Act like you’re totally crazy. Don’t think once they caught you that you can escape later. Some people have escaped, but some people just get shot for desertion. You’ll be thinking how to escape when after two days of training they throw you out on the front line, and it’s you and all the other chumps that got nabbed along with some unknown fuckers across the line whose job it is to kill you. Now they’re shooting at you. What are you gonna do? Start shooting! Killing them dumb ass dishwashers that got drafted by the other side.”

“That’s not right. Fuck that shit.” Taffy said.
“Let them have their chunk of land, I say. Who cares if the Re-United States doesn’t have the same shape on the map as the old one? Fuck it, make new maps! You know what I’m saying? I’m not fighting any war.” Darius turned his head to look intently out the window of the trolley at a group of people on the street, “This train is one of the good things they did, built the tracks right on what used to be a lane of car traffic, you can go anywhere in town on this. I love it. There’s still rich folks driving around in their cars, they can afford gas. I love the trolleys. When I was a kid we used to go jump on the ladders of slow moving freight trains rolling thru our neighborhood. When we got older we would joyride out of town and hitch-hike back. I love trains.”

“Damn. Every city should be doing this.” Taffy said, “Bring back the trolleys.”

“Yeah they should, and probably are, out of necessity. People can’t afford gas anymore. Trains are the most efficient way. And, you get to meet all these people! Some of them are just crazy, but I’ve made friends with all kinds of people riding this trolley. Hooked up with a beautiful woman too.”

“Really?”
“Well, she gave me her number. It was a good conversation. Here’s our stop. Let’s go.”

* * *

They walked up the hill to it’s top, down a side street off Cherokee that had been blocked off by planter boxes made of scrap wood and bricks, planted with sunflowers that rose like a living wall to shield the neighborhood. Beyond this living wall, in the middle of what was once the street, a vast market of vegetable and herb farmers spread out. Darius led Taffy to the middle where a bunch of tables and chairs of all types were spread out, looking like the furniture section of a thrift store. To the side a booth on wheels was attended by a woman with bronze skin and golden hair.

“Lantana!”

“Darius.”

“Two Thai iced teas, please.” Darius said with a smile, “How are you doing today?”

“I’m good.” she smiled at him, and gave Taffy the once over, “Who is your strange friend?”

“I just watched this guy come floating in off the river! Crazy asshole. He’s been out there a month, started in Minneapolis. Just going down the river.”

123
lantana
“What do you do out there?” She asked Taffy.
“Relax, fish, sleep, lay in the sun. Watch the shore go by. Read books. Paradise!”

She turned to Darius while making the drinks at her cart, “You love books too.”
“It’s true. I came to appreciate reading during the Catastrophe.”
“A good book can take you somewhere.” Taffy said.
“But if you are out floating in this paradise, why would you want to go somewhere else?” Lantana asked Taffy.
“Too much of a good thing. Gotta stay in touch.” Taffy smiled.
“Here you go.” Lantana said, handing a ceramic mug to each of them, “Bring the mug back when you’re done.”

Darius and Taffy sat in the shade of trees that once grew next to the street but now grew in small forests along with numerous other raised bed vegetable boxes made with car tires, bathtubs, and plastic buckets.
“This place is fucking beautiful.” Taffy said, “I could see living here.”
“Well, you might have to for awhile. I guess you haven’t heard about the hurricane. My family has an
obsession with weather, you know we moved here after hurricane Katrina. Yeah. Look up brother, the hurricane has made it to Saint Louis. Supposed to rain for five days straight, they’re predicting a serious flood.”

(Seventy-three)
Taffy sat in the city. The smell of campfire fading from consciousness every day until a faint trail of chimney smoke brought it back. Cooking by campfire or on the shanty boat while floating, using the rocket stove that Jacob had built large tin cans, pieces of brick, and mortar. The smell of wood burning was friendly, it smelled like freedom. Anybody can make a fire. In the city, fire is controlled, the authorities control fire. Fire is powerful. Using sticks found under the skirt of an old tree you can invoke the power of the sun, stored inside each splinter of wood, waiting to be unleashed.

Heat of life! The heating and cooking bill paid by picking up sticks. On the river there is no population to be controlled, so there is also no authority in sight. Every moment a victory.
Only a few days into hunkering down for the storm and the sounds and smells of the river were fading from memory. A stench of car exhaust choked upon, a vehement curse from a truck about ‘Fucking Bicycles!’.

Taffy kept pedaling. A rack on back with a milk crate held on by bailing wire and a large notch cut in the plastic crate where it pushed against the seat. Perfect, except for that bearing grinding and soon to seize, somewhere down there between the pedals.

“Ride it till it breaks.” Taffy thot, “Juice it.”

Taffy made it to Darius’ house and found no one at home. He turned on the radio, tuning into one of 7 different full time pirate radio broadcasts. The content of the shows was much better than the Patriotic crap spewing out of the link. A woman was ranting and thrashing out words. Taffy laughed in communion. Her topic was entirely appropriate to his day:

“Seems like there’s more and more cars showing up everyday. I wonder where they found all this gas. Siphoned from abandoned cars? I thot we were done with that shit. Peak oil, catastrophic climate change and all that. I guess after the Catastrophe there was double the resources for half the people. Enuf for another hundred years of self destruction. Great. So much for that post-apocalyptic utopian vision. I’ll have
to get that tattoo covered up. The capitalist war machine continues limping along, another century maybe. Resilient. Adaptable. Just like us. Because you know what? It is us. We are the machine. With all those old global connections, maybe it could adapt to survive even without oil. Turn human flesh into gas, like a fat burning oil lamp. We are the cogs of a ruthless empire. We dropped bombs on people and killed them instantly in tens of thousands. No other nation had ever done that. We were the first. We are ruthless killers, and the world heard the message. We possessed the eraser. We could erase entire nations from the history books, there would be no one left to remember. The most powerful nation in the world got what it wanted. Other nations make our clothes for us. We receive tribute from all over the world. The economies of entire nations exist to feed our appetites. To build us things we want. We pay them barely enuf to survive.

"Global capitalism, all roads leading north. Then the Catastrophe happened. Everyone knew something was coming. Nothing lasts forever, does it. Every empire falls. Seemed like the bug that was killing us was going to be the Achilles heel of global capitalism, spreading rapidly courtesy of the first class business
section in every jet airplane. After two days the disease vector looked like a dozen spiderwebs overlapping the globe. Then the bug hitch-hiked down dirt roads and found the little places, leveled the rest of the world. No justice programmed into that virus. Everyone blamed everyone, but no one seemed to be inoculated against it, no single group of people seemed to survive it better than another, except the random ten percent who were naturally immune. The source was never found. That’s what they say. That’s the story they tell. Truth? The Center for Disease Control said it appeared in Central America first. Three countries developed an antidote within two weeks and those three countries inoculated their populations first and then began cranking out doses for the rest of the world. China, France, and Switzerland. Did one of them engineer the disease? Most fingers aimed at the US. Who else would do such a thing? Wouldn’t it be just like the US government to accidentally release a virus, and have the antidote, but not give it out to its own population in order to avoid getting in trouble?

“I sat today in the library of downtown St. Louis, a fine library too, I recommend to my listeners that you pay a visit, but I sat there today reading news, histories, everything compiled about the Catastrophe,
and just thinking. Why are people gathering back together in huge cities? Why? Is this the best idea, why are we allowing ourselves to be herded like cattle? Is it loneliness? Why do we desire the company of so many others, shoulder to shoulder in cities? These swirling mad hives of humanity, people climbing on top of each other, screaming, fighting, fucking. Getting high, getting drunk, having fun, hating each other, working too hard again, bitching about everything, stealing from each other, dancing. My god. Why?

“We’ve been pushed here by authorities. You can’t deny that. This is all we’ve known for generations, kneeling down before the new god, Science. It’s completely unquestioned. They can cut half your brain out of your skull and say they’re trying to cure you from being sick, and the sickness is that you are sexually attracted to someone of the same gender. Some people say: “Fuck science! May it go back to the hole it crawled out of.” I enjoy some aspects of science, but the problem is we placed science on top of the template of religion, in competition with religion, the result is what we got here today.

“I can see we are headed for something potentially even worse than the old system. I don’t want to be a slave of this machine. I don’t want to be one of the
sterile automatons in their suits and ties, demanding assimilation, demanding conformity. I wish the whole thing a fiery death so that we can live free. Really live out the dream that is in the US constitution. Take all those lovely silk ties off those fancy necks and weave a rope to climb up out of this shit hole.”

Taffy turned down the volume on the radio and listened to the sound of voices outside, then relaxed and stared out the window at the vines climbing up the side of the red brick house next door, remembering his stroll yesterday down to the Mississippi River. The city of Saint Louis had closed it’s flood gates and sand bagged them. The river was seven feet above flood stage. Taffy walked along the water front and found a man sitting with his companion on the steps leading up to the arch. The river was clogged with driftwood and massive whole trees that rolled along. Water lapped on the steps below them, the stone paved landing was completely underwater. Two flag poles stood fifty feet out in the river, one with the US flag, the other with the flag of the State of Missouri.

“How’s the river?” Taffy said.

“Crested today.” one of the men said.

“So this is it, eh? I was out on a boat four days ago.” Taffy said.
“In the flood? Right now it’s illegal to be out there with anything less than 1800 horse power. The river’s closed!”

“Yeah. I hope my boat is still there when the water goes down.”

“Current is pretty strong. Rip your boat right outta there!”

“Well, it’s tied up behind the old River Boat Tours barge right over there. Pontoons are full of foam, so it can’t be swamped. If it gets hit by a log tho, breaks up or flips upside down, that would be a mess.”

“Yeah that would. Might be alright tho. You never know what surprises the river’s got for you. Those currents hold secrets down there, you only see a little part of it up here.”

The three of them stared at the fat river moving from left to right.

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“Are you afraid of it?” Taffy asked.

“Just look at it.” the man said.

“You’d be dumb not to fear something like that.”

The second man said, “The river eats people, every year, swallows ‘em up. People wade out four feet from shore and they’re gone. Poof!”
The first man spoke, “We’re not fish! If I was a fish I wouldn’t be scared of it. If I was a fish then I’d be scared of me. The fisherman!” he grinned wildly.

“You gotta respect the power there. Respect.” the second man said.

(Seventy-four)
A short distance from Cherokee Street Darius took Taffy to meet a man named Thomas Jackson. He owned an entire city block and was looking for people to stay in the houses, rent free, just to keep them safe from pyromaniacs and nihilists. Taffy thought it sounded like a sweet deal for a temporary river-rat bivouac.

The houses were all red brick, like everything else in St. Louis since that fire back in ye olden times. Some of the brick work was plastered and painted in a garish way. The roofs were flat and each had a small porch, most of them two stories. Thomas Jackson was found lounging in the front yard garden of a place midway down the block. He sat in the shade under a pear tree, eating a pear.

“Hey Thomas. This is my friend Taffy.”
“Hello! Want a pear?” Thomas Jackson asked.
“Thanks.” Taffy took one from the basket.
“Taffy, like salt water taffy? I used to love that stuff. Don’t see that around much anymore. I guess St. Louis never was a big taffy producer. Hey, we get to sit around and eat our own pears tho, eh?” he smiled and took a luscious bite, “Mmm, these are perfect. Damn.”
“We got a house a few down that has apples, cherries, and peach trees growing. Food just grows on trees here. Ha!”
“The gardens are looking good.” Taffy said, gazing at the street where the entire north lane and the parking spaces too had been converted into a raised bed garden that ran the length of the block. It reminded Taffy of the river banks where the grasses and willows grew, the paved street would be the river. The plants were distributed chaotically in the beds, tomatoes, collard greens, basil, hot peppers, sweet peppers, beets, salad greens, zucchini and squash, beans and peas.
“That was a project. Couple dump trucks of dirt. City subsistence program. They gave us the dirt and we contracted out to grow food with it. There it is, enuf to feed the block. Only got two other tenants tho.”
“City let’s you run things here?” Taffy asked.
“I own this whole block, every house on each side. They gave it to me, trying to spark up business, get people to move into a safe neighborhood. I was shooting off warning shots. I got a shotgun. Kids come in here all drunk and start breaking windows, smashing doors, trying to set fires. Damn punks! End of the world motherfuckers, I said, 'Here's your end of the world! Blam!' I ran around with a shotgun and a fire extinguisher just to keep this block from being ruined. I would yell at them, 'Hard working people built this! All this! And you little shits are gonna wreck it? No way!' I put a stop to it. I would yell at those punks. Luckily they were always so drunk I could hear them before they got to far into whatever ignorant ideas they had in their heads.” Thomas turned his head hearing a noise, up the block a cat had knocked over a pile of trash digging for scraps.

“Here kitty kitty kitty!” the old man sang, “Yeah. I would throw off some shots, maybe hit one of them, who knows. Hunting in the dark, who knows what you'll hit! Scares the pigeons too. I like this place. It's my home and I'm trying to keep it alive. Let it live. Some people moved in, down the corner house. I told them, 'Call me up if you hear anything.' That's the deal. That's all you gotta do. I'll take care of the rest.
They don’t pay rent, just listen and look, eyes and ears. Every new person moves in makes me relax a little bit more.”

“So you’ve got more places you want people in?”

“Oh yeah! Other end of the block. You interested?”

“Yeah. I like it here, but I don’t know how long I’ll stay.”

Thomas Jackson survey Taffy, “You’re not one of those damn drunk punks are you?”

Taffy shook his hands as if to rid himself of something clinging to them, “No no. Those aren’t my people. That’s cave-man stuff. I’m more a fan of libraries and music than self destruction. I’ve been going down the river in a shanty boat.”

“Well hell now! Going down the river. That would explain the scruffy look of you. Well buddy, you came to the right place then. I’m starting up a library myself, in that house right over there. Community library. Anybody on this block ever writes a book, it can go in that library. Let me take you on a tour.” Thomas rose from the chair and they walked on the sidewalk next to the raised bed gardens, “You’re the first white person that has come by looking for a place. The people in the house down on the other corner are Latino. We’ll have a pretty diverse community if you move in. People are
gonna think we’re a cult. Up here we’ve got three empty lots with vegetable gardens going. You can help all you want with the gardens. They feed us. More than we can eat. We trade with the grocery down the hill for things we haven’t got. Thot about canning, but haven’t got around to it. Charles and Matilda, they knew how to run a canning operation. They’re gone tho, long gone. Yep. Follow me son.”

* * *

Taffy got a nice place at the end of the block, the building looked like it used to be a corner store since the door opened right onto the corner and the first floor had lots of windows. The second story was a nice apartment with wood floors, and a carriage house was out back. The roof was set up so all the water drained into huge plastic storage barrels connected to hoses on the bottom of the barrels, these ran down the street to the vegetable gardens. Inside the house he found the apartment completely furnished with possessions of the former occupants.

“They’re not coming back.” Thomas Jackson said to him. “The city annexed everything after a year. If no one made contact and submitted a claim, that was it.
This is all public trust. Nobody wanted a whole block, and I said, 'Let me have a whole block. One house is no good to me if all the rest of them are full up with drunk punk-ass squatters setting fire to everything and fighting out in the street.' And they gave it to me. Here I am.”

“Thomas Jackson town.” Taffy said.

“That’s right. They can name this neighborhood after me, fine. I’ve been working my ass off here to save it.” he laughed, “I don’t care about that. I just want to be a part of a happy community here, you know?”

Taffy explored the house Thomas Jackson had leased to him. He found a link in the living room upstairs and turned it on. Looking for information on the flood levels of the Mississippi River. The water was forecast to go down in a few days. After a week it seemed the conditions would again be good for boating. A week. A break would be good. Hanging out with other people, strangers. The boat had become a lonely place, Taffy realized. He looked back at the screen, and searched for more information about the river, which led him to a video of a flood from years past with a house floating down a swollen river and crashing into a bridge. This led to viewing a video
about other disasters, a plane crash caught in video, and then to a video about the conspiracy of the world trade center, and then to a video of a woman’s ass dancing in extremely tight jeans that ripped open suddenly. According to the link, 420,369 people had watched that ass wiggle and rip those jeans. Taffy looked up from the screen and shook his head spastically. It was becoming dark outside.

“Dammit. What have I done with my last hour of light! What was I doing?” he stood up dazed, wandered around the room, walked back to the link and closed it. Taffy walked outside, focused on pulling his self back into his self. Darius was weeding the garden in the golden sunset light. Crickets sang an evening concert in the shady grottoes underneath the heady smelling tomato plants.

“Hey! What are you doing tonight?” Darius asked.
“No plans.”
“You gotta come with me to this party. I think it’s someone’s birthday.”
“Alright.”

Taffy looked around the strange place. Saint Louis was run off the tracks, the whole city was parked in a grass field just watching the birds fly over. It was
(Seventy-five)

Taffy strolled with Darius towards the party, thru streets of dark gray asphalt and red brick houses, even the sidewalks, being slightly red, seemed to have brick in them. Brick town. Every building with a different style, a distinct facade from the one next to it. On the business streets, the buildings butted up against each other.

They walked over concrete framed by thick growths of grass sprouting from the cracks between, no one bothered to return the surface to it’s original human perfection, letting the perfection of chaos exist. They ducked under overgrown trees, rocked left and right feet over loose street pavers, kicked at tin cans and wind blown trash scattered in a city where nobody wanted to be a sanitation engineer anymore. Sanitation engineer was now one of the highest paying jobs, along with janitors. People treated them like gods when they appeared, nobody fucked with them.
Taffy and Darius walked down and down, past the abandoned brewery with it’s massive brick buildings, stripped and gutted of their organs, hundreds of small family brewers worked their fermentational magic all across the city now. Every corner store operating had a different beer available. Some areas had prolific fruit trees growing, and these neighborhoods had vast selections of wine.

“People here really jumped on opportunities after the catastrophe.” Taffy said.

“St. Louis jumped on rebuilding.” Darius said, “Four months after the evac happened people were like, ‘Fuck this refugee camp, I’m going back home.’ Not even knowing really what they were gonna eat or drink or be doing in a closed up city, just a back-pack full of water purification tablets and some survival rations. They walked back home and started cleaning up.”

“Minneapolis was a police state. It sucked.”

“I heard things like that. Different security corporations, or national guard operations. Blackwater operations were really fucked up, no surprise. They had most of the West and East coast, trigger happy bullshit. Randomly shooting anything, sometimes even shooting each other.”
“Merdeavion was in the upper Midwest, mostly bumbling and incompetent, fresh company you know, lot of just-doing-my-job types. I met some really nice Merdeavion people. I was traveling on my boat with one actually, she was upper management. We became really good friends. Ha. Weird. Fucking lonely without her now.”

“You hooked up?”

“Lovers? No. It wasn’t like that. There was a time when my life used to be dominated by fucking, you know, the whole quest seems to take over some people’s life, especially when you’re younger. I got over that. I can appreciate people for more than a source of fucking, right? You know? Like, I don’t need anyone else to have an orgasm. Right?” Taffy looked over at Darius who was grimacing, “I’m not trying to talk down to people just cause they’re young now. I just noticed that as I got older things changed with me. When I was young I thot I would never change. I thot, I’m not gonna be like those boring old people! In some ways I still am doing that rebellion against settling down. Traveling on the shanty boat, like that. Some parts of me have changed tho. I appreciate having friends that I’ve known for years, stability, a lover I
know and trust. You can’t have some of these things by rambling around all the time.”

“You’ve been with a lot of women tho, huh? You got tired out maybe!”

Taffy paused in his mind while his feet continued walking, considering this delicate moment of being perceived as heterosexual. Passing as a normal. Taffy thought of all the times he held his tongue about things he believed in, about who he was. Giving in to fear and adding another brick to the wall between him and the rest of the world. Fuck it then. Caution, shyness, fear, fuck all that.

“Yeah, I’ve been with a lot of women. Also with a lot of men, and with people who didn’t accept the boundaries created by the social construction of gender.”

“What the fuck! So you’re a fag?”

“No. I’m queer.”

“Like, gay, right?”

Taffy laughed, “It’s easy to get lost in words, eh? Words are little boxes that we use to define and control things. I’m queer, and I’ll tell you what that means to me: it means that I decide what to do with my life. I don’t let any government, religion, philosophy, teacher, relative, parent, sibling, friend, or anybody
else tell me who I can or cannot love or fuck. That’s between me and the people involved with me. Everyone else can piss off. None of their business. Being queer also means that I don’t want to assimilate into the normal world that I grew up in, cause I think the normal sexist, racist, classist, homophobic, body hating world I grew up in is NOT good.”

“Alright alright.” Darius held up his hands, “I wasn’t trying to start nothing. I was just surprised. You don’t seem gay- Queer.”

Taffy laughed again, “So, what does a gay person look and act like? What does a gay person act like who lives in say- Pakistan? I’ll tell you, a gay person in Pakistan probably tries to act like everyone else so that no one can tell he’s gay so that religious extremists don’t drag him out of bed in the middle of the night and chop off his fucking head! Same thing in this country. It’s better in some places, worse in others. Not as bad now as it used to be. People still get killed tho. For being different.”

“I know like one person who’s gay. I mean, I think I know some other people that are, but they don’t talk about it.”

“You think you don’t know, but I bet you do know a lot of people. They’re just hiding it, out of fear or
shame. People kill non-heterosexuals because they have some fucked up programming in their heads that makes them prejudiced. Full of fear and hate. I think- I mean logically I have thot it out, and decided it’s fucked up that heterosexuals are running around the planet breeding like insects, but I try to control my feelings of hatred and prejudice you know? Maybe the planet has a stable number of human beings on it now, so why go back to runaway baby making? But everyone just says, we gotta fill up these empty houses and get these factories going again, like that was such a good time. Leave the cars and chairs empty. Now they’re giving money to people who get pregnant. Can you believe it? Positive pregnancy test gets you two grand in the bank. Do we really need to be encouraging that?”

“I hear you.” Darius said. “It’s nice now. This city used to be crazy, cars everywhere, couldn’t find a decent job. Now it’s great, I work like 20 hours a week and I’m rich! Compared to how I lived before the catastrophe, I’m filthy fuckin rich! Sit back and watch the vegetables grow.”

“Hill yeah.”

“Alright. Hey, sorry I called you a fag.”
“Well, fag was pretty close, I didn’t take it as an insult. So now you have a queer friend and I have a black friend.”

“But I still feel like I would be insulting you by calling you a queer.”

“Hmm. Yeah. Calling myself queer is sorta like if you called yourself the N word. Reclaiming the word from the people who used it to oppress us. Using that derogative word in recognition of our status in the dominant white-heterosexual world.”

“Alight. I don’t use that word, but I understand what you’re saying. Let me take say now that I’m all about the ladies. If you meet any fine women at this party, send them over to me.”

“That’s not how it works, buddy. I’m open to all the possibilities. Threesome? Two women, two men, one of each? Who knows! May the stars be kind to me tonight! I hope I meet someone and feel the sparks, something going on. It always helps to be with a friend at a party full of strangers. Otherwise you look like a psycho off the street, standing around staring at people. People will think you don’t have any friends because something is wrong with you. People are attracted to laughing and smiling, but not to people who are laughing and smiling while standing by...
themselves. So, you are right. We will introduce each other to people, and then our prospective lovers will see that we have at least one friend, so we can’t be complete psychos.”

“That’s what I’m talking about. We’re almost there. See that crowd of people and bikes out by the street?”

Taffy thot of the street scene earlier, bicycles everywhere, scooting in front of the trolleys clanging to get out of the way. Taffy recalled being the only bicyclist in sight, surrounded by a city full of cars. Feeling like some kind of warrior, or in the running of the bulls, anticipating a head butt or horn up the ass at any moment. And now the street scene is dominated with bicycles, everyone riding around like it had always been like this. These people were driving cars a year ago. But it’s a good thing, right? Even tho it’s too late to stop disastrous climate change? Taffy laughed and let it go.

(Seventy-six)
Darius disappeared into the party and Taffy stopped to piss on the side of the house. When Taffy climbed the
front steps and entered, Darius was nowhere to be seen. In the kitchen there was an awkward line of people on each side of the room, leaning against counters, facing each other over a chasm of linoleum. Taffy said hello to someone, the birthday girl? He stepped out the door and onto the wooden staircase descending to the backyard. A fire burned there in that small squared off piece of land, protected by bricks, fences, razor wire, safe from hungry packs of dogs and emotionally damaged humans roaming the streets.

Taffy stepped down to the campfire burning there and sat in a wheelchair propped before the fire. There was no one out there. A fire burning alone. They had gone to piss maybe. So many people all coming to one place. Strangers. Taffy had never felt too comfortable with a stranger. What do you do with a stranger? Knowing nothing about them. The unknown. No trust in them. After half an hour speaking you could know something. Until then, what? Superficial. In these situations Taffy liked to simply sit and let it come. Observe and be amused. Often this strategy resulted in total isolation, they might act like he didn’t exist. Or the bold ones might step forth and bring on the dancing horses.
Moments after smiling into the fire someone came down the steps and sat in a chair next to him. The person extended their arm in his direction, offering him a large bottle of beer. It was Sand. The sight of her face brought Taffy back to Minneapolis and the Catastrophe when so many friends died. The harsh winter that followed. She was one of the few that huddled together in that last house, until she couldn’t take it anymore and left.

“Oh my god!” Taffy said, staring at the face he last saw climbing into a van and driving south out of a desolate city, escaping a cold winter, headed for a warmth or oblivion. Sand laughed and they both jumped up from their chairs to embrace.

“You made it.” Taffy said.

“I did.” she smiled, “And so did you.”

“Yeah. A little more crazy than I was before, but in a good way. Have you been in St. Louis the whole time?”

“Yeah. Word on the road was that Missouri was pretty open, not exactly controlled by the Corporate Coalition, so I came here. There were some half assed C.C. People here pretending to run things, but they only controlled like twelve square blocks downtown. People had re-settled on their own and weren’t gonna
sand

150
listen to anyone telling them what to do. After a few
firefights and car bombs Merdeavion Security refused
to go outside of the C.C. Green Zone downtown, and
corporate headquarters wouldn’t send resources to
back them up, they had too many other fronts to fight
on already. So things here just fell down neighborhood
lines and the previous unofficial transition
government operated underground. Then the Patriots
won and there was a big party and it’s heading back to
business as usual, which isn’t all good, really.
Corruption is a tenacious weed, my friend. Let me tell
you about my drive down here!” Taffy sipped from
her beer and tried to keep up with the intense flow of
information coming from her, “Alternator went out! I
had to bust into an auto parts store and figure out
which one to replace it with. Not as easy as you might
think, with the inventory computers being dead. I did
it tho, drove on thru and made St. Louis. Lived in my
van on the sly till I met some kids squatting here, they
used to be in that band “Butt Flakes”. Remember
them?” Taffy moved his eyebrows, frowned, and
shrugged, “Yeah, people change. They used to be such
douche bags. Nice bunch of people now, real human
beings. I was staying with them so I wouldn’t go nuts
in the van you know. It’s been good here. So, are you
moving here, and where is Franklin and all those other fucks? God damn Taffy it is good to see you, give me another damn hug!” Sand leaned over and wrapped one arm around his neck, the other around his waist.

“Well, me and Franklin split. He was in his own world of booze and I wasn’t there with him. I left town, as you can see. They’re probably all still there, getting in trouble, but hopefully not too much. The old prison industrial complex seems to be belching smoke again, hungry for souls. We’ve got to look out for each other.”

“Yeah. Nasty shit. Things are different here, and I think it might stay that way, unless the feds start coming around. We may have reverted to state’s rights being trump, which is good and bad, but without the feds pushing law on us locally, we can have a huge affect on what goes on, here in this region that is. I don’t know. Am I being too optimistic? I’ve become crazy active since I left Minneapolis last winter. I feel like things will tend towards getting better if we all stay on top of it, right? If a decent percentage of the population can stay aware and understand what’s going on, that’s the recipe for social change and true freedom, right? An actual real new age.”

“You just said New Age.”

“I know! Should I run for a Patriot office or what?”
“Alright, I'll vote for you.”
“No. You'll be my campaign manager. How long have you been in St. Louis?”
“About a week now. Came here on a boat.”
“A fucking- What?”
“Boat. Out on the river.”
“No way.”
“Yeah. Started up in Winona with this woman named Louise, we found this boat just floating down the river. We swam out to it and decided to take it down the river. Kind of a long story, but now Louise is gone and I got this sweet little house boat that was built by this guy named Jacob. It's down there riding out the flood. Haven't been to the boat in days, hope it's alright. City living has got me going! There's so many distractions in this town.”
“Tell me about it!” Sand said.
“You got yer potlucks and parties, musical happenings, theater out under the stars, people playing that wild dice game on every street corner.”
“Yeah!” Sand's eyes lit up, “It's called 'Maps'. Came from the evacuation camps, I was just talking to a guy about it the other day. Love that game.”
“Yeah. Social interaction. Entertainment. Using words to count the passages, it makes you understand
what is on people's minds by the words they choose to use in the game. Some genius invented that game.”

“Yeah. Damn. So you have a boat. You gotta show me the boat.”

“Alright I will.”

Sand stared at the fire a moment and then turned her head back to Taffy, “Guess who's in town.”

“Uh-“

“Aston!”

“What?” Taffy flashed back to that night at the Last House when they had caught him.

“Yeah! Apparently this is where all the refugees from Minneapolis ended up!”

Taffy looked at Sand’s smiling face, “He didn't tell you why he left, did he.”

Sand shrugged, “Same reason I left, I guess. He said he just had to leave.”

“No. He really did have to leave. We put him in a car and told him to leave.”

“What?”

“He sexually assaulted Julius.”

“Whoa.”

“I should find him and talk to him. He's got to own up to what he did or he's going to continue hurting people, and himself too.”
“Yeah. Damn. That explains a lot. He looked kind of hollowed out you know, like something had been eating him from the inside out. I thot it was just the Catastrophe. Now I understand. I’ll help you find him.”
“Alright. Good. We can do it together.”
Darius stumbled down the stairs and found them at the fire, “Hey!”
Taffy smiled, “Sand, do you know my new friend Darius?”
Darius approached them, “This question might offend you, but here we go. How come so many white people think they came from another planet? Are they sick of being JUST white, now they want to be EXTRATERRESTRIAL white?”
“I’ve considered it.” Taffy replied, “Mostly I think I just hoped that if I was from somewhere else that they would come back and pick me up. Don’t you even get the feeling that this world isn’t quite right?”
“Oh buddy don’t get me started.”
“You get it.”
“Not really. But I’ll let it go.”
Taffy turned to flash a smile at Sand.
“Hey, what’s your name?” Darius said, the joy had returned to his voice.
“Sand.” she held his hand.

* * *

Taffy woke up in his house with some minor ache of the head. The home-made double malt beer really had taken him. He twisted and groaned, spine crackled, there were other people sleeping in his large bed and he rolled into them. Two distinct heads in a mass of body. He had forgotten, now it was coming back. Some hands and arms drunkenly wrangling intimate friendship, kissing and such. A good end to a night begun in awkwardness, peaked with maniacal shouting and tipping over furniture, ending with the embrace of strangers. Taffy mused, he never did meet the birthday girl, she retreated from the chaos, perhaps enraptured doing coke in a bedroom. Oh well, another time.

“Aston!” Taffy said aloud as he rolled out of bed and shuffled to the kitchen, filling a mason jar with water to guzzle. As the jar came down empty he saw in the living room bodies strewn on couches and floor. Ah, hey! The party went from the birthday girl’s house to Taffy’s shanty boat - where some situation with the security guy was resolved after a few bottles of shared
booze - then the remains of the party hopping crew came back to the neighborhood to have a campfire in the yard. Hopefully Thomas Jackson had not been awakened! He was nervous about young people having fires. Taffy smiled at the restful scene in his living room. Sand’s boots lay by the couch, a distinctive red vinyl glitter. Her dog Frisky lay curled up on the couch with her, a golden retriever pit bull mix. Sweet dog. Taffy pet the beast’s head. It was good to be among the living. One old friend and a dozen new friends made missing the ones who weren’t there much easier. Louise loved dogs, if she were here she would be friends with Frisky.

Taffy looked into his bedroom at the head sleeping on his pillow. Hell yeah, life goes on. Franklin? Who was that? There were no careless whispers here.

Taffy remembered that there was some drunken talk last night of people wanting to move into his house. Who had said that? Taffy shrugged. New house mates would be good. His plans involved floating away any day now. The party on the boat last night was like a housewarming after the storm. There would be crew to leave town with.

Enough with the future. First, breakfast for everyone. Collard greens were piling up in the garden.
and the hen house was in need of egg harvesting. Taffy put on the big straw hat to shield hangover eyes from the sun and strolled out the front door to harvest from the raised bed in the street.

“Hey!” Thomas Jackson yelled, he was sawing a board with a handsaw in front of his house, “Coffee? Come help me drink it. You know how I get when I drink a whole pot to myself.”

“Alright!”

(Seventy-seven)
They say the last day of summer was yesterday. Sun heads west again this evening, every night the crickets are singing their cat-calls trying to hook up and squirrels are scratching inside the walls of the house, hiding snacky treats for another winter.

I have all these equations in my mind, popping up the instant I awake from a restful nap moaning from the movement, the return to consciousness. I see a graph pop into my mind, the blue line of the river rise indicated on the link to the National Atmospheric Association computer, an arc down the graph to the
point when the water will go below flood stage and I am physically free to go, my presence here in St. Louis entangled with relations to people and a growing love for them, my strangely temporary bivouac here in this brick house. I keep expecting this to go on forever. Keep expecting Louise to walk in at any moment and say, “Fuck it! Let’s get back on the river!” Anything. I look out the window at the alley behind the house, red brick pavers and black asphalt filled potholes, some green dash of grass. Red, black, green. The boarded up brick house across the alley, a potential place for some anti-everything punks to break into and bust up and burn down. Punks? That seemed long ago, I hardly looked the part anymore. The aesthetics of it were humorous now, the fashion, the music, once passionate, vibrant with rebellion, now vacant and sad, the tatters of a carcass picked clean. Now I wear what I find for free. What do you call that style? My philosophy is whatever makes me and the people around me happy. Post-punk? At any moment I could look like anything. The tattoos stay the same tho. A pair of glasses with a piece of bailing wire holding them together. If you asked me for a handout I might actually give you some, because I have been there, tho now it’s become hard to make small transactions like
this with the whole money-on-a-plastic-card thing. There are ways. You can make exchanges in some corner stores or at flea markets, card to card, people who know what it's like will help you out. Not the assholes downtown, not the people who actually have money to share. They won't drop a penny. After all we've been thru together as fellow humans, surviving the Catastrophe, the uniforms and suits still manage to be assholes. Like a bad habit, they don't even seem to remember why they started being greedy assholes in the first place. It's just tradition now. That's part of the disconnect, most of them didn't actually go thru the Catastrophe with us. They were evacuated early by helicopter, flown to private corporate sanctuaries surrounded by razor wire and guards. They were the first to be inoculated. They never missed a meal, they never smelled a single burning body, never saw the national guard executing people. Never had to hide in the oven to survive. Total privilege. Maybe a small percentage of them will fall thru the cracks of doctrine and develop authentic compassion for the rest of us, and feel, really FEEL what it's like to struggle. What can those few people do to change things? Write books? Give speeches? Preach in churches? Organize protests. Write letters. Marginalized by their peers.
Eccentrics. There goes all that money, spent on helping people. Maybe just does it anyway and gives them the middle finger, a famous philanthropist. He was so rich that he gave it all away, and look at him smile.

If you have power over people, how do you decide how to stop having that power? Who do you give that power to? Deciding who to give power to is actually using that power! Damn. Whoops. They didn't ask to be born rich, right? I'm sure it's really hard to decide what to do with all that money.

Maybe I give the middle finger to this whole poser pretend counter-culture that has become an alternative economy, channeled by market forces into a mere sub-culture, fake rebellion. Why isn't anyone trying to stop us? Because we aren't actually doing anything that is threatening the established system of power. We are like a string of flashing lights across the nation. We are bold and flashing, but all they have to do is put on a pair of sunglasses and we disappear. Shit! We have to keep moving! Movement! MOVEMENT! Seven steps beyond post-post-punk. Nameless freedom loving wild ass people living life for themselves. The second it has a name, the moment they make a box to put us in, burn it to the ground! Don't let them take it! If most people don't understand what you're doing, but are
completely fascinated by what you're doing, then you're probably doing the right thing. Living life for yourself. It's unheard of! Wow. What?

A few days after that party that Darius dragged me to, Sand and I tracked down Aston. I had been working on a speech in my head for so long, trying to get it right, thinking it was such an important moment in his life, and he had no one there telling him anything. He had started his journey down the long road of misery. I was never much good at confrontations with men, they always ended up beating me and breaking parts of my body until blood came out. I had almost given up on confronting men about their behavior, but I thot of the price of silence and I said this:

"Don't hide from what you did. Embrace it. You have to accept that and change your behavior. Then I think you should seek out the people you hurt and try to make things right. Ask that person you wronged how to make it right. Maybe they want you to apologize, maybe they want you to get counseling. Even if you can't find them, even if they don't wanna talk to you ever again and refuse to ever forgive you, you still gotta admit the truth to yourself. You fucked up. Okay. You can't change the past, but you can
change who you are in the present and therefore into the future. You have to keep working on yourself, talk with friends about it, figure out how to change your behavior so you don't do what hurts people. You can change. If you're lucky, someday you could end up reconciling with the people who you've hurt. You can't hide from the past, it isn't going to go away as long as people remember. Don't let your mistakes consume you. Just think about it, feel compassion for those people, feel compassion for yourself. Then figure out what you need to do. Have someone you care about support you.”

It was good, it came out good. He was receptive to what Sand and I told him. By the time we were done talking it seemed like a little flame had come alive inside him. Suffering is like oppression. When one person is afflicted, all others are afflicted.

* * *

I just saw Darius come onto the block, riding his bike with the blue milk crate in front and red one in back, tied on with bailing wire and loaded with mysterious parcels, food wrapped in paper, bottles full of beverage. Darius had become obsessed with playing
this cello that he acquired by trading vegetables with someone who lived uptown. He was starting to sound good. The smoothing waves of sound resonating off the hard wood floors of his house, undulating out the open windows, crossing the street and dancing off the walls of other houses, racing down ear canals.

It was inspiring. I thot about finding some kind of woodwind to accompany him- oboe or clarinet? The cello with it’s warm low notes was perfect alone too. I sit on my porch, glass of cherry wine in hand, Thomas Jackson being an excellent wine maker, the sips made my skin tingle. I hope that Darius will start playing his cello, like he seems to have gotten in the habit of doing, everyday at sundown. I am not disappointed today. A triumphant song leaps into the street, massaging my heart and skin, I feel goosebumps, a warm surge from the core. Darius is really good, he FEELS it, all the way thru. I’m drunk in the sunset. I’m laughing. I’m in a beautiful place with no fear.

(Seventy-eight)
After the raucous events on the evening of the boat party, Taffy received an message on the link asking
him to please move his boat to another location. The loud noises of the party had awoken and disturbed the one guest residing at the Riverboat Inn. Business was bad and he wasn't helping.

Sand came with him to see the Jacob's Party in a sober light and to help move it. They brought a large jar of home-made kim-chi, jugs of water, egg salad sandwiches, and Thomas Jackson's home-made potato chips: sea salt and vinegar flavor. Sand's dog “Frisky” ran thru the forest eagerly sniffing everything.

The river had dropped some, it was near flood stage now or a little below, all the giant logs and whole drift piles had already floated down and even found a place to rest with the car tires, refrigerators, loose buoys painted bright red and green, and the endless empty plastic soda bottles with their lids still on.

The sun was out, a good day to float. As they loaded up their bicycles at the house Taffy began to feel excited, going boating! That feeling of freedom, of being in your own world, in a spaceship disconnected from civilization and all the accumulated nastiness. Out on the un-tamed river. Even floating thru a city it felt untouchable, people looked down from bridges, folks stood on the bank fishing, watching from cars. If you wanted to you could get close and talk to them, or
you could just continue sitting there on your boat, and soon the current would carry you on down to the next scene.

Arriving at waterfront Taffy and Sand found the shanty boat floating safely, tied to the steel barge which was pretending to be an old stern wheeler by having a fake paddle wheel in the rear, The Riverboat Inn. Taffy climbed down to the deck of the Jacob’s Party and stood there feeling the thing float. Looking out on the Mississippi flowing by he thought of the hurricane that had brought this rain north to dump in the Mississippi basin. New Orleans had been evacuated, everyone forced onto trains and shipped out to wretched camps, the same decrepit camps they had evacuated to when the Catastrophe struck. There was a lot of anger about it, they were pissed! Shipped from their homes to a warehouse prison, guarded by armed Patriots protecting the now suddenly valuable commodity of People. Scarcity. There weren’t enuf people to push the buttons and flip all the burgers, the rich wanted their services restored. People had become gold! Uncomfortably so, there was no such thing as a part time job now. There was no unemployment! People had become sparkling gems! Except the flawed ones, the ones who wanted to organize unions, or who
wanted to do their own thing, the ones who wouldn't co-operate with the new vision of society. They were isolated to avoid infecting the survivors. The amnesty was over. Inside the empty and dark prison factories, lights were being turned on.

Taffy and Sand tied their bicycles onto the rubber coated roof of the shanty boat and stowed the chow in the cooler. Their destination- the River Des Peres on the south side of St. Louis. A short ride to a place where there should be no harassment from humans. The River Des Peres was full of sewer overflow, there would be no problem with people because there wouldn’t be any people there. He could tie up indefinitely.

“Being out here makes me think I should leave town. What do you think?”

“Why?”

“I like it here too much. What if this is it? What if I settle down here, fall in love, adopt children?”

“Whatever, Taffy.”

“I'll have to move the boat again soon anyway, since the water is going down, it would end up beached. I'll come back tomorrow and let more line out. But I'm thinking, maybe I should pack up and leave tomorrow.”

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“What? Really?”
“It's too comfortable here. Friends, food, music! What else is there? I'm afraid if I leave I will never hear a cello again. But- maybe I can convince people to go with me!”
“That sounds like fun.” Sand grabbed his arm and shook his body, “Fuck yeah, let's all go!”
“We need another boat. Thomas will be upset. Who's gonna guard his houses?”
“We can promise to come back.” Sand suggested.
“ Totally. Are you ready? Let's get outta here.”
Sand untied the front line and Taffy started the motor, steered out and turned downriver. They waved at the lonely couple standing at the railing on the top deck of the Riverboat Inn, who politely waved back.
In the middle of the river they met a tow boat pushing 3 steel barges upriver, loaded to the top with black coal for a power plant. The pilot came out of the cabin and peered at them thru binoculars, they waved, he took a hand off and waved back. The co-pilot at the controls blew the tow’s air horn as the boats slowly passed in the channel.
Taffy sat on a bar stool in the kitchen. The house had quickly become a punk house. There was a kitchen sink full of dirty dishes. Two people were living in the carriage house out back, five people in the house. The porch was piled with bicycles, some even worked. There were spontaneous parties and huge feasts. It was pretty good times. Someone hung an upside down US flag in the front windows, Taffy took it down. Thomas Jackson was showing signs of anxiety. “How come all these people didn’t want to live in a house of their own? Plenty of houses.” Taffy shrugged, “I guess this is the way we’re used to living, it’s how we’ve lived for years. One big family.” Thomas Jackson nodded, “Family is good.”

Taffy turned to Sand who was sitting next to him, “Hand me that.” Sand followed the line of his pointing finger to the can of sweetened condensed milk, she slid it his way and Taffy poured himself another cup of coffee.

“Look at this. I live in a punk house.”

“Yeah.” Sand looked up smiling from reading the morning news on the link, “Crazy how that keeps happening.”
“It’s kinda surreal, after being out on the boat, just two of us, and then alone. Now here I am thinking, who ARE these people?”

“This is a different way of life. Sharing with other people, extended family. It’s really awesome to have people around to talk with and do shit with. That whole you-versus-the-world is fine, it works. I lived in my van here for a long time, not buying into the system, as little as possible anyway. But the thing about that is, there’s no one to share your triumphs, you know? Like, look at all this good food I got out of the dumpster! Let’s have a feast! There’s none of that. Also there’s no one to help you when you’re defeated, no one to pick you up. This communal living, call it what you want. It’s totally different than how my parents raised me and how they lived. Different from the way most people are still trying to live, the modern nuclear family bullshit, the familial unit that makes it easy for religions and corporations to market their products to. We don’t need that shit cause we have each other. We don’t need to buy a product to relieve our loneliness because we have our community. Am I right?”

“Yeah. When it’s working, that’s the ideal, isn’t it. What about when it’s not working? On my boat I do
the dishes, they're all mine, and I just do them. Here, I mean- look at that! A mountain of dirty dishes, and nobody takes responsibility for them. Who's gonna haul themselves up onto the cross and clean all that? Sometimes I think that anarchy just isn't working. Totally unorganized, half assed bullshit. Seriously, I like it when things are organized and full assed.”

“Ah, dishes. The Gordian Knot of anarchistic communal living. If we can ever figure this out, true revolution will follow.”

“I think about leaving constantly.” Taffy said, “I like it here but I don’t want to settle down. I think that's also part of the way we live differently, is that we don’t care so much about things like dirty dishes, or cars, or houses, and we will drop it all, give up everything, and travel some vast distance just to see each other, and we value the freedom and connection to specific people more than we value a stable comfortable life. In that way we are completely different from our parents. Their house was their castle, you know, they would never leave. That was it. I like moving around. Almost everyone I know moves around, except for a few key friends who stay put and cement us to certain places. God, without those people we would be plastic bags blown by the wind. I like
moving around, moving my body keeps my mind moving too, even tho it’s hard on my body and friendships sometimes. Traveling seems to make me remember what is important, when all you’ve got is this little backpack, and you’re happy for simple things, and you know you don’t need to be part of that system that wants to isolate us and make us needy, turn us into little babies dependent on what they are selling. It doesn’t matter if you’re well fed and safe and stable and own lots of stuff and have everything, cause for us, we could go crazy, and lots of people go crazy in that situation, deep down, sitting on top a pile of loot, totally unhappy. Traveling makes us remember that what’s important is each other. What’s important is US, loving each other. All these trappings are just icing on the cake. If you start obsessing about possessions and begin chasing an illusion of stability and permanence, you start to forget that it’s the people around you that are important.”

“So you have to leave us to really feel that we are important to you. But- you’ve already done it! So now you don't have to leave.”

“It’s the city! This vicious program whose blades toss us against the walls like smoothie fruit! God damn this city! I want to take everyone in this house out on
the river, and then we will be family. Not all on my
boat tho, it's too small. We'll make another boat,
everyone will get on it, and maybe eventually we will
come back here for the winter or skip the winter and
come back in the spring or something. Maybe some of
us can only go out for a week or so, whatever! No
stress! C'mon, let's do it!"

Sand raised her mug, “After another cup of coffee
and I'll be able to do anything.”

(Eighty)
It rained hard again, from sunrise to sunset, water fell
from the sky. Everyone stayed inside and steamed up
the windows baking cookies and creating other
excellent foods. Music was played, Darius on cello,
Sand on electric guitar, Taffy on drums.
“You are not a good drummer.” Sand said.
“I know. It's fun tho.”
“It's like jazz.” Darius said.
“We're having fun.” Sand said.
“Oh yeah.” Taffy held up a drumstick, “Hey Darius,
you gotta come with us, on the boat.”
“No, no. I’ve got my girlfriend and I’ve got my job. I like them both.”

“Quit yer job, bring yer girlfriend.” Sand told him.

“Oh no, she aint going camping. I’ve seen your boat. She is not sleeping in no tent at night, not digging a hole out in the woods to shit in. She’s a city girl. I like my job too. Winter is coming in a few months and I’ll be putting my arms deep into warm water, hot steam, the perfect winter job, tropical. Dish washing.”

“I’l go.” Bernard said.

“Totally. That’s the spirit.” Taffy said, Sand turned her head sharply.

“Cool! I’ll just go for awhile and take a train back, there’s aline that runs along the river. Awesome.”

“Yeah sure, Bernard doesn’t have a job or a girlfriend.” Darius said.

“Hey...”

“It’s alright Bernard, this just isn’t your time.” Darius consoled him.

“You see? I gotta get outta town.” Bernard said.

“Alright.” Taffy said, “Bring a sleeping bag, food, a water jug, a book to read, whatever like that. A headlamp. And some shoes that can get wet.”

“Okay. I got it. When are we leaving?”
“Well, the river is supposed to rise from this new new rain, we should wait till it goes down. There's always stuff floating in the water when it rises, so we should wait till the river settles again and we can motor without all those chunks hitting the propeller.”

“Are you planning on coming back?” Darius asked.

“Um-” Taffy said.

“I'm coming back in two weeks.” Sand interrupted, “I got two weeks off from my job. I am outta here.”

“I dunno when I'm coming back. I thot maybe I would spend the winter somewhere south, warm. Last winter was hell. 30 degrees below zero for days on end, holed up in the house like a caged animal. It caused me pain.”

“Aw man. St. Louis is a lot warmer than that.”

“I know, I'm coming from the far end of the spectrum. My goal is no snow. I got a raincoat. I don't want to feel the liquid on my eyeballs beginning to freeze as I ride my bicycle. Call me weak if you want, I don't care. I know what I want.”

“New Orleans. Never been the same since the hurricane.” Sand said, “If you didn't live there before, it won't seem so fucked up to you. You'll meet a lot of good people, still lots of awesome folks there. Just
don’t bug them about the hurricane, it’s irritating to think about all the time.”

“Like talking about the Catastrophe.” Darius said.
“Yeah. Like that.”

* * *

The Jacob’s Party had been stranded by high water, lifted up and set down on a bank of mud that smelled of shit.

“The River Des Peres?” Bernard said, “That’s a big sewage drain for the city since the plant shut down during the Catastrophe. Raw sewage. It was nasty before, but now it’s the real deal. I almost decided not to go when I heard where you tied up. Now I see I was right. This mud here is probably 90 percent shit.”

“It does smell.” Sand said.

“Oh boy.” Taffy said, surveying the scene from the weeds and trees atop the bank. Their bicycles lay in the grass, morning glory vines wrapped around their axles from being pushed along the deer trail thru the woods.

“We are going to build a courderoy road to get the boat down to the water.” Taffy said.

“A what?”
“A log road, then we put short little round logs under each pontoon and roll this fucker down there.”

“Seriously?” Bernard said, “I have a problem with staph infections. There’s no way I could subject my skin to that fecal mud.”

“How about you collect some logs to lay down? Anything that doesn’t break in half when you thump it on the ground.” Taffy said.

Bernard sighed, “Alright, I can do that.” He trudged into the woods.

Taffy slogged thru the mud and got the bow saw from the boat. Bernard came bag with a log.

“Shit! The mosquitoes are insane back there!”

“Bernard, have you ever been outside?” Sand asked.

“Alright. Let’s collect logs together, the skeeters will be spread out between all of us. They won’t know who to bite.”

“I bet they’ll figure it out.” Bernard slumped down onto a rock, “Let me catch my breath.”

Sand and Taffy walked into the wood.

“I told you. It’s already begun.” Sand whispered, “That motherfucker! He’s a great guy, he’s my friend, yeah, but working on a project with him, in close
proximity, day after day, fuck! In this circumstance, he is not a great guy.”
“T__know the story. He’s probably got something to say about you too.”
“We’re not talking about me right now.”
“Sorry.”
“You fucked up. You’ll see. He’s so annoying!”
“Let’s get that damn boat back on the water and get the hell gone from the River Des Poo. I apologize for failing to consult with you about the crew addition. My enthusiasm got ahead of my caution.”
“Thank you.”

* * *

They sat on top of the bank covered in mud before a blazing fire, making coffee and smoking.
“Wow. That was a lot of work just to get halfway down.” Sand said.
“Thanks for making coffee Bernard.” Taffy said.
“Anything to get outta doing real work.”
Sand’s eyes stabbed at Bernard, his back was turned. Taffy rolled his.
“Well, I think after a little break, you know, let my motor cool off, I’ll go back down and figure out why
it's stuck. There must be something underneath that's holding it up. A rock maybe."

“Oh man, I thot we were done for the night!” Bernard moaned.

“I won't be able to sleep.” Taffy said, “Unless the boat is floating on water again. Gotta do it. We're almost there.”

“I'm with you.” Sand said.

“Alright.” Bernard acquiesced.

Taffy gazed down the slope at the moribund shanty boat. There was definitely nothing stable or comfortable about this. They all smelled and looked like turds with arms. Taffy laughed.

“Bernard! Where's the nearest brewer and will they be open right now?”

“Matty's! Yeah, knock anytime, that's what he says, but if he is asleep, it costs more.”

“Alright. We're gonna need some.”

(Eighty-one)
A strong smell of shit lasted for 3 days on the boat. Taffy’s tolerance of the increasingly contentious Bernard was shorter than that.
“What is that fucking song?” Taffy demanded.
“Oh I don’t know, I just like to sing it.”
“Yeah, I liked it too, the first dozen times I heard it.”
“You’ll start singing it too. I’m a good song writer. Did I tell you about the time I met Merle Haggard?”
“Yes, you did.” Sand said.
“What about the time I saw Tom Waits make an illegal u-turn in his Oldsmobile?”
“Yes.” Taffy said. They were all silent for a while. The banks of the river went by. Taffy tried to relax and watch the scenery, listen to the birds, but each moment listening to the river was now full of anxiety for the inevitable disruptive outburst by Bernard. Somehow, while in the city, his motormouth was hardly noticeable, he seemed like a charming character. Now with the full throttle of his expression constantly directed towards Sand or Taffy, he found himself hammered with questions, stories, and knock knock jokes. Sand forwarded all of Bernard’s attention to Taffy by saying, “Why don’t you ask Taffy?” or by stuffing wads of tissue into her ears and hiding behind a book. Taffy also hid behind the pages of his novel and tried not to hear. Bernard was always happy to repeat the question tho. Sand could put on
headphones, plugged into a solar powered guitar amp, and noodle on her Epiphone, rocking in solitary sonic freedom. Taffy wished she was playing plugged into a full stack so that he could heard a sound coming down his ear canal that was not Bernard's voice.

“I think we should camp out at that beach over there. It looks good. Last night, that place was a fucking hole.”

“We need water tho. We can make it to this little town, Crystal City.” Taffy said.

“What! We've got plenty of water.”

“Listen Bernard. I don’t mean to suggest that you don’t know everything, but we only have a gallon and a half for three of us. We’ve been sticking by the rule of a gallon of water per person per day. It's a true formula. Running out of water is terrible.”

“Playing it safe huh. Whatever. So we'll camp on a dock or on some rocks in town, with a bunch of knuckleheads bugging us? Shit!” Bernard retreated to the front of the boat. Sand moved her fingers with eyes closed across the fretboard, oblivious to the outer world. Taffy stared out at the water.

* * *

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The Jacob’s Party pulled into Crystal City and tied to
chore near the boat ramp. A person sitting at the top of
the bank waved to them.
“Hey! It’s Darius!”
They all had lunch together at a diner and then did
some errands around town, Darius and Taffy went to
the grocery store and library. Sand said she was going
to a thrift store, Bernard decided to tag along with her.
“How’s the floating been going?” Darius asked.
“Well, I’m getting to know Bernard a lot better.”
“Oh yeah, that’s cool you let him go without hardly
even knowing him. Probably be good for him.”
“Yeah, I think it will be good for him. Unless we
toss him over the side.”
“Ha!”
“The shit that comes out of his mouth, and it never
stops. My ears are ringing.”
“Uh oh. You’re done with him.”
“Yeah. But he helped out a lot, getting the boat back
in the water and everything. I don’t wanna be rude,
you know, invite someone along and then give them
the boot. Harsh!”
“Yeah, but it’s your boat, it’s your home! You can
un-invite him.”
“I don't know how he survives, he can't prepare his own food! He doesn't know how to cook! He eats peanut butter and jelly sandwiches unless Sand or I have cooked a meal. It's kinda like we have a toddler to care for now. We've got a haggard baby!”

Darius laughed and fell off the sidewalk, stepping into the gutter, “I know what you mean. I can only take him in small doses. I have a couple days off from work, I can handle that much exposure.”

“Sweet. Well my friend the forecast is good, sunshine for a week, rumors of a cold front are too far in the future to care about.”

“Hell yeah.”

“Did you bring your cello?”

“No. I don't get my baby anywhere near water, sure as hell not taking it out on a boat!”

“Dammit. Maybe I can make you one.”

“What?”

“Yeah, I think I can do it. If I make it will you try to play it?”

“Hell yeah.”

* * *

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Later that day they all met up at the Jacob’s Party, filled the 5 gallon water jugs and took stock of the food inventory. They cooked supper on the rocket stove.

Bernard began singing his song. A tension filled the air. After awhile he switched to rap, regurgitating some song he had listened to enuf times to memorize.

“This one goes out to all my niggas!” Bernard said in a low voice.

“What?” Darius looked at Bernard.

“Huh?” Bernard said.

“What are you saying?”

“Just a rap song, a song by Hot Louis.”

“You said nigger.”

“It’s a song! I’m just repeating the words he said.”

“I don’t want to hear you say that word around me, alright? I don’t like to hear anyone say that.”

“It’s just a word man! Are you afraid of words?”

“A word that represents lot of fucked up shit.”

“If the rapper didn’t want people singing his songs then why did he make the music and sell it to us?”

“Like you bought the right to say nigger by owning a rap album?”

“Okay that’s the last straw. I’m over it. As owner of this boat I’m gonna put my foot down. Bernard, there’s only one way to make this situation not suck,
and that is for you to leave. Pack your stuff, the train station is at the top of the hill. The sooner the better.”

“Whoa! Really? We were just talking.”

“I think I may be speaking for a majority when I say that you have been driving us crazy with your damn babble. You gotta go.”

Heat radiated in the air between them.

“You’re mad at me! You have a temper.”

“Yes I do. Now get off my boat.”

Bernard looked around at the faces glaring at him.

“Alright. This is some P.C. bullshit. I guess my style thinking isn’t appreciated here. I’ll leave.”

Bernard packed his things and walked to shore, then stopped and took a bottle out of his bag.

“Here’s the last of the whiskey. I’ll leave it for you.”

he sat it on the deck and walked up the hill. Taffy kicked the bottle and it landed with a splat in the mud.

“Let’s get outta here.” Sand said. They untied the ropes and shoved off, motored to the middle of the river, Taffy killed the engine.

“Ah.”

The three smiled at each other.

“Sorry I interrupted the debate.” Taffy said.

“I made my point.” Darius said.

“What the fuck!” Sand said. All of them laughed.
They stayed on a luscious beach that night, fifty feet of hard sand running up to a line of eight-foot tall sand bar willow trees. Beyond grew the old willows, fifty feet high, mixed with towering cotton woods a hundred feet high. After all the mud Taffy & Sand slogged thru they smiled just to be out on a surface that wasn't trying to suck them down. They were a tight crew now.

In the night as they sat looking at what stars could be seen, and Venus to the south and mars low in the east, the big dipper. At their feet a small version of the sun blazed, sticks burning to chase away mosquitoes. A set of lights appeared on the river, the red/green split light in front, white top light in back, cruising upriver, possibly headed for the Crystal City boat club ramp. Then the boat slowed and dropped off it's full throttle cruising plane, the engine lowered to a rumble and the boat turned towards their fire. As it neared they saw it was a flat bottomed john boat like most of the fishermen used. The boat slid up on the beach and
the engine was off, the guy climbing out to drop a small anchor in the sand and walk up to them.

“How ya’ll doing?”
“Good.”
“Want some fish?”
“Yeah! Are you selling?”
“No! I just caught so many and I don’t wanna have to clean them all! Got two reach-in freezers at home stuffed full of fish. When I’m not at work, all I do is fish.”
“Well, there’s three of us,” Taffy said, “How much do you think we could handle? We don’t have a fridge.”
“Three cat fish. You can eat that up quick. Got a sharp knife?”
“We have a fillet knife, yap.”
“Got something to put them in? A bucket?”
“Ya, here take this one I’m sitting on.” Sand said.
“Alright. Lemme get em.”
The man went to his boat and wrangled the fish into the bucket, brought them to the fire.
“They’re all dead. You should clean and eat them as soon as possible. Keep the lid on that bucket or the dog will get em.”
Sand’s golden retriever was sniffing at the fish with great interest.

“Don’t worry Frisky, we’ll give you a little piece.”

The man introduced himself as James, “Been hearing about a boat going down the river from some people up in Crystal City, figured you must be them.”

“We just left there.” Sand said.

“So, you been doing any fishing?”

“I try sometimes.” Taffy said, “Not too good at it. Just dropping this line off the boat, but it doesn’t seem to work.”

“Kinda bait are you using?”

“Well, I tried some sausage, and kernels of corn.”

“Man. Okay. Depends on what kinda fish you’re trying to get, but how about some live bait. I’ll get you some.” He got some, “Like this. Minnows. And then this little plastic tub has some stink bait in it. The catfish like the stink bait. Put some of this on your lines and drop them in the water tonight, you’ll have fish for breakfast.”

“Damn, thanks!” Sand said.

“You want a beer?” Darius asked.

“Aw, thank you. Just one is okay, I got a lady waiting for me back in town.”
“Yeah, me too!” Darius said, “Back in St. Louis that is.”

James sat next to the fire after taking the beer, “That where ya’ll are from?”

“Sand, Darius, and Frisky over there all got on the boat in St. Louis. I’ve been on the river since Minnesota. This is my second river and third boat!”

“Sounds like a trip.” James said, “I went down the river before, when I was younger.” He sipped the beer, “Now, you got oil and flour to cook the fish with? That’s how I like it, roll the pieces in a little spiced flour and fry them in a skillet. That’s how I like it.”

“We’ve got it. I’m getting hungry just listening to you talk about it.”

They spoke of the recent flooding and James told stories about people he knew on the river who's boats and docks got trashed, and who's motors got busted from hitting all the waterlogged wood floating down.

“You gotta slow down and if you run at night you’re taking chances. Some people don’t even care, they got a load of money saved up from whatever scams they pulled after the catastrophe and they just blaze around on those grinders. It’s good for the boat mechanics and the marina people, they’re making money off those yahoos.”
James drained his bottle and then left them with their fish, boating upstream to his home.
“Fish fry for breakfast!” Taffy said.
“Fish fry!” they echoed.

(Eighty three)
The next day was a bit of rain in the morning, Darius had been sleeping on the beach but came into the cabin of the boat when the drops started falling and found a spot on a bench. After the rain cleared and the sun bore thru the clouds they set off downriver, cleaning fish while drifting and frying them in a skillet on the rocket stove. Relaxing on the back deck as the current spun the boat around, Taffy watched the limestone bluffs crowned with green forest pass by. The railroad ran along the river here, a string of stopped cars caught his eye. There was a strange coloration to the engine in front, a large splotch of black covered the bright company color scheme. Taffy took out his binoculars to look.
“Check this out! It looks like the unit on that train caught fire, the whole side of it is blackened.”

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Sand looked thru the nocs, “Should we check it out!”
They cruised over and made a landing slightly down from the unit. After tying a few lines to some trees they scrambled up the bank and climbed the shifting ballast to the tracks and approached the train. The engine had a massive blast scar on the side of it and there was a crater on the access road next to the tracks, black and twisted hunks of metal, burnt car tires.

“A car bomb.” Darius said, “Seen a lot of this in St. Louis.”

“Why? To rob the train?” Sand wondered.

“I dunno.” Darius replied, “Didn’t notice any of the containers being open. If this train was under Patriot control then it may have been Christian Fanatics that did it. That would be my guess.”

“I’ve heard rumors. What’s their story?”

“From what I’ve heard in St. Louis, it seems they believe that the apocalypse has come and taken the worthy to heaven and everyone who has been left behind is too much of a sinner, but they have one more chance, if they are righteous in god’s eyes and cleanse the world of sinners then maybe they will get to go to heaven when the second heaven bus comes thru.
They’re starting to cut off the lines of supply, it looks like.”

“Wow.” Taffy said, “I hope Bernard is alright. I didn’t know the fanatics were getting too intense. I thot it was all the same hot air they’ve been blowing since before I was born.”

“Let’s see what’s in these trailers.” Sand moved to the string of container carriers and flatbeds with tractor trailers chained down to them. The cargo closest to the engine were all refrigerator trailers, the fans of their cooling units were silent.

Sand climbed up and broke the seal to open it up, “Holy shit! Pineapples! Where the fuck are they getting pineapples?”

Taffy looked in the trailer, filled with cases of the fruit, “We aren’t getting it. Somebody with a lot more money and connections that we have.”

“You got that right.” Darius said, “Do they grow pineapple in Florida?”

Sand pulled a case down from the top and ripped the box open, exposing transparent plastic tubs full of processed pineapple rings. The lids were slightly bulging.

“Shit, since the coolers were off the stuff went bad.” Darius swore.
Sand opened one, sniffed at it, then took a great bite. “Woo!” she shouted, smiling, “It didn’t go BAD, it went GOOD.”

Taffy grabbed a tub and opened it, sniffed at the bubbly chunks of pineapple, “Natural fermentation! We gotta get all this back to the boat and make hooch!”

“You guys are gonna get sick.” Darius said.

“No way, try it.”

Darius tried a piece, “Oh yeah, that’s good. It’s strong! How much can we fit on the boat?”

* * *

They loaded as much as they could onto the Jacob’s Party, almost twenty-five gallons, all mashed up in buckets with a little water added. They left each lid cracked a tiny bit to let the fermenting gasses out. In some other trailers they found coconuts, rotting meat, bananas, and a massive shipment of cocaine. They took a little bit of everything before hearing a gunshot in the woods that sent them scrambling for the boat.

“Probably someone hunting, eh?” Sand said.

“Let’s get the fuck out of here.” Darius said, quickly loosening the knot of the shore line where it held them to a tree. Taffy hauled on the anchor line and they were
taken by the current downstream, the blackened train disappeared as they huddled on the boat, quietly watching the shore.

(Eighty four)
The sun was moving on West so they began scanning the shore for a place to camp. Darius was staring up at the bluff at a row of mansion type houses.

“Look at that up there!” Darius said, “No lights in any of those places. You think anyone lives there?”

“What an impractical place to live.” Sand replied, “On top of a hill. That’s why rich people live up there, cause it takes wealth just to get to the top! Ain’t nobody riding a bike up to those houses.”

“Yeah maybe there’s a reason no one lives there. Militias attacked them maybe, and they fled to the city.”

“Let’s go up there.” Taffy said, “Get some exercise on land after luxuriating on this boat all day.”

Sand and Darius looked at him. Taffy nodded and smiled, “Yeaahh...”
They found a trail that started from a well worn fishing spot on a rocky wing dam, it led all the way to the top of the bluff. The trail was manicured, steps cut and set with pieces of flat sandstone, a rope to hold onto thru the steep spots. From the top they found a road and could see down into the flatland beyond, a dyke had broke and the small town beyond was flooded, water up to the doors of the houses, some of them had only the peaks of their roofs showing. At the bottom of the hill the road was swallowed by the river.

The four of them walked up the road to the houses, selecting the driveway of a modest looking ranch type cliff-huger mansion that was as long as a city block. The substantial doors were locked. They went around back where a lawn that had once been meticulously mowed was now well overgrown. The view of the river was spectacular.

“Damn I think I can see where we camped last night!” Darius said.

The sliding glass door on the back deck was locked. Sand picked up an iron deck chair and smashed the window out, bits of safety glass surrounded her red glitter boots. She whipped her head around, brown
braided pig tails twirling, and with a smile gestured the boys to follow.

They explored the mansion, found delicious cotton sheets, soft mattresses, a kitchen stocked with all kinds of food and some of it seemed like it might even be edible. The garage was empty. In a shed out back they found a diesel generator and a supply of fuel that could be used to light up the house.

“Seems like a bad idea, but it would be fun.” Sand said, “Maybe we could just use it to heat up the hot tub on the deck!”

“Oh fuck yeah!” Taffy said.

It was agreed. Tonight they would drink more of the pineapple hooch and relax in the hot tub.

“What do you think about that piano in the living room?” Sand asked Taffy.

“Can you play?”

“Yep.”

* * *

Sand found a photo album in a shelf containing hundreds of pictures of boats on the river, on the same stretch of river, looking down from the deck of the mansion. Many of them home-made shanty boats like
the Jacob’s Party. Suspicious and mud caked characters lounging as they floated down. Each photo was dated and annotated.

“Wow. This is fucking cool. We would be in this if they still lived here!” Sand said.

“Let’s draw ourselves in.” Taffy said and took a pen to a blank page, and caveman style drew their boat and all four of them on it. Above it he scrawled, ‘Livin Tha Dream’.

“Good job!” Sand said, “Now we’re famous!”

They drank hooch for dinner, thinking that on empty stomachs it would increase the mild alcoholic effect. They became wildly warm-headed drunk in short time. Sand lunged at the piano, a baby grand of some vintage. Taffy made a drunken sojourn down to the boat, accompanied by Frisky who needed a walk, to retrieve the shanty-cello he had been working on for days. It was a nice piece of hard driftwood for the neck, a tin gas can found floating served as the body, the strings were from the dumpster of a music store back in Crystal City, round wound bass guitar strings. The bow was made from a willow stick and the hair was donated from Sand’s head. The shaved-in-the-back look. “Ha! You look punk again.” Taffy said and got punched.
They tore into a free form noise fest, the type of jazz that is most appreciated by the musicians playing it. Sand stood at the piano, dancing around and slamming keys, her goblet of hooch resting disrespectfully on the finely oiled surface of the antique piano. She banged on the keys and sang, “You can take a chance of love, one more chance on love-” Taffy went to the kitchen and came back with some nice thick wooden spoons and started whacking rhythms on chairs and coffee tables and ceramic vases, on the hooch jug and on the walls. Darius began to evoke raw sounds from the shanty-cello, laughing wildly as he shredded Sands hair on the rough strings. Sand sang, “You can drive a black Cadillac, whips and furs in the back...” Taffy played vibes crystal and brass vases until they dented and shattered. “Singing this song, the night will go on and on.”

They played until exhausted, then staggered out to the hot tub.

“Is it warm enuf?”

“Close enuf.” Taffy stripped and got in, “Nice! Oh yeah. Turn on the jets!” The water began roiling, “Oh yeah!” Leaning back against the comfortable wooden wall of the hot tub, goblet of hooch in hand, Taffy smiled, “Ya’ll get the hell in here.”
The three humans reclined naked in the hot tub, telling stories and breathing in steam. A voice came from the yard, they stared at each other with suddenly bulging white eyes!

“Hello?” a figure walked up the steps of the deck. Naked and cornered, they held silent. Taffy spoke up, “Hey, how ya doing?”

The figure moved closer and came out of the shadow of a tall tree, the moon now illuminated his face, “I heard the music earlier and had to come see where the party was.” He was middle aged, a little rough country looking, wearing a plastic mesh baseball hat.

“Well, you found it!” Sand said.

“Are you friends or relatives of the Berrystons?”

“Yeah.” Taffy said without hesitation, “They told us to come up here and have ourselves some fun. You’re welcome to join. We have some home-made pineapple booze in that bucket there.”

“Sure! Hard to turn down a drink when you haven’t had a life in two years. I’ve been on a two year bender.”

“I heard that.” Taffy said, “We’re trying to take it easy, living out on a shanty boat.”
“Oh, alright, that was you. I saw you out there earlier today. I’m staying in a house a little further up the bluff.”

“You own the place?” Taffy asked.

“Uh, yeah. Made a deal with the owners to be caretaker of the place until the dyke wall gets fixed and the road is passable again. Now with these train attacks happening, who knows when things will settle down. I might end up growing old there, wouldn’t be so bad! Good view.”

“Well, I would get up and go to the kitchen to get you a glass for the hooch but we’re all naked in here and I don’t want to offend you.”

“I’ll help myself, thanks. I’m a forty-three year old country boy who spent my share of time in the big cities. I’ve seen it all. A little country skinny dippy is about the last thing that would offend me.”

The three continued relaxing, after he went into the house to get a glass the consensus of their intuitions was that he was alright. When he returned they invited him into the hot tub.

“Damn these jets feel good on the muscles!” he said, “Too bad there’s not one of these at the place I’m staying!”

“How long you been there?” Darius asked.
Naked butt

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“Well, when the Catastrophe hit I, uh, used to work for the owners doing yard work, mowing the grass, landscaping, maintenance. Then I showed up to work and they were gone, left a note about being in South America doing some bullshit missionary work. Excuse my language. Well, they just never came back. I never got paid. Ha. Seems like so long ago. A whole different world.”

“So you don’t actually have any deal with them.” Sand said amused.

“And you sure as hell don’t know the Berrystons!” he raised his goblet of hooch into the middle of their circle and they all clashed their glasses together, laughing, “Here’s to living the good life!”

* * *

Taffy awoke in a king sized bed next to Sand. He got out of bed as first light came thru the windows, like happened every day now, up with the sun. This time he headed for the bathroom with vicious stomach cramps and dropped a series of shits, beginning with an experimental culinary dish that Darius had concocted consisting of millet, whole wheat flour, canned pumpkin, bacon grease, and maple syrup. The
log came out as a brutally solid bread stick. Taffy stood and felt better for a moment, then the cramps returned and again he squatted to vent a glutinous goo. Dammit! What roiled thru the pipes! What was fueling these bombs, dysentery? Anxious bacteria? And in the middle of nowhere, no medicine available, the thought of it was the end of fun. Several small movements later he stood and limped back to bed mumbling about hooch and it’s purgative powers. A strange dream later and Taffy awoke again, this time to the sensation of Sand punching him.

“Wake up! The guy is back!”

Taffy rolled up, crackling the vertebrae of his spine, and that felt better, like pushing the spinal button between your shoulder blades, crack crack crack and the hangover chakra is opened! The extra bit of sleep after the nightmare bathroom episode had restored him. The cramps were gone, it wasn’t a bug or poison, just that wretched desert Darius had baked in the double-skillet-clam-shell to satisfy their munchies after that guy in the hot tub had smoked them out. What the hell was his name? Home grown weed, that’s what he was doing in that hill top mansion he was squatting. The first crop was potent. Debauchery.
Taffy rolled outta bed and walked down the hall, passing the bathroom from which a rancid stink emanated, there was no water available to flush the thing. Their stay in the Berrystons' mansion would need to be limited.

In the main room Sand and the hot tub guy could be seen looking over some packages he had apparently brought. Darius' leg dangled from the plush couch where he continued to sleep.

“Brought you some venison jerky. You can drop a chunk into a soup you’re cooking too, make good broth. Got some chickens up at my place, they let loose more eggs than I could ever eat. I’ve been boiling eggs, pickling eggs. Ever had a pickled egg? Pour some hot sauce over it and taste the delicious.”

“Cool. Thanks! This is just what we need. I’ve been feeling the lack, you know.” Taffy said, “Maybe it’s the cold front, tricking my body into thinking that winter is coming on, trying to make me store up fat.”

“Yeah, I’ve been feeling that too. That’s why I’ve been preserving all this food. Pisses me off to be hungry. One decent sized deer will last me for a long time tho. You do any hunting?”

“Just fishing.” Taffy said, “My family never hunted anything but fish.”
“I’m city folk.” Sand said. The closest we ever got to hunting was on the freeway driving past a cattle ranch. We all knew where the beef came from. One time we hit a skunk with the car. I guess you can’t eat skunk tho, huh?”

“Oh, I imagine skunk is a delicacy in some parts but not from where I’m from.” hot tub guy laughed.

The three of them put heads together and cooked up breakfast. The succulent odors reached Darius’ nostrils. He moved from the couch to the piano bench and began playing some dead white guy music.

“What is that you’re playing?” Sand asked.

“A little Tchaikovsky, a little Chopin.”

“Sounds like genius to me.”

“When my dad died my mom ended up with some money, and she spent it on me. I learned music from some great teachers. I’m a lucky person.”

They sat at the oak dining room table and ate.

“After another dip in the hot tub I think we should float on down the river.” Taffy said.

“You’re welcome to stay. Be my neighbor.”

“Well,” Taffy said, “we gotta show Darius here as much of the river as possible in two weeks time, he’s got a job and a girl friend back in St. Louis.”
“We left a comfortable house back in St. Louis,” Sand said, “we didn’t come out here looking to squat a mansion. It’s pretty great being out here tho, all the nature. Watching storms tear down the river, makes me feel connected to everything that is operating around me all the time. When you live in a house a long time it’s easy to hide from the rain and wind and all that. Being in a house, it’s like a space ship, looking out the windows at some planet you have no physical connection to. It’s like, why are we living? Who thot this was a good idea, to just sit inside this box and stare at a screen? Get out there!”

“Yeah.” the man said, “That house up there is my little nest, and when I leave it I’m flying. I like having the nest to go back to. Sometimes I don’t think I’ll ever leave. I feel good there. Maybe it’s not for everybody, that life, I’m not telling anybody else how to live their life, and I hope nobody comes and tries to tell me that I’m living wrong. They can have their bullshit, just don’t fuck with me.”

“Yep.” Sand said, “Hey listen, last night I drank a lot of that hooch and I confess I don’t remember your name. I thot it would come back to me, but it’s not.”

“I never told you my name, that’s why you don’t remember!”
“Oh, good! I thot I was slipping.”

“The changes in the world have made me a cautious man. The less people know, the better, eh? You can call me Jack.”

“Jack, good to meet you, I’m Sand.”

“I know. My apologies for being so paranoid, it just seems that people cannot be trusted. Less and less. I carry a gun and knife and a few other things on me at all times, and keep my old eye open, Harriet Tubman style. Know what I’m saying? I trust my intuition, and you folks are alright. So I trust you, a little bit. I’m a conductor on the new underground railroad. You’ve heard? People who need to get away from the Corporate Coalition or the Patriots or the Fanatics, whatever new asshole has climbed to the top, I can help you avoid prison or execution. There are some free areas in the backwoods, wilderness nearby, or you can go all the way south, out of the country. If you have someone who needs to escape the fascist bullshit, send them to Jack. Once they get here I can set them up with a ticket to go all the way to safety. I couldn’t tell you the locations of the other conductors, I don’t know them. I only know the conductor to the immediate north and south of me. The entire length of the railroad couldn’t be compromised, even if they
tortured me. I simply don’t know. One more thing. Ya’ll be careful out there, things are heating up. For the immediate future, stay the hell away from train tracks, train bridges, and trains themselves, also interstates and big rig trucks, that whole infrastructure. These things are targets right now. A lot of coordinated bombings. Stay away from that and you should be alright.”

“I have so many questions for you.” Sand said.
“I probably can’t answer most of them.”
“What is this group or movement? Specifics?”
Jack shook his head, “I am my own movement, as are the rest of the conductors. It’s simple, I believe people should be free. That’s the extent of our common bond. Nobody has a right to make up rules and tell you how to live your life.”
“Anarchism.” Taffy said.
“There’s probably some philosophy to put what I believe into a little box, fuck that. They don’t know me. I served what used to be this country, thinking I was doing right. I watched those assholes shit on everything and everybody. I changed. I see a bigger picture now, you just look out at the sky at night and think about it, out insignificance, our ignorance. Our governments. They look with only the most narrow
vision. Governments don’t look out at the stars and understand that everybody and everything is all connected, all the same. Institutions don’t see that. They don’t understand the big picture. I don’t even think they can be made to understand, just avoided until they perish of their own stupidity. That’s why I live the way I live. It’s a crazy time to be alive! I love it. I’m enjoying being alive out here, and I’m helping future generations be free. I fully believe in it.”

(Eighty five)

A thunderstorm rolled in the day after they left the mansion. On a beach of the Illinois side of the river they saw the storm front moving from the north west, a long curved line of dark clouds with white lines between. Fast moving, in formation, the sky was amazing, the sort of odd that makes you run and grab the children from the front yard and close the open windows. A fearsome sky.

The next day was even more intense. Wind came barreling down the river and Taffy had trouble keeping the boat pointed downriver, the winds wanted
the Jacob’s Party sideways so it could push it better, such an eager sailor is the wind.

A metallic beast churned towards them, a massive assembly of 20 steel barges tied together and pushed upriver by a huge towboat that looked more like a hotel than a boat churned its twin diesel engines wildly, they sent out corkscrew rolling waves from the full throttle engine wash. The shanty boat cello banged against the roof and at last came loose and smashed into the stove as they held on.

“Shit!” Darius cursed and lunged for the instrument to secure it.

“My coffee cup!” Taffy yelled as it rolled back and forth on the front deck, Sand reached for it but the next rolling wave tossed it over the side, “Fuck!”

Sand smirked at him amid the ridiculous rolling and clanging banging of the shanty boat, “I thot you said everything goes to the bottom?”

“Yeah. But that one hurt. That mug and I, we had a relationship. Every morning, every night. We moved a lot of green tea together.”

The wind blasted. The tiny channel that led to the burnt down St. Genevieve marina suddenly appeared but the wind swept them rapidly past.

“Oh no!” Sand cried.
Taffy turned the rudder hard and hit the throttle to make it back upstream. When it seemed they were making headway the motor died.


“Oh no!” Sand cried.

Taffy scrambled for the 5 gallon jerry can and filled the tank on the tiny engine and then started the engine again, but they had been taken down.

“It would be such a waste of gas to try to get back up. We should land farther down and then try to find a road or railroad tracks to get into town.

“Alright.” Sand agreed.

In the swift waters of the channel side they made a rough landing against a big log floating there on shore. The bank seemed to have been a landing once, weeds had overgrown a carefully arranged stone paving that sloped gently up the hill to a patch of woods. Sunlight shone thru the trees, making it seem like one could walk thru it to the other side and find an open space, like a road to walk on.

“Doesn’t look too thick back there.” Sand said.

“Yeah, after being on the boat all day I could use a walk.” Darius said.
“I'm gonna relax here and watch the sunset.” Taffy said, lighting up a bit of the weed that Jack had given them, “Ya'll go on without me.”

*   *   *

The walk to town turned out to be ten miles. After smoking the weed it seemed like much more fun to go wandering.

St. Genevieve was not a town that embraced the river. There was no row of houses overlooking the river, no benches set up to watch the river flow by. The only marina in town was boarded up with plywood, the insides blackened from a fire.

St. Genevieve was one of those river towns that almost pretends the river doesn't exist, only acknowledging it when the waters rise to epic flood stage and invades their streets and houses. A town that fears the river. They miss the good benefits of the river, like sitting and watching the sunset over its wide body. All the efficiency of commerce conducted in buildings so high up on hills and far away from the river bank robs the people of this raw joy, this beauty! When high water comes, definitely head for high ground, but don't neglect the beauty in that powerful
water every day. Embrace the wildness. Go down to the river.

Taffy strolled directly up that big hill to the library, perched up there to make it easier for the sky gods to find it. Taffy wanted to write a letter to Franklin, the words had been floating around in his mind for a long time. It had been a long time since he's sent any communication. He smiled at the librarian and sat at the keyboard to the link:

“Dear Franklin, I am on a shanty boat on the Mississippi River. It’s a long story! First a motor boat, then a canoe, now a shanty boat with the canoe tied on the side. There’s a lot of life and death visible on the river. In the city death seems to be whisked away, cleaned up as soon as possible. The same with life, if you think about it. As soon as people start really living the damn cops show up.

“The river is loaded with action! Asian carp jumping out of the water you. Birds floating on the river, standing in it, and flying over it. Insects of all kinds, animals making noise in the woods, and a very few humans. Yes. The country. You would hate it. The fashion out here is unremarkable. I like that people are the minority. Death, piles of dead trees floating down, dead fish, dead birds. I saw a mole turned belly up
outside its hole. I saw a fish with a smaller fish jammed into its mouth, suffocated from the gluttony of biting off more than it could chew! Withered shrunken fish skeletons, logs stripped of their bark and riddled with holes made by woodpeckers. Death everywhere, but death that has a use for everything still living. A different world than ours. Dead humans are a problem in the city! Nothing feeds off them, it's a burden. Out here, a dead body is a feast for thousands!

“Nothing is allowed to rot in the city, rot is wrong. I remember my friend tried to put rotten logs in his front yard to recreate a complete ecosystem, to provide space for insects to live. Everyday people were putting flyers and business cards up on his door, trying to sell him gardening, landscape, yard work. Nature out of control! Dear god, somebody stop it! Nature has invaded the city! If you can't make your own yard submit to the monoculture grass then what kind of man are you? What kind of human being would allow that to happen? A human less evolved than the hyper consumer of modern times, obviously.

“People are afraid of death. We have been humbled by the Catastrophe, but we still don't embrace death. I think we fear it even more now. Death is to be hidden. At the scene of a fatal accident they still cover the
bodies with white sheets. Dead trees are turned into wood chips. Dead bodies are turned into a rectangular black box surrounded by a parade of cars. Dead buildings are torn down and hauled away, buried.

“Edible and medicinal plants are labeled as undesirable and destroyed in mass quantities. People experience malnutrition while other people are paid money to destroy food. Damn our fucked up society.

“I think about death a lot on the river, in a way that makes me smile, cause I’m out here doing what I want to do. I saw a huge cottonwood tree fall into the river after the flood a week ago. If my boat had been under that tree I guess I might be dead now. I could fall off the boat any day and just drown. There was a storm the other day and I went onto the boat while it began raining and that I’d cook up some hot tea and make some food and everyone could all hang out in there. My friend Darius who I met in St. Louis and oh yeah guess what, Sand is here. More about her later. I start splitting wood for the stove and I think I’ll listen to some radio music, cheesy as it may be. I tune the radio and the first thing besides static is the harsh alarm of the Patriot Weather Alert system, you know the sound cause they are always testing that fucking thing, right? The robot voice describes the severe thunderstorm
system heading south east of St. Louis county, which is exactly where we are. Also, a tornado warning in effect until 6:30 it says. Oh shit! Always wanted to see a tornado but not in a situation where my only shelter was a shanty boat floating on a river. I watched low clouds come by, directly overhead. “There’s a suspicious looking cloud.” I said to myself as bolts of lightening lanced into the earth across the river. Then I look up at this dark cloud, fascinating, swirling, energetic! Directly above our heads I see the spiral, not a stationary formation, but a rotating spiral. I just started laughing. This is really not the way I always wanted to see a tornado. You do have to be careful what you wish for. Be very specific!

“I went back on the boat. What could be done? Nothing. To escape a tornado you must go to the lowest place and hope to be passed over. Since water runs downhill, the river was the lowest place. Maybe the cloud gets thirsty and sends a straw down to suck you up. What can ya do? Worrying about it aint gonna help. We drank strong ginger tea, ate canned salmon with crackers, sauteed brussel sprouts from hot tub guy’s garden. After awhile the rain stopped and the crickets started. The crickets are always the first to announce the end of the rain.
“Well Franklin, what the hell am I trying to say thru all this? I miss you. I hope you’re doing good. Write me back. I wish you were here to drink tea with me and take photographs of everything. - Love Taffy”

Taffy thot for a moment then opened another blank letter on the link: “Dear Louise, hello! The river isn’t that same without you. The water went up really fucking high, but without you here it felt completely empty. Am I getting my point across?

“How’s the north land? Hey, let’s start an intentional community of everyone we love so that we never have to be apart from them again. Is it too big a dream? I’ve been thinking about it, now could be a time of opportunity for us all, if we just went and did it and said fuck off to anybody who tried to screw with us. In the right place at the right time... Yeah, I’m dreaming. I hope you can come back here. A few friends from St. Louis are with me now, but they have jobs and lovers and growing mountains of possessions they have to go and feed and polish. Come back out on the river, if you can, if you want to. I invited my old friend Franklin to come out also, I hope he does. Take care Louise, I hope all is well. - Love Taffy”
He clicked SEND and sighed. The St. Genevieve library was full of lonely, desperate people clacking away on keyboards.

(Eighty six)
They stayed another night on the overgrown stone paved landing at St. Genevieve. Sand and Darius hadn’t made it up to the library and they wanted to use the link there.

“We got trapped hanging out with these sweet people running a soda fountain downtown.” Sand explained, “They were selling coffee for fifty cents a cup, what’s the point of even charging money at that price? Might as well give it away for free really. I think they just like to have people come hang out.”

“It’s a retired from the workforce kind of place.” Darius said, “It was cool. She looked us up and down but she wasn’t mean about it. Here we are covered in river mud dried up and turned to dirt, from the knees down, solid dirt cake. She said don’t worry, I got a broom.”
They drank black tea as the sun rose higher in the sky, burning off the morning dew from the walls of the cabin. The boat rocked gently in the wake of a fishing boat that cruised by.

“Here’s a good use of those bicycles we got strapped to the roof.” Taffy said.

“That’s what I was thinking.” Sand said, “It’s kinda epic walking all the way up to the library. It’s kinda like going to a whole other town.”

“Apparently there’s a long history of flooding here,” Taffy said, “so they freaked out and built everything on the tallest hill available. I imagine rebuilding after every flood got to be a bummer. There is a nice view from up there!”

“The French settlers didn’t have fancy surveying equipment. They built the town far back from the river but it was still at the same elevation. No way to tell they had fucked up until a bag ass flood came. Nice little creek running thru the old town tho, nice place for a nomadic fishing camp, but not so much for a flood vulnerable honky town.”

“Can you call French people Honkys?” Sand asked.

“Uh, maybe not.” Taffy said.

“You just described about every city in the civilized world.” Darius said, “A massive city started out from
one family’s camp fire. I hear stories from my family, Jamaican uncles, Brazilian grandmother. Mother from Jamaica, father from Switzerland. I hear the histories of people and places, and boy, people are weird. We are just, some weird fucking creatures. Endlessly strange.”

* * *

They untied the bikes and hauled them thru the skinny woods to the dyke wall, a tall rampart of jagged stones sprouting with mullein plants, the dyke stretched to infinity to the left and right. Bright white chunks of sandstone, granite boulders, rocks, pebbles. They wrestled the bicycles up this slope, sliding on loose rock where almost nothing had taken root. The mullein plants rose up like castles, right from the rocks like miracles, bright yellow flowers flying at their tops.

The top of the dyke was a hard packed road, the river on one side, farmland on the other. They rode, Frisky trotting alongside, eagerly looking for something to chase.

They tried to avoid the vicious sharp rocks which flew out from under their tires with nasty ping sounds. A flat seemed entirely possible. Taffy looked out at the view from 30 feet above ground level. The farm field
was fallow, only a tiny piece far away near highway 61 seemed green. On the highway they could see big trucks moving, taking up the slack of the sabotaged railroad perhaps.

“Look at that! Whatever happened to peak oil? I thot we were done with all that.”

“Oh you know they found a few barrels up their sleeves.” Sand said, “They probably started drilling in the arctic now that the polar bears are dead.”

“Harsh reality.”

“I’m sure the oil companies have got it all worked out that somebody is going to get ripped off and it’s not going to be them.”

Taffy hit a big rock and felt it jam all the way thru his tire and hit the metal rim. In 3 seconds his tire was flat.

“Fuck shit bitch.”

“Yep, that’s the major four letter words.” Sand said.

“I got a flat tire.”

“I got a patch kit, tire levers, crescent wrench, what do you need?” Sand said.

“How much do I owe you?”

“I’ll take an i.o.u.”

Taffy tore apart his front tire and ran the tube down to a puddle of water next to the dyke to immerse the
tube and find the leak where it spewed bubbles. In minutes the tire was fixed.

“Okay. Now I’m really gonna watch the road.”

They cruised ever more slowly down the dyke top, a slalom course with miniature cones that were two inches high and camouflaged with the surface. The challenge was Olympic! All three shared the medals as they arrived at the metal gate and moved their bikes around it, hitting the pavement the began at the burnt down marina. Some big rig trucks were rolling down the road towards a barge facility at the end of the road. Road kill littered the road, possums, rabbits, frogs, raccoons. A barreling truck swerved into the middle of the road to avoid the three cyclists and ran directly over the carcass of one of the beasts, making a horrible squelching sound.

“I think I got some blood on me.” Darius muttered.

“Fucking gross.” Sand said in her best Minnesota accent.

Taffy pulled up alongside them since there were no trucks coming, “Have you ever road-killed something?”

“On my bike?” Sand said, “I almost hit a snake once.”
“I was riding with my girlfriend one time,” Darius said, “and a bunny jumped out in front of her and she screamed cause it ran out and stopped right in front of her. At the last second it jumped out of the way.”

“That’s the thing about cars,” Taffy said, “They are so fast that you don’t have the reaction time to do anything. You couldn’t stop if you wanted to, and you’re going so fast maybe you didn’t even see what you killed.”

“An extension of the whole thing, you don’t see the people in the car factory working like slaves to build those fucking things, and you don’t see the people who die in mines to get the metal to build cars, or the people oppressed and killed to drill the oil it takes to run the things. I wonder if you could figure out the death toll per automobile, the amount of people who die to get that thing onto the car lot brand new. How many deaths per auto would constitute an atrocity?”

“The true cost.”

“These bikes are all that too, but way less. How many bikes can you make out of the same weight of car? Fifty? A hundred? We’ve been studying this stuff in class. The most efficient machine to transfer human energy into motion. The bicycle. They’re doing good bringing the trains back too, trains are fifty times more
efficient than trucks. All the trucks and cars coming back proves something about people to me. We just can’t learn a lesson. Even if we know what’s right, we do the opposite thing, cause we want to, cause we’ve always done it that way, we have this desire and don’t know where it comes from and we can’t control it. Like war, it’s what we’ve always done, we think it’s even a good thing even tho we know it’s totally bad. Secretly we love it. We shrug and say, what can ya do? What the fuck is that? Some people have deep faith in a religion that explicitly forbids killing another person, it’s one of the ten COMANDMENTS, but then they go join the military and KILL other people! What the fuck?”

“Yeah.” Taffy nodded, “What the fuck.”

The sun glinted on something and Taffy took notice, “Dood, no way, check it out!” Taffy squealed to a stop on his janky brakes, “Staghorn Sumac, the berries!”

“What’s he talking about?” Darius asked as Taffy scrambled down the dyke to a bush with compound leaves and tall cones of dark red berries shooting boldly outwards.

“These berries are edible, we can make some killer jam with this stuff, and there’s tons of it.”

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Taffy loped the berry heads off the bushes and bagged them up carefully, filled the milk crate on his bike. After a sampling of the berries they rode on into town.

At the top of the topmost hill the cruised into the parking lot of the public library, sweating and tired, they locked their bikes to the rack and turned to look out over the Mississippi River valley. The tall water tower, which they looked UP at from the boat, was now far below them. The horizon stretched.

“I'm happy that everything is downhill from here.” Darius said.

“Hey check out these apples!” Sand said.

Lining the community center were half a dozen apple trees, numerous apples littered the grass underneath. Sand picked up a good looking one and bit into it.

“Oh my god.” she slowly chewed, juice dripping from her mouth, she held the apple out to them, “Look at the color inside!”

“It's a Pink Lady.” Darius said, examining the redish-pink apple meat.

“It's the best apple I have ever had.” Sand said, “It's like an apple crossed with a pomegranate. Really tart but also sweet. Perfect.” The three of them all found
apples to eat, then filled their bags and bike baskets with as many apples as they could find on the ground, then tugged at the bigger ones still on the trees to see if any of them wanted to go for a boat ride.

Frisky lay down in the shade of an apple tree after drinking the bowl of water that Sand brought.

In the library Taffy signed up to use a link and sat down to his email. Such a strange transition to make, staring at a video screen after staring at a camp fire for a week. Dirty and a little wild smelling, he sat relaxed at the sanitary machine.

Franklin had written back: “Dear Taffy, you rat bastard! I knew you left town for awhile but I didn’t expect you to drop off the face of the earth! Fuck you! I forgot the password to my account and it got closed somehow, I didn’t have your address or anything. Nothing. Are we really even still friends? Alright. I’m mad at you. But we’re still friends. I know I’ve been a shit to you. I know I’m a drunk. I’m sorry for being such a wasteoid. Everyone deals with the shit differently I guess. Maybe I have the alcoholic gene and the Catastrophe just activated it? Like a survival mechanism. Ha! I feel like I’m out of the hole now, or coming out. Things are fucked here. Patriots, can you
believe it? I mean, can I even be typing this? The Patriots are great, the Re-United States is awesome!

“Back to business as usual. My re-citizenship benefits have expired and I have an awful job tending to the “needs” of rich shitheads who profited off the Catastrophe. I need to get outta town bad. I want to come hang out on your boat. How the Hill do I find you? Tell me some town downriver and I will just go there and wait for you. I’ll bring my camera and some chocolate bars. We’ll be famous. - Love Franklin”

“Yes!” Taffy laughed and made noises as he typed the reply. People glanced up from their computers to eye him, then returned to the blue glow of their own intricate worlds.
Zines Currently in print:

You Fucked Up #1 & #2 by Robert Rowboat
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**Musicography:** KALX radio FM 90.7, Lady Ga Ga, Dragonforce, Brittney Spears, Queen, Bruce Springsteen, The Smiths, Dead Moon, Rasputina, Fugazi, The Dresden Dolls, Beruit, Matson Jones, Katrina Josephina, The Magnetic Fields

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