You Fucked Up
You Fucked Up #4

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 here 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.
Louise and Taffy are going down the river on the My Baby IV, then a Merdeavion Patrol tells them it is too dangerous downriver and they get a ride on a truck, boat and all, to Kansas City where they re-launch the My Baby IV into the Missouri River. They meet a forest dweller and while staying with him their boat mysteriously is lost. They continue in a Canoe.

The Patriots rebellion is victorious over the Corporate Coalition government, and they encounter celebrations. A kind old river rat gifts Louise and Taffy a functional shanty boat, which they name after him: The Jacob’s Party. Louise soon despairs for news of her family, and leaves the river to go home to Wisconsin. Taffy continues alone. He meets a new friend Darius and old friend Sand in St. Louis, after a flood they take Taffy’s shanty boat out on the Mississippi, play music, party in abandoned towns, while in St. Genevieve Taffy receives an email from Franklin, who is still in Minneapolis, saying he wants come down and find Taffy.
We shoved off from Saint Genevieve with a full basket of pink lady apples from the library, sitting on the deck shining in the sun, a most delicious booty. The consensus was to blow downriver as fast and far as we could, get some distance from the light pollution of the city so we could see the stars, the milky way, our galaxy.

The next sizable town downriver was Cape Girardeau, some seventy miles by river. Darius piloted the boat, with some advice from Sand and I when encountering apparent obstacles like a barge heading downriver with a load of coal for a power plant. I whittled a new handle for my coffee pot which had burned away while neglected over a camp fire. Now it had a knob of some hardwood I had found in a drift pile. Sand had her headphones plugged in and was rocking out in some other world.

“I decided to write twelve songs while on this boat.” she said, “A whole boat album. You wanna play drums on it, Taffy?”

“Um, maybe I could just bang on a log.”

“Hard core.”

We cooked a huge breakfast while floating in the sunshine, I soaked up the energy after the cold of last
night. Oats with maple syrup, scrambled eggs, toast with butter and home-made jam of stag-horn sumac berries that the librarian in St. Gen was hawking in mini mason jars right off the circulation desk. The small towns already had their close networks of people, they seemed to have much better time in the post-Catastrophe world than the big cities. Still, people everywhere had their faces plastered to the screens, watching and listening for today’s hot topic. What did that old French guy say, ‘He who always watches for what is next, never acts, so he is always a spectator.’ Guy Debord, that’s the name. Here in the little towns there is less federal influence, so they just organize cause they have to, there’s no parent here to swaddle them like a baby. Not everybody likes each other, but they do enuf to make it work. The small places don’t have anything the government wants, so they get passed over, which is good and bad. They lack some things, but generally seem to be more content and happy than city folk.

We made thirty-three miles, dropped anchor at a vast beach with sprawled out wood piles and dog prints. After we made the landing and shimmied our anchors down into the dense sand I went for a walk like I always do after sitting on the boat all day
watching the shore go by. I'm out on the far end of the beach and I catch a movement. A little dog-like animal jogs away from me. Coyote? Fox? I don't know either creature enuf to identify it on the run. Then I hear this heavy galloping coming up behind me while I stroll back to the boat- oh shit! Here comes the leader of the pack to chomp on me! I screamed. Then Sand's dog Frisky ran past me, smiling with it's tongue out. Dog played a little joke on me, I think. The adrenaline came out, I really thot I was about to be compelled to do some mortal combat there.

We cooked up a little dinner on the fire, a spicy double pepper soup, and that feels good because the cold is upon us. October. I head to bed and wake up freezing. Pulling the sleeping bag over my head but it's a tight fit, this bag was designed for a teenager I think. It is not a custom fit world I live in. I make it to sunrise and my toes are cold. Always happy to see the sun again. I roll up and hit the beach to make a fire. There is a heavy fog over the river and a towboat has pulled to shore out there in the cloud, waiting for it to burn off, engines idling.

I make coffee, and I drink coffee as the fog lightens, picking up sticks I tap out rhythms to match the song I heard Sand playing. Yeah, it's gonna be awesome. I
sense something and stop drumming. I look up and to the left. Twenty feet away from me stands a large rottweiler. Our eyes locked and we sat unmoving. Several more rottweilers stepped up to look and I blinked, beyond the lead dog there were a dozen more rottweilers in all sizes. They turned and moved as one, silently fled back the way they had came. They were gone before I could even think of what to do. Many of them were just puppies, a feral pack of rottweilers. Who knows their story. Nothing but paw prints in the sand to prove they had emerged from the sunrise. I thot about Franklin. He loves dogs.

(eighty-eight)
They pushed off and motored down, another sunny day and no wind to hassle, a breeze made by the movement of the boat thru the part of the low sky which touches the earth.

Stopped in Tower Rock, on the Illinois side, next to a round island a hundred feet high of sandstone layers topped with trees and bushes. A boat ramp made of gravel, and a grass covered dike, the grass had been mowed.

“Ah, civilization.” Taffy said.
Taffy, Sand, and Darius climbed to the top of the dike and there was town. They descended down into it, and a loose dog sauntered up from the front of the bank building and made friends with Frisky. Looked in the bank window, donuts, muffins, complimentary coffee, they seemed friendly. The town was quiet as they strolled the street. They arrived at a Mississippi River museum which was closed, so they peered into the front windows.

“Too bad it’s closed.” Sand said, “It looks interesting.”

“Not many people come to the museum anymore.” a voice behind them said. They turned to see a white haired fellow emerge from the building next door, dressed in some respectable old school white shirt and slacks, “No, they bring school kids down here sometimes, that’s about it.”

“That’s too bad.” Taffy said.

“They moved some people in here after the Catastrophe.” the man said, swinging his arm out, “Used to be a little family town, everybody knew everybody, all grew up together. Different now. I don’t even know who some of these folks are. Good people, just don’t know them. Are you moving here?”
“No, we came in on a boat.” Sand said, “We're tied up down at the ramp.”
“You don't say' Out on the river. Well. You ask this man down at the bank, Charles Dworkin, maybe he'll open the museum up and let you have a look.”

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Taffy, Sand, and Darius toured the museum and listened to the stories Charles told them about the rivers. Charles had been a tow boat pilot and went up and down most of them.

They thanked him and shoved off, motored on and got near Cape Girardeau by the time the sun was going down. Taffy was tired and feeling over socialized. He set up a tent and went to sleep shortly after sundown. Sand and Darius built a fire.

“I got a letter from my friend.” Sand said as the firelight flickered on her face, “She says she wants to come out on the boat with her two kids.”
“Oh damn. Better check with Taffy first. He gets kinda wound up sometimes.” Darius said.
“Oh yeah, I've heard him go off about people having kids, but he loves children. I've seen him playing with them in the gardens. He just hates the re-
population plan, giving people benefits for having babies. I feel the same, I don’t want to see the country filled up with a whole new horde of consumers. Every baby destined to be a car driving, fast food eating, house buying, third world country exploiting ignorant American chump.”

“North American.” Darius said.

“Yeah.”

“ Seems like everyone is more appreciated now, cause there’s less of us. But also there’s no slack anymore, you can’t get away with slumping around anymore.”

“There’s no excess population to be exploited anymore. There’s no scarcity of food or shelter- not that there ever was, it’s just been appropriated following the Catastrophe and now people expect it. Who ever hears of someone being homeless now? You just move into an abandoned house and hang your hat up. There’s too much wealth and not enuf police! Sure it won’t last forever. Some asshole is going to figure out how to exploit us. The Catastrophe wasn’t the end of all suffering.”

“So how old are these kids that your friend wants to bring?”

“I think they are 6 and 9.” Sand said.
“That’s perfect. They can help out.”

“You like children, Darius? I never knew.”

“I like children. Somewhere out there in the world is one of my offspring, running around, as much as I had a part in it.”

“Wow. When is the last time you saw your kid?”

“Years ago. A long time. It’s a long story. Getting even longer. Yeah, had a baby with a woman. Didn’t want to! I tried to avoid it but I was a dumb kid. Friends would see me on the streets and say, ‘Hey Darius, I heard you are having a baby! Congratulations!’ and I would say, ‘Hell no! We’re getting an abortion!’ and my friend would say, ‘Well you better go have a talk with her cause she is spreading the word.’ So I go have a talk with her, and what all was said, who remembers exactly? I remember what we talked about BEFORE she was pregnant. See, I have always felt very strongly about not having kids, and we talked way before she was pregnant and I told her I wanted to stop having sex if she thot she couldn’t have an abortion. We agreed on that. I thot we agreed on it, but one of us wasn’t telling the truth. Damn. I was such a dumb ass. She came home from the gynecologist one time and told me that she had been tested and the doctor said she was sterile
so we didn't have to use condoms anymore. When she told me that, I knew it was a lie, but you know, a person doesn't want to believe that the one they love is lying to them. There really is a blindness that comes with romantic love. She had three sisters and all of them told me to watch out, they warned me that she was a habitual liar. Her own damn sisters warned me, but I didn't listen. When it came down to it, she just took what she wanted and it didn't matter what I thot. She wanted a baby, she got a baby. I never wanted to be one of those people screaming at their kids in the store. I never wanted to become my parents. Our baby was a beautiful little baby, I tried to be a part of it, for a year I tried to be something I always knew I didn’t want to be. That takes a toll on a person. I knew it wasn't right. I couldn’t nail myself up on the cross like that, I couldn’t accept someone’s vision for how I should live my life. I walked away. I left the state, crossed the mountains. I have no idea where they are. I know I did the right thing tho. Sometimes it’s hard. I try to let it go because it’s outta my hands, but I tell you, our culture does not look kindly on a male who refuses to help raise a baby, no matter what circumstances caused the baby to exist. I think it’s fucked up. Most people think it takes two people to
create a baby, but that's not true. It only takes one person if they use deception.” Darius turned away from the fire to face Sand, “Got any of those beers left? Let's have a round.” They opened a new bottle each, “What do you think, Sand. Did I fuck up? Should we have stayed together for the kid?”

“People are really weird. That's all I can say about that.”

“You got that right.”

“You want advice, huh? Don’t allow the past to make you miserable in the present. You're feeling guilty, sad, angry, hateful, am I right? You cannot allow these emotions to dominate you. Embrace the feelings, acknowledge them, and then if there's anything you can do to reconcile with these fucking people then do it, reach out. Otherwise, let it go. Burn it to the ground! It's over. Fuck it! NEXT!”

“Yeah. You're exactly right. I've been holding onto this shit a long time.”

“Let it go, baby!”

Taffy awoke with the sun as usual and opened the flap of his tent to see a wall of white, “Fog again!” he said and the fog continued being opaque.

Cold toes again, even after fixing his sleeping bag with a multi-tool by squeezing the metal mechanism tighter, making the zipper zip. Always the cold toes. Circulation issues. He crawled out and pulled some sticks from the woodpile, broke them up, piled them on last night’s coals and blew them into an orange life. Flame leapt up, fog jumped back. Taffy warmed himself, then feeling good he filled the stainless steel kettle for tea. Taffy strolled the woodpile for more fuel, and found a fallen tree with root stocks protruding that had been rounded down and smoothed by tumbling down the river. He picked up two hard sticks and and began sounding on the part of the tree where the roots began to emerge at the very bottom. It sounded like a natural Gamelon. Some nearby insects responded to the noise, then a bird answered back. Taffy tapped out more rhythms, “I wonder what language I am speaking to them with?” A wild ass bird flew in and perched on a tall limbless trunk full of decay and holes. The bird looked at him with a red mohawk and attitude.
“Woodpecker.” Taffy knocked his sticks on the nature's Gamelon.

The woodpecker knocked its beak into the wood, looked at Taffy, then shuffled to the opposite side of the dead tree so Taffy couldn't see.

Downriver could be heard the idling engine of a towboat, pushed up on the bank, waiting for the fog to lift. Like every foggy morning, Taffy built a fire and watched the fog move off the bank, retreat to the center of the river, then evaporate into the upper sky. Taffy drank tea and watched the opposite bank of the river appear as the fog diminished, it was rolling hills of trees over there. The towboat's engines revved up and now he could see it, downriver on the opposite shore. Puffs of diesel smoke came from its stacks and the whole thing backed off the bank, turned slowly, then roared upriver with engines oscillating at full speed.

Taffy watched the undulating waves rolling out from the propeller wash behind the tow, watched the disturbance reach the shore and toss his boat around on the way there. Darius and Sand slept thru the whole episode. Taffy smiled, they were becoming boat punks now, now even awakened by your bed rocking wildly.

Taffy wondered about Franklin. Had he jumped on a train towards Cape Girardeau, was he waiting there
right now? Taffy emptied out his tent and then shook
the sand out of it, broke it down and packed for the
boat. He saw the empty beer bottles, they might be
sleeping for a bit. Taffy cleaned their mess from the
beach and untied the boat, pulling a 2x4 lumber out of
the canoe to pry the boat off the mud. Slowly they
sloughed off and drifted away from shore on the mild
current there inside the bend. He pulled the motor and
the prop spun them away. Inside the cabin he saw
Frisky poke his furry head up to look out the window
with perked ears at the noisy engine, then lay back
down. Moments later Sand’s head popped up thru the
same window, sleepy eyed and confused. He gave her
a thumbs up while the other hand was on the tiller.

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The dual triangles of the cable suspension bridge that
connected Illinois to Missouri could now be seen
downriver. Cape Girardeau. Taffy peered with the
binoculars, searching for a decent landing spot, a nice
beach perhaps, the line of brown that might indicate a
propitious area to recline and watch the stars. There
was nothing but boat ramps and the old stone paved
bank where stern wheel tour boat was tied up, those
fake ones where the stern wheel doesn’t actually
propel the boat, a propeller underneath is doing the
job, and the stern wheel just turns along the same
speed the boat is moving. Taffy wondered how the
tourism industry was going these days.

A small slough opened to the right just beyond a
small boat ramp, the water looked plenty deep. He
turned in and checked out the banks, the flood had left
most places muddy. Here the mud bank was halfway
dry, large cracked cakes, the mud puzzle revealed, up
near the line of grass and trees. Near the water the
mud looked very fresh. Taffy nudged The Jacob’s Party
up to a decent spot and cut the engine and the prow of
The Jacob’s Party kissed the mud. Frisky jumped onto
the mud and slogged thru with all four paws to the
woods where he began his search for wildlife. Sand
was awake now and she tossed the anchor out onto the
mud, then jumped off to finish the job. Sand lugged
the steel Danforth up the bank, feet beginning to sink,
and then down knee deep in mud she stopped.

“Dear god!”

Taffy laughed and pointed, “Your god cannot help
you now.”

Sand slogged uphill, slowly rising from the mud
like some evolutionary re-enactment. She made it to

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the cracked mud cakes, wearing knee high mud socks
now she planted the spines of the anchor in solid earth
and shimmied it down. Taffy tightened the anchor line
on the cleat and threw out the plank so he could bridge
the deep mud.

“Another perfect landing.” Taffy said.

Taffy untied the bicycles from the cabin roof while
Sand washed her lower quarter in the river. Sand
poked her head into the cabin, “We’re going to town,
Darius.” A hand raised from under a blanket, then
lowered back down.

“Alright. See you later.”

Frisky followed as Taffy and Sand pushed their
bikes up the dry mud cakes, “I don’t think Darius
really drinks much, he seems really hung over.”

“I’ve noticed that. He seems to disappear for a day
or two after a good soaking.”

“Tough luck. Some of us didn’t get the alcohol
processing gene.” Sand shrugged.

They pushed their bikes thru tall grass that had
been laid down by silt from the high waters, the
waterfront went 3 feet up the side of the concrete flood
wall. A door in the flood wall was open to let trains
pass into town, next to it a fresh pile of sand bags.
They walked under the train bridge and up to the sloped dike wall covered in grass.

Sand pointed, “Hey look at all that Lady’s Thumb growing at the top of the bank there. Edible leaves. Too bad it’s all covered in river sludge from the flood.”

They reached the road next to the dike wall and rode wheels.

“Compared to the speed of the boat, we are moving about twice as fast now!” Taffy said.

“Hell yeah, we’re flying! Yow!” Sand put her hands in the air as they coasted down from the dike.

They rolled into old downtown and asked for directions to the best coffee shop in town, they were told to roll up Broadway to Grace’s place. The bartender was relaxed and let Frisky come in, he laid on the floor under their table.

“The Tanzanian Peaberry is the best coffee.” Taffy said while sipping from the classic hourglass shaped, brown glazed mug. Sand drank hers, “I think if I drink about 3 of these then anything will be possible.”

“I’m not sure we can afford all that, this is pre-Catastrophe import.”

“Worth every damn penny.”
A beeping emanated from Sand’s hoodie, “Hold on!” she pulled a phone from her pocket, opened it, walked away from the table to talk.

Taffy sighed, “Those damn things again.” he said to himself, “The Catastrophe wasn’t all bad.”

Sand returned.

“What the fuck was that?” Taffy said.

“What? Like you never got a phone call before. Get a load of this guy!” Sand pointed at Taffy and turned her head to an imaginary friend.

“Okay. Back to it. Coffee!” Taffy held up his mug, Sand sat down and raised hers and they clinked mugs.

“Coffee.” Sand said.

Half an hour later a woman holding a swaddled infant walked in the front door and approached their table, “Hey!”

Taffy looked up, “Oh shit! Crasstina!”

“Can you really drink coffee while you’re breast feeding?” Taffy said.

Crasstina was holding her baby in the nursing position with one hand, a coffee mug in the other, “Oh, it’s fine. I’m not drinking a whole pot a day or
anything. Couldn't afford that anyway. Unless imports open back up it's only gonna get more expensive.”

“That's what I've heard too. I wonder how long we have before the stocks run out. Talk about your apocalyptic countdown, peak coffee!”

“Black or green tea works just fine.” Taffy said, “I like tea. When I was a kid I would take a stainless steel mixing bowl and make a huge vat of tea to drink while playing computer role playing games. My friend made fun of me, drinking this huge vat of tea. I got jacked up.” Taffy looked down at the year-and-a-half old baby sitting in Crasstina's lap, “It's cute. I'll admit that. I can hardly believe you squeezed this thing out. You're bad ass.”

“Thank you, Taffy.”

“How do you spell her name?”

“M-a-y-g-a. Mayga!”

“That's a good name.”

“Beautiful baby.” Sand said, “If you like babies.”

“So who's the father?” Taffy said.

“Funny question. Maybe you?”

“What? No no, I had a vasectomy done from before I even met you.”

“Oh yeah, ha! I'm kidding. About you I mean. The baby was conceived back at the compound, one of
those wild nights. We were so reckless back then at the end of the world.”

Sand leaned in, “So it's Julius or Christopher or—”

“Aston.”

“Oh shit.”

“That's right, I fucked a rapist. It was before the assault on Julius. He was a good guy except that he lost control when drunk.”

“Taffy told me about that. I hope I never see that guy again.”

“I just hope he never does that to anyone else.”

“The world is full of fuck ups.” Sand said, “There's a new one born every day. Let's talk about something that doesn't suck. Are you ready to go boating?”

“Hell yeah, I'm excited to see the boat!”

“It's really nice,” Taffy leaned into the conversation, “has a nice weather proof cabin, floats on pontoons full of foam so it's kinda un-sinkable, a sturdy boat! Ready for a mother and her baby.”

“A baby! God!” Sand pointed her open hands at the quietly nursing child, “Is it going to make a lot of noise?”

“Hell yeah!” Crasstina said, “She's gonna party along with the rest of us!”
Taffy left Sand & Crasstina in the coffee shop and headed for the library, walking and wondering if Franklin had written. A haggard man stopped him on the sidewalk, “Hey man, could you spare some change? Just enough for a coffee you know.”

“Spare change? Shit brother, spare change doesn’t exist anymore! It’s all on plastic now.”

“Yeah, how about transferring a dollar into my account? I’m a poet you know, but it doesn’t pay well. In the ancient tradition of starving artists! Striving to put a smile on people’s faces and a thought in their head.” he tapped a forefinger on his suntanned skull, “Trying to ascertain the reason we are on this planet, shining a light on the big picture! Transfer me a dollar, man. C’mon.”

“Alright buddy. You sold me. I support the arts. Where can we make a transaction around here?”

“My friend at the fruit stand over there, right over there. No transfer fee. We have a deal worked out, I watch the stand when he goes to piss or eat lunch, you know.”
They strolled to the fruit stand and Taffy transferred two bucks from his plastic to the poet’s plastic.

“Thanks friend. It’s not easy these days, your benefits run out and you aint got a job yet, pretty easy to find some food and shelter, but then there’s the little things, man likes to sit at a table on the sidewalk with the people and have a cup of coffee. That’s when the poetry comes to me.”

“Oh yeah. I’ve been to all those places your talking about, and will be again.”

Taffy continued to the library, a rumble filled the sky as two massive military helicopters flew over the town, flanked by 3 smaller attack helicopters.

“Dear god!” Taffy joined the rest of the citizens of Cape Girardeau in staring up at this abominable sight.

Taffy made the library and entered the quiet calm. The librarians paid no attention to him, being engaged in some animated discussion. He sat down at a link and checked the mail. Franklin had written back. State borders had been closed, Franklin couldn’t leave Minnesota. Attacks on train routes by separatists and now tightened security. Shit! At least Franklin hadn’t been on a train that was bombed. Taffy wrote back. He checked some news sites for more information.
Independent sites, there were shocking stories and video. People were talking civil war, and there were rumors of other nations being involved, Canada, Mexico, the European Union. China was expanding to dominate the entire pacific. The Patriots here were trying to snuff this civil war and keep the Canada/Mexico alliance strong, in addition to strengthening bonds with South American countries, or simply invade and occupy them—the ones that could supply oil.

“Barely enuf people left on earth to continue the species and these fuckers are about to slaughter a whole bunch more. I mean, all governments, if they have the ability, try to dominate other states. That’s what states do, right? The free-for-all post-Catastrophe land grab is on. So fucked.”

The screen shone its light on Taffy’s face and made no response to his rant.

“Great. Here we go. ’Never Again’ is happening again. Fuck this cycle of godamn violence which is preventing me from being with the one that I love.”

“Excuse me, sir?”

Taffy spasmed in the chair and banged his knees on the table, “God! You scared the shit out of me!”

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The librarian stood patiently behind Taffy with a slight smile on her face, “Sorry to disturb you. I didn’t see you come in and we are trying to let everyone know that a government curfew just went into effect today, and no one is allowed on the streets between 8pm and 6am.”

“Oh shit. I am living on a boat down on the river, are they saying anything about that?”

“Oh, well let’s see, all state borders are being controlled to isolate the insurgents, and the middle of the Mississippi River is the border between Missouri and Illinois, so if I were you, I wouldn’t get out near the middle of the river or cross to the other side without obtaining permission first. Stay on this side, or you might get shot at!

(ninety-two)
All four friends headed back to the boat. Sand & Taffy walking their bikes with Crasstina and Mayga. There was a strange atmosphere forming in the town, people exchanged strange fearful looks. At the gate in the flood wall where the road left town a Merdeavion Security check point was being set up. The officers
took digital photos of them as they passed thru, even Frisky and Mayga.

“You’ve heard about what’s going on, right?” the black-uniformed man said with an automatic rifle over his shoulder.

“Heard about it at the library.” Taffy said.

“Do you think there are still buses running back to St. Louis?” Crasstina said.

“I don’t know. Maybe. Not the safest time to travel.” the security officer looked down at Mayga and frowned.

“That’s where I live and work. I have to get back there.”

One of the Merdeavion people approached Taffy, “You look like you could do some fighting. Country is about to need all the men it can get. If these fanatics get in power, god knows what they’ll be having us doing. I’m a christian now, understand, but I don’t believe you can force that on someone. Merdeavion’s got a recruiting office down on main street, you should go sign up.”

“Is that who the insurgents are, christian fundamentalists?”

The first officer spoke, “We aren’t getting any word from the top about specific groups yet. It seems to be a
coalition of different groups, judging by the profile we've been instructed to look for. We send in these photos to the database and check them against known insurgents. We're not gonna let any town fall, even small ones with no strategic value, if they take a bunch of small towns they could gain a stranglehold on us. I sure don't wanna go blazing in to retake a town that's being held by wackos holding guns to people's heads.”

“Jesus!” Taffy said.

“Exactly. Let’s hope this database has got a lock on who we need to take out so we can neutralize this bullshit.

A third Merdeavion officer came out of a small van, “They cleared. Except for the dog. He's one of them.”

“What!” Sand said.

“Aw, just kidding,” the officer laughed, handed the serious officer their ID's, and disappeared into the van.

The serious officer shook his head and shuffled thru the ID's, examining them, then continued, “Mr. Smith, your pleasure cruise may be at an end. You're definitely at risk of being killed out there, so why not join up with us and fight together? Doesn't that make you mad? They're trying to take your freedom away. Think about it. You could probably get a job on a patrol boat, with your experience boating.”
“Alright. I'll think about it.”

* * *

Arriving at the Jacob’s Party they stepped cautiously down the mud cake bank and onto the boat. The smell of coffee was in the air, Darius was awake.

“Hey, you brought us new crew!” Darius smiled at Crasstina, “Damn, why the faces?”

Darius heard the news.

“Oh boy. That’s it. I gotta get back to my girl, she’ll be loosing her mind wondering if I got lynched by some psycho cross burning fanatics.”

Taffy slapped his hands together and cursed, “When I think about the possibility of an All Powerful, All Knowing god, I think: let me be introduced to this fellow, this fucking bumbler! I would demand accountability for the thing’s actions, why would you allowed so much brutal suffering to go on for so long if you had the power to stop it! I would say to this thing, 'You fucked up! You knew what was happening and you had the power to stop it. You sat on your omnipotent holy ass. Damn you for that.”

“Anyway,” Sand said, “we can’t take the trains, some of the lines have been blown up and the rest are
shut down. There might be a bus service, or we could talk to some church charities, they might help.”

“That's kinda ironic.” Crasstina said.

“Whatever works.” Sand said, “There’s as many types of christians as there are people who call themselves christian. Some of them are even in touch with the reality we live in and actually do care about loving their neighbors. There's good people in this town, let's go find them.”

“Alright. It's time to go. Fuck! We can steal a car if we have to. This is bringing it all back, you know? The Catastrophe taught me that you don’t wanna be separated from the people you love when the shit goes down.”

“Well, this is my boat, The Jacob’s Party.” Taffy said to Crasstina, “At least you got to see it.”

Crasstina put her arms around Taffy, “You should come with us.”

“What the fuck, you’re not coming back with us?” Darius was pissed, “You can’t be out on the river when it’s like this. You’ll have to fly the flag of one side or the other, and if you don’t have any flag at all, then BOTH sides will shoot at you!”

“I don't wanna get off the river.”
“Damn Taffy, why not wait it out, go back out next spring. Tie the damn boat up and come play with us. We can play music together. Wait for this shit to blow over.”

“Argh!” Taffy held his head for a moment to keep it from flying apart, “I can't decide this right now. Let me sleep on it. I know ya'll gotta do your thing, so safe journeys to ya and good luck. After being out here and feeling the freedom on the river, I can't go hole up in a house in a city for another winter. I just cant do it.”

Taffy hugged them all and slapped Frisky as he scurried off the boat following Sand, “I'll see you soon! Love you!”

Crasstina reached dry ground and turned to face him with sad eyes, Mayga looked too and here eyes were wild and made Taffy laugh, “See you later baby!”

Crasstina held up her free hand silently before turning to follow the others.

* * *

Taffy paced the boat, talking to himself, looking down the slough at the river and the shore on the other side which was now closed to him. “With all the governments getting back to business as usual it's got
the potential to make the Catastrophe feel like a fucking vacation. All the horrible shit that people do is returning. War. Pollution. Oppression. The Catastrophe caused by the virus was more like a break from the ongoing catastrophe of human civilization.”

Taffy rummaged thru the storage bins and brought forth a bottle of Missouri moonshine. In the drunken descent that evening he found himself back in Minneapolis, alone in the kitchen, hiding inside the oven. After a vast store of internal trauma had been released, as when a carbonated beverage has been opened after being shaken for more than 30 years, Taffy found himself naked and curled in the fetal position out on the mud bank. The cabin of the Jacob’s Party had been wrecked, windows broken, things smashed. He called out the names of his estranged family, his mother and father, and old friends, lost somewhere in the Catastrophe. He called out to Franklin and his name echoed across the river against a hostile shore. His tears fell into the mud.

(ninety-three)
I felt strange the next day. Relieved to have vented those demons, but also terrified to understand that
those demons were within me. It's good everyone left,
I wouldn't want them to experience the brunt of that
Post Traumatic Stress Disorder explosion. I fixed the
boat, it wasn't too bad.

Rained yesterday, and I went out in it, kept going.
Little rain, little wind, then it came down hard and I
couldn't see thru the one window pane left at the front
of the cabin, the other window was patched with
wood. A shanty boat does not have windshield wipers.
I opened a side window and stuck my head out.
Scanning the shore I see a patch of lighter brown under
the trees of the bank, maybe a beach and not a mud
bath. With luck. Pulling in past a wing dam I hit the
reverse current and throttled down the engine, then
the propeller started chewing on something. “Shit!” I
screamed and cut the engine. Close enuf to shore, just
float in. Pounding rain agitated the water so I couldn't
see the many little water logged bobbers out there,
chunks of trees floating just below the surface, easy to
wreck a prop on. I went on the back deck and my
yellow raincoat, saw the fog float away from the
engine. I pulled the rope that lifted the homemade
longtail out of the water, both winds of the propeller
were still there, good. The boat bumped into shore and
I shifted on my feet, almost falling over. I cursed and
thot about how I needed to pay more attention to not falling over, being alone now, who would be on board to turn the boat around and pick me up if I fell over? Nobody. Boats that have lost their pilot tend to turn left or right and then just go in circles until they run out of fuel. On the first circle the now swimming pilot would be happy to see their boat circled round to meet them, until they failed to grab hold of it on the fly and were sucked underneath to be processed by the spinning prop. The circle of death. My plan to avoid this fate was constant awareness of the present moment, using breathing techniques and zen meditation in the morning and at night. I had been doing this before the Catastrophe to break the stranglehold of emotions over my life, the sadness, anger, jealousy, and it worked well. I got a little lost when the Catastrophe happened. Yeah, that threw everything off. My whole ten year plan. Ha ha. Friends and family scattered or gone. Ah, the descent into madness. Here I am again, alone. I am reminded of that time when there was no pleasure. Nothing but survival. Struggle. Talking to empty tin cans. The time before I hooked up with Franklin. Now again like a cycle I am descending the river, every day moving closer to winter, colder, older, asking the question.
Questioning, what am I doing? Listening to this radio, country music, ballads into infinity. Closer to larger towns, the pop music, hip-hop, rock, and ancient dead white guy music. I've been out a day and here I am feeding back into my own mental loop, hearing no one else fart so I could yell at them to get their ass out of the cabin, this aint no dutch oven. I can ask a question of the air and there will be no answer in human voice, but a blue heron may rise up from the shore and fly squawking it's dinosaur croak across the river, an Asian carp may leap from the water the moment I look out the window and make me wonder if it could feel the electric gaze of my eyes, are we dancing? My fish. A tow boat pushing barges goes by, heavy laden with some liquid fuel, pipes running the length of it, the towboat in back rumbling, the windows of the pilot house are mirrored, there is no human visible. It is a robot, a robot boat with robot slaves they are held prisoner by wage slavery to perform this task of oiling the machine and sending profits to the newly re-organized wall street, phantom money, they've made the world a game, people, animals, minerals, plants, all pawns, expendable and disposable during the course of the game. Success is not measured by the quality of food clothing and shelter and love spread out to the
world, but by how much power one person can steal from the rest. Like my old landlord in St. Louis said, 'Slavery was never abolished, it was replaced by worldwide wage slavery: Who made those shoes you’re wearing? You don’t even know!’

Capitalism must be de-programmed from our minds: it’s a disease we have been infected with.

During a break in the rain I climbed the beach, which had wildly eroded during the rain, turning from flat bar of sand into a delta of two foot deep ravines. The change was amazing, erosion in fast time, The sand being relocated to the river now The Jacob’s Party was suddenly no longer floating but was beached on a sandbar that slid underneath! The clouds did not look promising for sharing the sky with the sun, I set up a tarp under the black willow trees, strung with a rope and in the middle a driftwood pole with soup can stuck on the end so it wouldn’t poke thru the tarp. I built a fire of wet sticks, the mosquitoes swarmed in flocks, six of them in my face at a time, attacking in squadrons, I struggled with the fire as I battled those stinging birds. It was terrorism. “Fucking assholes!” I yelled. They mocked me with their high pitched song, played directly into my ear. The frequency was too high for me to understand what they were singing, like

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vigorous crust music. I jammed paper scraps between the wet twigs and then discovered the lighter was dead. “Dammit! Where’s those matches?” I slid down the blasted beach to the boat, hurrying to start the fire before the next squall of rain. I had drunk an entire pot of black tea earlier on the boat and could not sit still in that cabin any longer. There needed to be a fire and outdoor activity, even if the activity would be limited to the space under that 4x6 foot tarp. At least the view would be different. The paper ignited, the wood dried off and burned. I felt an itching in my crotch, god, how long had I been wearing these clothes? Where did that gold bond medicated foot powder go? Ah, civilization. Without it, I would have the sense to keep myself clean. Too busy running from the governments of the world to do laundry. Ah, the minty soothing powder, so much better than the hot rotten burning. The sun shone under the clouds as it set, a small illumination of my condition. I had to shit. I grabbed the shovel and dug a hole to bury it, even tho the dog wasn’t here anymore to dig it up. I buried it, there is something satisfying about that. Every day a burial. Returning those elements to the earth instead of having them sucked away by some expansive porcelain grid system. Squatting over that hold the bastards flew at me, a
squadron at my face, then zeroed in on the warm exposed ass, a squadron of skeeters nailed my double bulbs. By the time I had wiped and got my pants back up I was stinging from multiple stab wounds swelling up on my ass, greatly diminishing the pleasure from this natural cycle. Bloodsuckers! From Wall Street to the woods, they take it from you. I can’t stand them. Don’t scratch! Scratching only makes it worse.

One my way back from business I spot a green thing in a drift pile and pick it up: a palm sized plastic stegosaurus dinosaur. It had a grin on it’s face. I think of Franklin for some reason, and put it in my pocket.

I found a log round in the drift pile and I think it will make a nice seat, when I try to roll it I find that it’s hollow. What a find! I roll it back to my camp and break up more sticks for the fire. Looking at the log I take two sticks in my hands for the fire and begin tapping on different sides of the hollow log. It has resonance, it makes an excellent percussion instrument. The sky turns to night and the fire warms my body and I pound out rhythms for everything. The rain begins to fall again, tapping on the tarp overhead. Applause. I can pretend that everyone I want to be with me here IS here. Is that contrary to being aware in the here and now? Fantasy? Is it wrong? I’m hanging
out with all my friends from everywhere, we are drinking and laughing and we take a big cast iron skillet and make apple fritters fried in oil right over the campfire, and Franklin looks just like a small green stegosaurus sitting next to me.

* * *

I slept on the boat alone that first night, no giggling going to sleep stories and tired babble, and yes, no one to laugh when I farted. The tarp that was tied over the edge of the leaky roof flapped in the wind all night. Flapping, crackling, snapping. There was nothing else to hear. Couldn’t get to sleep for a long time, feeling my body react to all the chain smoking I did all day. I slept restless.

In the morning I stepped out on the back deck and wondered where I was going. It hadn’t been the same since Louise left, she was the sparkle that I hadn’t felt since hanging out with Franklin. She was my best friend without all the romantic bullshit. Her leaving was bullshit tho. Bullshit! Whatever, she was unhappy, she had to do it.

Sand and Darius were great, but they never planned to go the whole way. I always knew they were
leaving. I tried to limit my connection to them but you can't control your emotions all the time. And so, where am I going? I thought about spending the winter in the gulf, keep going down river. How lonely that sounded now, and terrifying with the world now swirling in violence.

The hermit thing doesn't feel right, even tho it might be the safest thing to do. Hide out! Head for the hills! Playing it safe sounded boring as hell too.

I wanted Franklin to hold me, keep me warm when the serious cold weather hits, and I wanted Louise to sit and drink coffee with booze in it and play chess with, I wanted Darius and Sand to be in a band with, Crasstina to make out with and draw art together, Mayga to practice my funny faces with, all the people from Minneapolis when it was just us and no one else existed, and all of the St. Louis Post-Catastrophe party people. All of everybody rolled up into one burrito with a cup of hot salsa and corn tortilla chips and pickled jalapenos & carrots. Where could I find this burrito?

I thought about getting off the river. How many times did I stick with something and ignore my intuition to get out, and what was the result of that? Jobs, relationships, hitch hike rides, various journeys when I
knew I was going the wrong way but just kept going anyway because the thought of turning around was too painful. Thinking: It'll be fine. It'll work out. I was SUPPOSED to go the long way, the hard way, the lonely way. After so many willful approaches to life, I grasp the idea of learning from these experiences instead of repeating them. Getting off the river. I could walk away from The Jacob's Party at any moment, if I was next to land that is. Walk away, find my friends, be happy. Maybe in a couple days. Still thinking about it. When it feels like home you don't want to leave it, even if it's built on the side of a volcano about to erupt.

(ninety-four)

There is a long twisting bend on the last leg of the Upper Mississippi just before it joins with the Ohio River at the city of Cairo. It is a taste of the long winding detours the lower river takes on its way to the sea, as if realizing its journey over land was swiftly approaching an end and trying to delay the inevitable change that would occur down at the delta beyond New Orleans: becoming one with the Ocean.

As he moved on the water, Taffy found the sun shining now on this side, now on that side of the boat,
floating downriver after turning a curve to go north felt strange. A cold wind blew from the north and he searched for more layers but found he had no more. Just the pants on his legs that the wind blew thru. The plan was to be farther south by now, eliminating the need for Minnesota's tradition of layered clothing. The clouds burned away after noon and the sun hitting the clack cloth of his leg sent tingles thru his skin and across his entire body. The tingles seemed to bear an ancient message for all nomadic creatures: head south while you still can.

The river's action on the outside of the bend, where the heavy pressure was, created wild boils and whirlpools. A small whirlpool opened up directly in front of the boat and the Jacob's Party passed over it, spinning sideways, they now floated down the river sideways. Correcting course, Taffy peered forward and notice a boil, they struck it and the boat slowed down and rose up, feeling like and elevator going up. This continued for miles, miles of huge sand bars on the slow side, the sun changed position, several barges passed and the water was even more turbulent. Apparently this area was Patriot controlled, since the barges flew the flag and bristled with large weaponry mountings. For each one Taffy rapidly hoisted the
colors high and made sure to smile and wave. The automatic weaponry tracked him, but did not fire. Taffy angled the Jacob's Party into the wake caused by the front end of the barges passing, and then angled into the long rolling waves created by the churning of the huge propellers of the tow boat. The boat lunged up and down, water came splashing over the front deck and sprayed into the air. Taffy was thankful for the cabin, or everything he owned would be soaked.

Taffy continued on. There was no longer a dog to be let off and run. No other people needing to hit land with the shit shovel. The sun was low now, a bridge appeared on the water horizon, a graceful round arch of light green steel. Then another bridge, two triangles rising above a square steel arch. Beyond this Taffy saw a barge emerge as if from the woods to the left and proceed to cross the river, then disappear into the woods again on the right.

“The confluence!” Taffy said, his little used voice rasping. The confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers was in sight. This was not an event to undertake at the end of the day. Taffy aimed the Jacob’s Party for shore near the bridge, imagining that an easy way into town might be found there.
Heading into shore he felt a bump and forward motion stopped, he cut the engine. Stepping forward he put a sounding pole into the water, the grinding of tiny grains vibrated the pole: a sand bar. Only a foot of water here. Taffy took an anchor and stepped off the boat in his wet shoes, walked to shore an wriggled the anchor down into the sand. The beach was gentle, lots of sand bar willows near the water, and black willows further up the bank, with vast opened areas between. A sweet campsite. Taffy slackened off the anchor line and pushed the boat out of the shallows so it was floating again and waited for the current to carry it away from the sandbar. Once over deeper water he reeled in the rope, now feeling safer from the wakes of barges and the possibility of the river level dropping in the night, leaving his boat sitting dry on the sand bar.

Taffy took the folding chair to shore and sat to watch the sunset. What month was it? Taffy had made it to the confluence, the southernmost tip of Illinois. A beach outside the city of Cairo.

It felt good. It felt lonely.

Taffy called to the green stegosaurus on the boat, “We made it! You son of a Pterodactyl! Whoo!” The barges were still out there moving, nobody was bombing them, that was reassuring, at least he wasn’t
near the damn front lines of this asshole fighting. No authority or hostility had yet presented itself. Going into town might be another thing! He would pretend to be a local—definitely not from out of state.

“Fuck it. I want some fresh vegetables. I know they got vegetable markets, everybody eats food, right? Maybe they’ve even got a decent brewer here. I’m going in. Anybody else? Fuck you guys then.”

Taffy strolled thru the willow thickets, there was a path thru the sand, a wide empty spot with only deer tracks. Taffy pushed his bike thru the sand, sometimes riding on top, sometimes digging in like sand does. Sand. Why wasn’t she here. Screeching with that horrible singing with the headphones on. And Darius, he wanted to see the confluence. Two rivers, one person: boring. Taffy made it to the bridge and climbed uphill thru tall grass underneath that steel thing that people had made. There was lots of Goosefoot growing here, with fat seed heads on each one looking like tiny fists, we will grow in your damaged earth! We will spread! Annuals rule! Taffy imagined harvesting the plants and hanging them upside down in a bag, waiting for the seeds to dry and fall. Gregory had told him how to do it, this was the
first opportunity since then. Old Gregory, how was he doing? Probably great.

Taffy stepped onto a rutted road on the right side of the bridge, the large concrete pylons stretched into the distance across a large farm field that lay in the flood plain. Between the old moss covered concrete pylons that supported the road above were small caves, each one a different scene. Taffy imagined the scenes in the hobo jungles that were once underneath. Some of the alcoves had tarp shacks, fire pits, wooden pallet flooring, couches, but all of it seemed to have been long abandoned. Nearing the end of this long elevated road the rutted path he was on sloped upwards and Taffy caught a movement in one of the alcoves from the corner of his eye- two large white tailed deer sprang from under the bridge and pranced away into the fallow field, leaping impressively, bounding madly. Taffy stood watching them in the golden light of sunset until they were halfway across the field when the deer stopped and turned to look back.

“Wow. That scared the crap out of me. They were so close!” Taffy walked up the road wondering if that had really just happened. These things always happened when he was alone, there was no one else to share the wonder with. “But then-” Taffy said to
himself, “if someone else had been here, they might have been babbling some stupid shit and the deer would have heard them and taken off long before we got a chance to see them. Yes, it’s better to be alone. Being alone has advantages. Like, I don’t have to share my food with anyone, I can eat all the fucking donuts.”

Cairo must be full of snacky treats.

At the top of the hill Taffy was at road level to the bridge, and found a parking lot with a sign over a small paved road, “Defiance Park: Confluence of America”. Taffy rode down into the park, warm afternoon wind blowing past, down a long road lined with trees and huge fields of tall grass, random pipes with chains hanging down, the remains of decorative fencing. Swing sets lay unmoving, their seats overtaken and hidden by tall grass. At the far end of the looping road a completely collapsed steel roof lay rusting, in the distance a concrete monolithic structure with stairways to climb. It looked like a tourist attraction gone to hell, so Taffy left his bike on the road which was cracked and sprouting grass from it’s many cracks, and walked towards the thing. Stumbling over something hidden there he looked down to find a quadruple headed water spigot. “Hell yes! I can fill my buckets.” Then he noticed the main pipe to the spigots
had a gaping split, the result of water freezing in the
winter. Somebody had forgot to flush the pipes before
it froze. Taffy had seen that enuf in Minneapolis to
know. For fun he turned the spigot knob to hear the
squeaking sound of defeat. He approached the
monolith, it was some piece of work. All reinforced
cement, built to resemble a boat. Climbing to the top
he saw lots of old graffiti, one compelling piece said,
“The Machine Loves You”. Taffy laughed. He topped
the stairs and looked out at the view: heading down
from the monolith a path went all the way to the water
where the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers joined to make
one big river. They were different colors, Taffy noticed.
The Mississippi was kinda green, the Ohio was brown,
you could see the line go out and eventually disappear
where they blended, making a lighter brown. Taffy
turned back to the graffiti after awhile, thinking about
how Crasstina and Julius used to be a crew and would
go out to hit any government or corporate canvas they
could find. They would already be doing their thing on
this concrete beast, whip out a little squeeze bottle full
of house paint and write in cursive on the concrete
floor. Julius! Where was he now. Crasstina! Was it hard
to hold a baby in one hand while using a can of spray
paint in the other?
Taffy walked down and parted the grass to reach the overgrown pathway to the confluence. He stumbled across a pile of empty beer bottles, thru spider webs down the path to the place where the two rivers did their endless line dance, spinning against each other, spiraling out, a smaller version of the Milky Way galaxy in which it existed.

“How you doing there fella?”

Taffy choked out a surprised noise, looking towards the source of the voice, a hunched over old man sitting on a plastic 5 gallon bucket with a long sturdy fishing pole in his hands.

“You scared the shit out of me.” Taffy said.

The man laughed, “Really? I can’t smell it. Where you from?”

Taffy realized that in this small town he was like a flashing light in the night, there was no pretending to be one of the crowd, “Just got into Cairo, thot I would come see the confluence. I always wanted to.”

“It’s pronounced KAY-ROW. My name’s David.”

“Taffy.”

“Taffy?”

“Yeah.”

“What is that, were your parents hippies?”

“Uh-”
“Anyway, I’m probably one of the only people here that will talk to a stranger. Not a lot left in town. There’s just nothing here. People grow a little garden, catch a few fish. Slow as hell.”

“Aw, that seems pretty nice.”

“Fuck no, what’re you talking about? There’s whiskey, which we don’t have, and there’s women, which we sure don’t got here.”


“No. Nothing biting. Listen, you gotta be careful in town, there’s some desperate folks around, you know, and they’re not OUR people.” David pointed back and forth, “You know, not our kind.” Taffy felt confused a moment, and then realized that David was trying to address him as a white brother.

“Be careful on the west side. That’s where you’ll get one of those fuckers jumping out from behind a bush on your ass. There’s only about a hundred people live here now, most of them just mind their own business. Just watch your back. Not planning on moving here are ya?”

“No.”

“Good. Nothing here. Not even fish.” David jerked angrily on his fishing rod. Taffy turned away from the
old man, away from his booze and hate wrecked brain, and walked out of the decrepit park. Hitting the pavement he took a running jump onto his bike and headed up highway 51 into Cairo. The first interesting sign was a billboard advertising the library. “No way!” Taffy pedaled on, it was a ghost town, apparently almost completely abandoned. A lot of the building looked like they had been abandoned long before the Catastrophe. Some big old stone buildings further on, on the right a National Guard Armory with a Patriot’s flag and a Merdeavion Security flag underneath it flying from a tall pole out front. A lone security officer sat on the back two legs of a chair propped against the building, smoking.

Further down on the left another fancy stone building with some beautiful bushes and trees, statuary and sculpture in the front, and one of the only places in town where the grass had been mowed. Up the steps and behind the glass of the old wooden door was an OPEN sign. Taffy leaned his bike on the bike rack and walked up the stone steps, pulled the brass handle on the old door. The door closed itself behind him and he listened and smelled it, the library was a quiet, good smelling place. The billboard outside of town was correct, this was not a place to be missed.
Inside was packed with sights: glass cases full of tiny historical things, documents, plaques, pictures, paintings, photographs, beautiful woodwork on everything and stained glass windows, luxurious wooden chairs and tables, all looking very old but entirely clean and well maintained. Also, as in every good library, wall to wall shelves full of books.

“Can I help you?” A man approached Taffy, judging by his skin color, this was one of the people the fisherman had warned him about. As Taffy spoke with the man he realized it hadn’t been all that long since everyone had left the boat, but he was talking like he had been alone a long time. He told the librarian his story, and the librarian told him what information he knew and offered the use of the link.

“Let me show you something to take your mind off your troubles.” He pulled some photo books off the shelf and sat down at one of those polished old wooden tables, the perfect height for setting a book on to read, and showed Taffy pictures of Cairo more than a hundred years ago. A shot of people walking across the Ohio River one winter when it was so cold it froze all the way across the top, thick enuf to walk on.

“Look at those people.” Taffy said, “The river must be a mile across right there.”
“That’s about right. Don’t know if I would be so brave if the river froze up like that now. The towboats probably keep it open anyway, the way those engines churn up the water. Now look at this one, the flood of 1937. They built a wall just tall enough to hold the river back. Here at that same spot, hundred of people in the summer watching speed boats racing.”

“Wow. Those boats are wild, just a little wooden hull and a giant engine!”

“And here, imagine those streets out there filled with this parade, people filling the balconies, lining the entire street.”

“What happened?”

“Well, Cairo was founded by the river, the steamboats, it was an important place, the confluence of the river. When the railroads came thru and the steamboat commerce died out, so did Cairo.”

Taffy spent a long time in the library, looking at photos, maps, dictionaries, gazing at the stained glass windows, washing his hands with warm water in the bathroom, warm water! Everything was luxurious. Taffy said good bye to the librarian and walked out with many stories across time swirling in his mind. As he moved about town he could see the history that happened here, history that was still happening. The
civil war fort, the steamboat boom & bust, the railroad boom, the race riots, economic collapse, the floods, The Catastrophe, 2071 people dead, cremated in an empty barge, that was sent downriver. The suicides of friends, relatives, loved ones as the disease tore thru their body. The library had a special room for documents relating to The Catastrophe.

Taffy walked his bike up the empty street, trees growing out of broken windows, open doorways with dirt blown in so grass & weeds grew, forming a new living carpet for the floor which oozed into the street. Piles of bricks lined the sidewalks, the collapsed facades of buildings. This town was decrepit long before the Catastrophe, and now it seemed to have gotten the final push. If that library stays open, there could be nothing else here, and Taffy would still come visit.

(ninety-five)
It was dusk now and a few street lights turned on as Taffy strolled up to the grocery store, a Super Value store, the giant red sign was dark. Inside he found one worker attending one isle of items, the rest was blocked off by unused shelves and seemed to have
been turned into some kind of community center. Four people in this space were learning dance moves from an instructor. Three children jumped on a tiny trampoline in the corner by the windows. Taffy collected some vegetables from the cooler, some with insect bites and worm holes. It was great to see actually, knowing that the plants hadn't been doused in chemicals so that a bug would never go near them. Knowing that the slightly damaged fruit or vegetable wasn't thrown into the trash. Nobody in the old world would have bought a piece of food that an insect had taken a visible bite from. Nothing appeared perfect anymore. The illusion was gone. Nobody ever smiled and said Have a nice day. Taffy took his selections to the clerk, “Afternoon!”

“Hey.” the clerk rang up his food and he handed her the card, she swiped it and waited.

“Says declined.” she said, “You got another?”

“No. That's it. The Patriot starter card, should be good for another month at least.”

“Starter card? Where you been, out in the hills? I can't believe they're still giving those out. Where was this issued?”

“Missouri.”
“Oh shit. There was some computer virus attack, Patriot cards only work in the state they were issued from.”

“Oh damn. A virus. That’s ironic, after what all we’ve been thru. Godamn virus even in the computers now.”

“ Seriously. Probably the same people that’s blowing up the trains. Crazy assholes with nothing better to do. So anyway, if you can’t pay and you need some food you should try the charity down the street, 119 Washington Street. Go down there right now they might still be open.”

“Okay, I’ll try that. I can try my Patriot card on the Missouri side of the river eventually, cause I’m traveling by boat.”

“Out on THAT river? And with the way things are going? You’re a brave soul. You run into any crazy people?”

“Not yet.”

“You all by yourself?”

“Yep. Had some friends with me, but they went back to St. Louis when they heard about the trouble.”

She looked at him a moment, “I think you may be a little crazy. But crazy good maybe. Listen, I just put some crates out back with donations for the charity,
you go back there and help yourself. Don’t let anyone see you, alright? Some people get riled up easy about the dumbest things.”

“Thanks a lot.”

Taffy headed out back and found the crates by the dumpster, picked out some loot and bagged it in a cloth pillowcase that he brought: cabbage, collard greens, stale loaves of bread, some cold fried chicken.

“Dinner coming up!” Taffy slung the bag over his shoulder and headed round the corner, directly into the sight of a Merdeavion Security patrol car cruising down the alley. Taffy strolled along as tho everything was fine and picked up his bike to ride off, the cruiser flashed its spotlight on him and then the reds came on.

“Put the bike down.” an amplified voice came over a loudspeaker. Taffy dropped the bike and put the loaded pillow case down. The cop got out of his car and approached.

“Do you have any weapons on you?”

“No.”

“Let’s see some ID.”

Taffy handed over the patriot card.

“So what are you doing out here today?”

“Just getting some food to eat.”

“From the dumpster?”
“Yeah. My card doesn’t work here because it was issued in Missouri.”

“Missouri?” the cop looked down at the plastic, frowning, “Why did you pick this place here?”

“Uh-” for a moment he wondered about insulting the cop’s intelligence, but he said it anyway, “Because it’s a grocery store and they have food.”

The cop just nodded.

“I’m gonna run your ID. Wait here.” he got in his car and Taffy stood there waiting for the investigation to be completed. The cop returned, “Okay. You can go. Throw the bag back in the dumpster and don’t come back here, you’re not welcome.”

Taffy took his ID back and then tossed his bag into the dumpster, got on his bike, and rode off down Washington. The cop zoomed past him and pulled into the Armory garage down the road. Taffy turned around and returned to the Super Value, grabbed his bag from the trash and stuffed it quickly into the milk crate basket on the back rack, then rode back towards the river on a side street to the east. Out of town on the highway, past Defiance Park, down the rutted road and pushing the bike up the sandy beach. Seeing the Jacob’s Party floating there put his mind at ease and Taffy began to relax. Food and shelter re-united, a
couple of the basics of home. Where was the love? Nothing but self love at this point. Or: the love of cole slaw and collard greens and fried chicken.

Taffy sat down on the folding chair and rolled a smoke, looking out at the river, thinking: “No more money except in Missouri. Okay. Maybe just smoke only 3 cigs a day. Conserve. Plan it out. Budget. This would still work. It was still working. People can adapt to anything. Which is also what's fucked up about people. Maybe we should stop adapting and start resisting. That might get you killed tho. Some of the resistors would get killed. The rest would get freedom. Such a rip-off for those killed! Screw that. Adaptation it is. Return to dumpster diving, it's kinda fun anyway, a rush, getting away with your bag of loot! Collard greens upside your head! I'm thinking too much again.”

Taffy inhaled leisurely and gazed up and down the beach, the black willows, young ones, had tufts of shredded bark stuck in their lower branches, looking like heads of hair, little decoration left by the flood waters as the rising river partied it's way downstream. A piece of driftwood hung on a dead branch thru a knothole that the water had slid on there like an
engagement ring. Festive! This was a good place. There were good people in this town.

* * *

Taffy returned to Cairo the next day after cleaning out the nasty rotting material at the bottom of his ice chest and carefully packing in the new arrivals from the Super Value. He went to the charity on Washington Street and asked about food, “We used to have a food shelf, but now it’s just dried up, no donations. If you can do work trade, then Mr. Caruthers will give you a crate of vegetables from the gardens. Let me tell you how to find him.”

Taffy strolled a few blocks to the large plot of land where it seemed houses used to be, they had been leveled and the bricks used to make raised beds for food crops. A man was reclining in the shade of a tree when Taffy arrived.

“Hello! Mr. Caruthers?”

“That’s me.”

“They sent me here from the charity on Washington. My name’s Taffy.”

“Ah huh. What do you think of our vegetables here? It’s harvest time! Aren’t they gorgeous?”
“This is a beautiful place. I can’t even see the
ground through all those collards!”
“You looking for some food? I could use some help
right now.”
“Point me in the direction!”

* * *

Taffy helped Mr. Caruthers pick, clean, and can a
whole lot of tomatoes of six different varieties, “Now,
check this out Taffy: tomatoes are high in acidity, so
we don’t have to use the pressure caner, we can just
use the water-bath method.”

Taffy was stoked to be learning something new.
Canning! His grandmother had canned food back on
the farm, it was a childhood memory. Mysterious glass
jars with strange two part lids. Taffy thot: Damn, it
wasn’t that hard either, we could have been canning
dumpstered vegetables instead of watching them rot
because we couldn’t eat them all. But oh yeah, we were
ignorant of grandma’s wise style, too busy getting
wasted to think about intelligent things.

“The acidity will keep the bacteria and
microorganisms from growing and spoiling your
food.”

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“Nice.”
Mr. Caruthers had a whole brick building for his
garden with all his tools and processing equipment set
up on long tables and hanging from the walls, from the
rafters hung large amounts of drying herbs, sometimes
wrapped in a fabric gauze to keep the dust off, some of
the plant bundles had white sheets tied on them like an
upside down parachute to catch the seeds as they
dried and fell.

“And those are Goosefoot plants there, right?”
“I’ve heard them called that, everyone here calls it
Lambs Quarters.”
“Must be a northern thing.” Taffy said.
“Yeah, here we dry em out, catch the seeds, and
throw those around next year! One of my favorites,
you don’t have to water, don’t have to weed- cause it IS
a weed! They love to grow and it tastes just like
spinach. I love all this. Now that I don’t have to work
and pay rent, phone bills, satellite tv, blah! All that. I’m
free, I can just grow food and feed my friends and love
it. Sometimes I trade vegetables for things I need, and I
don’t need much, so it’s great. Sometimes I wonder-
what if I had a bad crop? What if some bugs ate it all
up! That little bit of worry is a lot better than working
under somebody else for money.”
“This is an awesome way to live.” Taffy said, “I was helping out with some gardens in St. Louis. People there were doing the same thing.”

“You can do it too. People everywhere are doing it. Survival! As far as I can tell, this is the way things should be. Simple. It was taken away from us and now we got it back. We gotta hold onto it.”

A woman walked in the open doors of the building, carrying a box, “Got the lids and jars in the mail. They shipped them on a barge, can you believe that? No wonder it took so long.”

“This is my partner in crime, Mrs. Takebaum.” Mr. Caruthers said, “I’m an old man. She moves a lot faster than me. Really mostly what I do around here is water the plants and chase off the deer by sitting in that chair under that tree over there, whistling my songs, organizing the work trades. Best job I ever had!”

“Hello, my name’s Taffy, I’m here to help!”

“Well it looks like yer gonna need these jars. Thank you for helping out young man, there is plenty more than the two of us can do in a day, and we have three other garden plots on the west bottoms. We’ll probably be harvesting down there this week. You gonna be around?”
“Hard to say, I just got here! I’m just going down the river on a shanty boat.”
“Going down the river! Where you headed to?”
“Up until yesterday I was headed here, and here I am! I’m just hoping to make friends, learn things, and be happy.”
“Well alright then.”

(ninety-six)
Taffy stayed there for a week, helping with the harvest and meeting people, exploring the town. He climbed onto the roof of Mrs. Takebaum’s house and repaired a section of roof where the shingles had been ripped off during a hard wind. The boat was soon stocked with canned vegetables and dried venison from a hunter that lived in town. Taffy helped the hunter with repairs to his truck. From reports abroad it seemed the conflict was escalating around the country and world, none of it had reached Cairo. The little Merdeavion post remained quiet and the employees were bored, but the dumpster at the Super Value store was 100% secure. Officers would accost Taffy on the street and harass him about signing a contract. It got to be a running joke. Taffy imagined that they must get some kind of
bonus if they convince someone to enlist. Once he saw a few young folks signing up, wanting to escape the small town that had shrunk unbelievably smaller. Taffy wanted to enlist them in the freedom of the river, but it wasn’t an easy sell. Build a boat, find a boat, equipment, all the uncertainties, the idea intrigued everyone he talked to but the execution seemed daunting. Merdeavion offered instant teleportation to excitement and glory, moral righteousness, the right thing to do. Defend the re-union. In a town that was almost born out of the first civil war hundreds of years ago, this was their time to shine. They went. Gardens were abandoned and the people that remained took over. People still had to eat. Amid all the far away killing, people still had to go on living.

This is what interested Taffy: the eating. Taffy loved to eat all kinds of things and trying any new dish or treat that seemed survivable. Eating involved some amount of killing too, but in what war have you heard of soldiers eating each other? It would make much more sense if they did, so that all that meat wouldn’t be wasted. Joining with a hierarchic system to go and kill whoever the leaders pointed their fingers at didn’t seem like a good thing for anyone. All to figure out who would be at the top and calling the shots for the
next reign of state terror, and some asshole always ended up on top, so why bother? If someone came into the vegetable patch and tried to steal the food you needed to survive, then you might have to fight them. That was a whole different thing. That would be homeland security. There's no security in volunteering to be a puppet.

Sitting on the boat one evening after partaking in a barbeque pig roast in Mr. Caruther's backyard, Taffy sat drinking a peppermint tea that a local had dried and packed for barter. The flavor was encompassing, and he gazed at the water flowing by. A strange sound came from the cabin of the Jacob's Party, sounding like a bird that might have flown in and gotten stuck. Taffy got up and opened the door, now they loud sound was coming from a storage cabinet, and he followed the noise, digging thru clothing, and at last holding in his hand a small phone.

“What the fuck! This is Sand's.”

The phone continued chirping.

“I despise these damn things.” he said to the phone, then he opened it and put it to his ear.

“Hello?”

“Jesus! Taffy! Is that you?”

“Yeah. Hey, you left your phone on my boat.”
“Aaarghh! Fucking finally! I thot my phone was at the bottom of the god damn river! I've been calling for days!”

“You fucked up. What am I supposed to do Sand, mail this thing to you? How's St. Louis? Are Crasstina & Mayga alright? And Darius?”

“Everything is awesome as usual.”

“I was sitting here drinking peppermint tea and contemplating the beauty of life when this fucking thing goes off like a time bomb and suddenly I am reminded of the fact that my friends are not here. And you know what? Now I'm sad.”

“Okay Taffy, I know all about the weird mines in Africa and the water pollution and all the other gross shit that goes into making a phone. I left it on your boat for a reason. So that we could know if you were okay. So we could get a hold of you and come back down to be on the boat if this shit blew over. Why? Because we love you. Will you please keep the phone charged as a favor to us?”

“That's so sweet. A phone. Suddenly I don't feel pissed anymore. But wait- if I keep this phone, then you will buy another phone, and then I will be a participant in this heinous techno-capitalist crime!”

“Taffy. I already bought another phone.”
“Fuck! God dammit! Alright. I’ll do it for love. It was meant to be. When we meet again I will give it back to you.”

“Great. By then I will have probably dropped my new one in the toilet or something.”

“It’s good to hear from you.”

“We worried about you, Taffy. Things are crazy, they’re kidnapping people off the streets here again, it’s doubled. People are talking wild shit. Seems like the new military is still sexist tho, because they mostly grab young guys.”

“How do they get away with that shit?”

“It’s not actually Merdeavion or any other corporate military doing the kidnapping, it’s these groups of thugs, sub-contractors, organized criminals really. Somehow they blackmail people, or threaten to harm their family, or just brainwash them with the Patriot thing, sometimes offering cash bribes, and then if the soldier dies they just take the money back and offer it to the next chump. There’s a lot of stories flying around and none of them are good.”

“Wow. I’m in Cairo, it’s real small, mostly older people. Haven’t heard anything like that. There’s Merdeavion people here tho, always trying to get me
to enlist. They must get some huge bonus, why would they give a shit?"

“Oh yeah, they get the option of exiting their service contract earlier or they get an immediate cash bonus. Compared with the kidnappings, the Merdeavion harassment seems legitimate. We’ve been doing organizing here, patrols on the street, baiting the kidnappers, trying to draw them out so we can beat their asses. If we make our neighborhood hood hard for them they will just go to another neighborhood and do it there, so we are trying to organize city wide, share information, and on the link with people in other cities too, sharing tactics and strategies. It’s a lot of work. I think sometimes, maybe I should just get the fuck out, you know. I didn’t survive this long just to become a casualty of someone’s greed scheme.”

“Please be careful, Sand. You know doing work like that makes you even more a target than a young guy walking down the street. You gotta pay attention, all the time, aware of your surroundings and everything that’s going on. If you feel like you can’t do it anymore or your intuition tells you something’s wrong, get the fuck out! Come on down here and get on the boat. Cairo is very relaxed. People just work on their
gardens here, and hunting for food, it's way out of the mainstream."

"Yeah, always good to have an escape plan."

"And bring everyone else to. If we need another boat, we build another boat."

"Alright. So Cairo is good?"

Taffy told her more about it.

"Damn, maybe we should blow out of here. That's tempting. We've gotta play our part tho, it wouldn't be right. From the day we got back here we jumped right into the middle of organizing this resistance. The Patriots aren't doing shit about it, cause it benefits their fight. We're on our own. And all these friends and families wondering where their people have gone, I can't abandon them, it's like the Catastrophe all over but there's a possibility we can bring the people back or stop more of them from going away, it feels like we can fight it! It's not just a few people, this entire city is ready to rise and kick some ass."

"Alright. If you decide to get out, you can catch the mail and shipment barge down at the river. The train lines are shut down from the bombings and trucks are refusing to drive because there have been highway attacks. So actually, staying in St. Louis might be about the same as going abroad right now. I guess I landed in
a pretty sweet spot, but there’s only a few hundred people in this area, I always feel like I’m someone’s boyfriend at their family reunion, I’m the stranger hanging out at the buffet table, munching down food. The living is easy here, but I can’t stay forever. That boat is down there tied to the trunks of willow trees, and it wants to go, I’m sitting on it right now as I talk to you and I can feel the current pulling us down. It wants to go, I want to go, and some day we will go. Screw what the rest of the world is doing. This is what I’m doing. They can all blow themselves to hell, I’ll make a note of it in the ship’s log.”

Sand laughed, “Alright, I gotta go Taffy. I’m watching Mayga for Crasstina right now, and I think it’s time for a change, you know what I mean?”

“Have fun!”

“See you soon Taffy. We love you!”

“I love you! Tell Crasstina.”

“I will. Bye.”

“Bye.”

(ninety-seven)

In the harvest hustle I forgot a few essentials. This morning on a beach south of Cairo by 29 miles, I lit a
fire with the one match left. One match. Usually it only
takes one match with a good nest of shredded papers,
but when you only have one ancient haggard match
from the Ritz-Carlton Hotel, out of what used to be
someones prized match book collection, I was under
pressure. Without tea water- just put the tea leaves
between cheek and gum? Suck on dry coffee grounds?
In one fluid motion I struck the match and the end of
the stroke was under the newspaper. Flame jumped
up! I had a tasty beverage. The sun rose right in my
face as I stare at the east bank where towboats went up
and down the river all night, splashing little waves on
shore, waking me up, rocking the boat. I always wake
up a little when it moves a certain way, feeling like the
anchor came loose or the rope broke or the water rose
wildly in the night. Usually just open my eyes and look
out the windows at the opposite shore, is it moving?
Last night the angle of light from the the moon, and
drift back to sleep, feeling the comforting thump of the
pontoons on the sandy shore.

There’s a strange oil oozing out of the beach here,
this whole island was dumped here by a dredge
keeping the channel deep enuf for the barges. Maybe
they sucked up a barrel of oil, or there’s a bunch of
buried oil cans under there, who knows what shady
corporate/government shit was going on now that most of the watch dog groups were gone. A couple of people making a lot of money at the expense of everybody else.

The island is tucked between two huge wing dams like small mountain ranges jutting from the bank, and the boat is angled upstream, pushed by the backwards swirling current here on the opposite side of the deep sailing channel.

I also forgot tobacco. I definitely will be cutting down. No way to light them anyway. New Madrid downriver 15 miles, who knows what waits, I've never been there. No one I had met in Cairo had been there either.

Yesterday after leaving Cairo I decided to stop at a beach and explore. I ran out of gas thru some miracle at the perfect moment and drifted down into a large cottonwood jutting from the bank, having fell into the river during some high water erosion of the bank, but still rooted enuf to remain. A branch of the tree jammed right thru the starboard side window, thrashing the wood frame and scratching the rafter inside like King Kong groping for the beautiful woman. I yelled at the tree. Then I took a bow saw and cut off the limb that had snagged me, then pulled
myself closer to shore along the huge trunk of the cottonwood like it was a marina dock.

That night the mosquitoes came out to keep me company, with no matches or lighters, and no motivation to rub sticks together, I had no sanctuary by the fire. They bled me like an ancient physician. They rejoiced in the broken window on the Jacob’s Party. By the time I had the window screen patched up they were all mostly inside the boat, so I stepped out and locked the door on them. They must have alerted their friends and neighbors about the big feast, since I soon found myself inside an iron maiden of mosquitoes. I went back inside the boat. At least these had already filled up on blood and would be sated or slower moving and easier to kill.

All night a terrible scent of mold assaulted my nose and made me gag, I smelled the patched screen and that was it. The extra screen I had dug up from the bowels of the Jacob’s Party had been wet and cultivating spores. I found some vinegar and with a cloth rubbed the screen. I remembered Billy’s story back in St. Louis, telling me about spores as we sat around smoking from pipes. Billy said a fungus spore was the only living thing that could survive the cold vacuum of outer space, and that there were theories
about life on earth originating from spores that landed here on a meteor! I guess that would make every living thing on earth an invasive species.

The smell of vinegar reminded me of my sisters who used to rinse their hair with vinegar, gave it some kind of shine. I thot about my family, missing from the rosters of the Catastrophe dead, and they hadn’t posted themselves as survivors either. So irritating. Dead or alive, there was no way of knowing, there was no word from the home town. Were they avoiding taxation? On the run? Imprisoned or murdered without record? Was it just an error in the database?

It was years ago when I left them to travel the world. I hardly looked back, I lost touch. It was just me and the world. That was the choice I made, I wanted a different programming than I had received back there, so I went in search of it. And here I am, wondering about the soil my roots used to grow in. My family. I shouldn’t have lost touch for so long, I feel like a bad son sometimes, but what does guilt do for anybody? Whatever disagreements over our government and religion and moral values and economics and food and music and everything else all seem so petty now. I should try and find them. I think being uprooted from Minneapolis where I lived so many years had made
me think about my other homes and families. I have family all over the country, they conspire to have me possess a phone so they can call me to know I’m alright. My blood family, the creators, how can a person be without that, or be without resolution concerning them? To have nothing but a question isn’t right. Find them and accept them for who they are and ask the same from them. I decided to try the research again in New Madrid, and maybe find a possible answer to another question: Where am I going on this river? Home?

(ninety-eight)
Another long bend in the river. Seemed like I was turning the corner for hours. A string of barges pushed thru, like a convoy, Merdeavion people swarming over them like ants. The whole parade tore up the river terribly, a cast iron skillet flew off my stove, my breakfast of potatoes end onions went everywhere.

Then New Madrid, long stretch of wharf, Patriot flags in the wind, a lighted sign with the town’s name. Here was a place that embraced the river. Whatever was beyond that grass covered flood dike should be friendly to the river traveler.
I stuck the anchors in the mud cakes and climbed the bank, climbed the dike, and at the top was a road and a small town on the other side, modest homes, a steel roofed building that had all the steel ripped off by wind. There were no fancy towering buildings to indicate the epicenter of this nest. I walked down to the road below, Water Street, and strolled a block. A fellow riding a bicycle real slow with a red comb stuck in his curly hair, one hand on the handlebars and one on the can of beer in his hand, sipping thru a straw.

“Say there, you know where I can find a store?”
“Yeah. Down this block, on Main Street.”
“So I go this way, and then...”
“Main Street. I’ll go with you.”
“Ah. Alright. Thanks!”
“He rolled alongside slow as I walked, sipping that cheap malt beer. I told him the short version of my story.
“You need a place to stay tonight?”
“No, I sleep on the boat.”
“Need blankets?”
“No. It’s been warm lately.”
“83 degrees today. Wait for that cold to hit. That’s what I’m worried about.”
“Yeah.”
We walked onto Main Street, it headed directly away from the river. There was hardly anyone around, it was Sunday. A metal sign creaked in the wind, and around every wooden power pole a bunch of corn stalks had been tied, the stripped cobs had golden yellow kernels, like shrunken old teeth. The dried stalks and leaves rattled in the wind, and these were the only noises on Main Street.

“Store is right up there.” he pointed, “Take care now.” he pedaled faster.

“Thanks.”

When I got to the store he was coming out of it with a fresh cold one. After putting a new straw into the can of malt liquor he pointed at the store.

“That’s it. I’ll bring a blanket down later if you want.”

“Aw, thanks, I’ve got blankets. All I need is some of what they got in here. Stop by down at the river later if you want, I’ll just be relaxing tonight.”

The man rose his beer up in salute, “Alright. Be safe.”

I went into the Quick Sack convenience store, they had it all. There were shelves with food, a deli, tables by the window to sit at, they even served beer you could drink right there at those tables. I checked the
selection, “You have St. Louis Black! I didn’t know they sold that out of St. Louis.”

The smiling woman at the counter looked my way, “Yep, we got a towboat pilot in the family, picks up merchandise for us after delivering his coal. It’s gotten tough to order stuff from across the state, and forget about importing from the coasts! We’re lucky to have what we got.”

“I’m happy to see it. I’ll take six of those.”

I swiped my card and waited. A negative sign formed on her lips, “Says declined.”

“Oh boy. It should work here, Missouri is the state it was issued in!”

“I’ve been hearing stories about people having all kinds of trouble after that virus attack. They tried to reboot the backup data but you know, computers. Let’s try it one more time and see.” She tried it again, “Nope. Didn’t work. They say it could be weeks before they can straighten it all out. You should call in and tell them it’s not working, grease the wheels you know. Meantime, you have a friend you can borrow their card?”

“That’s the thing, I’m traveling alone on a shanty boat. I’ve never been to New Madrid in my life!”
“On the river? Here.” she pulled a can of the same malt liquor that the kind bicycle guy preferred out of a cool and handed it to me, “Take this beer, drink it, use that link over at the table there, and maybe you can figure out how to make your card work on Patriot site.”

“Wow! Thank you so much.”

“No problem.”

The result was nothing. There was no time line for the restoration of funds, nothing. The system was totally bursted. Broke. I was broke. Being broke changes everything. I had some food. Got some matches from the Quick Sack. I had enuf gas for the motor. I could do more drifting to stretch the gas supply. Everything would be alright. I convinced a man coming into the store to buy a pouch of tobacco for me. On the link I found a note from Franklin, trying to find a way down. Jimmy The Fixer knew of a few transport scams, the slow boat, or a sketchy ride in the back of a Merdeavion supply truck, possibly nailed inside of a shipping crate. I wrote back to Franklin advising that he stay away from Jimmy and don’t try to force it. The time will come.

Meanwhile, I am floating further away. Hill.
Back on the boat I with this beer buzz worked on repairing the window with some screws and split driftwood. It looked good, but not cold weather ready. I tried to play Darius’ cello that I made for him and which he left behind with the notion that he would return. I wasn’t very good with the bow, but I was the only one listening. I awoke later that night, a towboat pulling up to shore, looked like it might land on top of me, they pulled up river and jammed the tow head into shore, a boat with a white light went between, making some crew change, dropping off merchandise perhaps. Ah, merchandise. Without money I felt isolated, so many interactions in a day are about money. Now all I could do was ask about the weather, that was free.

This spot on the river bank, that was free. Apparently nobody wanted it. There was no flag stuck in the soil, no sign advising one to fuck off. Why didn’t folks from town hang out here, it was beautiful. Fear of the wild? This river floods the town, it destroys and kills, it is wild: there are endless bugs, coyotes, spiders and snakes lurking in the drift piles, mosquitoes and mud. Many white people have long viewed the river as the devil’s creation. This spot on the riverbank was not a civilized and well furnished living room. It was
dangerous. There could be a homeless person down here.

From the safety of road at the top of the dike, sometimes from the safety of automobiles, maybe with the window rolled down for extra excitement, they looked down at me and at my strange boat. This shore was the unknown, the depths of the river were unknown, and the unknown is terrifying.

I had to go into town to fill up my water buckets, so I moved the Jacob's Party down to the boat ramp and took the buckets up to a spigot. Hauling two five gallon buckets back to the boat I saw a truck pulling a small boat out of the river. The driver leaned out of the window at me, “That looks like too much work!”

I looked at the new truck and fancy fishing boat, imagining the full time job the guy must be working to pay for this and all the rest of his expensive toys. “Gotta do the chores!” I smiled, “After I get this water down to the boat, I'm done! I'm taking the next week off!”

The boater laughed, then looked forward thru the windshield of his truck, nodding and contemplating his existence. I continued down to my boat.
I woke up on the beach at Tiptonville today. Had a dream I was back in Minneapolis working at the cafe, and my old lover Rhea was there, it was her birthday and everyone was planning a surprise party for her in some glass windowed beautiful complex where she now lived in the future of my dream fantasy. Fountains in the terrarium lobby, huge plants to talk to, she was a gardener before the catastrophe. I was following her around, up the stairs, it was like a musical and sensual like a scene from and Andrew Blake porn film. When I turned around I saw hundreds of people dressed like it was the height of Mardis Gras, some of them were giant animals that may have been costumes or actually real giant animals, everyone’s spirit animal attending the party, all quietly smiling and climbing the stairs in procession. There was Rhea, she had her hair down and a beautiful outfit on, she looked amazing, and I knew she would be so happy that we surprised her on her birthday.

Then my eyes opened to Tiptonville, Tennessee, the east side of the river, comfortably in the shade of the forest.

Yesterday was a blur! Drinking and boating with this fellow named Davey. He was born in Scotland but
now lived in Brooklyn. His Scottish accent was amazingly heavy, I think I understood half of what he said. He showed up on the bank of New Madrid in an orange kayak, a blaze of high energy: “Hey! Have ya got any beers on there?” I was laying on my bunk and the voice was right in my ear, I woke with a shot of adrenaline and needed no caffeine as usual.

“God!” I said, plunging my head up to the screened window, “Where did you come from?”

Davey laughed, “Brooklyn, by way of Scotland!”

I pulled on my pants and invited him onto the Jacob's Party, “No beer, sorry. My plastic identity seems to have been disabled by saboteurs.”

“Terrible. I heard about that. Well, is there a store in town?”

“The Quick Sack, up on main.”

“I'll go pick some up. My card still works. Are you hungry?”

I thot about the hold full of canned vegetables, the 5 gallon bucket of rice, everything that would keep me alive except for culinary boredom. Most people in the world eat the same thing nearly every day. Who was I to lust after luxury snacks.

“No, thanks. I've got some food.”

“What have you got?”

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“Rice, beans, and canned vegetables.”

“Okay so you’re not starving, but I think you’re hungry. I’ll be right back.”

In an hour he returned, which seemed like a long time for a six block walk, but Davey seemed like a person who would easily fall into long conversations with strangers. He was a bouncing ball of energy.

“I got us some sandwiches, tuna fish. And beers, you got a cooler?”

“Oh yeah, thanks! Right over there, under that bench.

Davey dumped the beers into the cooler and took two out, handed one to me, a motion he would continue to repeat all day long. I ate the sandwich and it was the best tuna fish sandwich ever. We drank beer and talked while floating down the river. He had been out on the river a couple weeks, took a train out from Brooklyn going to Minnesota with the intention of starting out at the headwaters of the Mississippi River and going down to the Gulf of Mexico.

“And then: life happens as you try to plan it. The train I was on got bombed! Boom! Not while we were going fast, lucky for us. They evacuated everyone onto buses eventually, after we stood out in this Illinois soybean field of for a long time. They said they
couldn't carry any checked on baggage because nobody was allowed near the train. It was stupid you know, because the bomb went off on the tracks up by the engine, it wasn't on the train, so I snuck around back to the luggage car and found my kayak, it was on top of everything like I thought it would be, and took it to the bus. The driver wasn't having it. He wouldn't even open the bottom to check and see if it would fit. I think he must have been shipping contraband or something, why would you act like that to someone who's train had just been bombed? Right? So I'm standing there, looking around, and I see up the road is a huge steel bridge, and I think: wait! I say to the bus driver, what's that river down there? And he said, that's the Mississippi River. I decided that was close enough. Took my kayak down and dropped in.”

“No way.”

“I figured the whole event was a sign for me, the bomb, the bus, now or never! I got on the water. Once I was out on the river and cruising along, you know, I'm excited, I'm shouting, and then I turn to look back at the bridge and the whole train crew and all the cops and the bus driver and the passengers, all of them standing on that bridge just watching me go! What a
send off. I waved at them and all the kids waved back. I think the adults thought I was crazy.”

“I didn’t find out about the river charts until a few days later, I stopped into a pub and somebody says, you don’t have the river charts? And he sends me off to the library where I printed them out from the link. Not as good as the real charts because if you get these wet the ink runs, and you have this nice watercolor! I found that out the hard way, but I can still read them. Another beer?” Davey reached in the cooler and handed me one.

“Beer in a can! Weird. These are new ones, right, not left over from before the Catastrophe?”

“Oh yeah, seems like everything’s getting back to normal. Cheap beer in cans.”

“I preferred the bottles from the small brewers. You give the bottles back and they put more brew in them. Now, we just end up with trash that’s gotta be melted and thru this whole process before it’s usable again. I grew up with trash, always “throwing stuff out” you know? I guess I’ll get used to it again.”

“Yeah, and when the cheap stuff isn’t re-usable, what can you do? We’re not millionaires, I gotta make it to the gulf and drink beer on the way!”
“You do gotta live.” I said, and opened the can, “Cans do make a good sound when you open them.”

“Yeah but so do bottles, and toasting with cans is a sad sound compared to glass meeting glass.”

We drifted some and motored too, Davey had his kayak tied onto the side and would frequently check over the side to see how much water it was taking on.

We made Tiptonville and ate at a diner, Davey called a lady who had given her number the night before as he left a bar, she stuck it into his hand as he was getting a car ride back to his camp on the river. She told him they could meet in Tiptonville that evening. I was tired, drinking all day, and I lay down after eating some barely cooked white beans. I woke up in the night farting, and heard a soft voice say, “Why do they have so much gas?” and then Davey’s voice said, “There’s just one person on the boat. Must be the beans he ate.” That was my contribution to the party. I would awake from my vivid dreaming to hear them talking late into the night.

(one hundred)

They went separate ways the next day, planned on racing to Caruthersville, 25 miles away. The wind was
mild, the boating good. Davey disappeared around a bend, the kayak being quite a bit faster than the top speed of the old shanty boat. The motor throbbed pleasantly. As Taffy looked out at the sun catching small ripples in the water and shimmering wildly, blinding, he saw two strange things in the water and thot they were ducks. Checking thru binoculars Taffy saw it was the heads of two deer, swimming for the east bank! They turned after seeing and hearing the Jacob’s Party approach. Taffy turned off the engine but they would not resume their course across the bow, so he decided to motor quickly past so they could get where they wanted to go. They swam along side a ways, nothing but their heads above water, they seemed to be turning back towards the shore they had started from. The Jacob’s Party passed them, Taffy strained looking back to see if they made it to shore alright, but he lost sight of them in the glaring light of the lowering sun.

* * *

Next day. Drifting. A towboat passed, heading upstream, and Taffy looked it over. Someone standing at the front of the line of barges, both hands holding
something over his face, 'nockin the Jacob's Party. The
person walked down the line of barges to reach the
towboat in back, went inside the pilot house and
emerged with two other people who also had
binoculars. All three spied the Jacob's Party. Taffy
started to squirm. This was a weird feeling, but it made
sense these days to be cautious. Taffy stood on the
deck waving and smiling. They didn't wave back. Not
even the one-handed binocular wave. Taffy tried not to
squirm under the magnification, his body felt itchy but
he refused to scratch it. The towboat continued
upstream and disappeared around the bend. Taffy let
out his breath. Then a high pitched whine came over
the water, an outboard motor, upstream. Taffy turned
to look, and there it emerged from around the bend, a
speedboat. Taffy thot of the days with Louise, hauling
the canoe up out of the water to hide. There was no
way to do that now.

As the boat neared Taffy took out the binoculars he
had scored from that mansion on the bluff, binoculars
that once looked down to record each passing boat of
interest. He focused in, the boat was up on plane,
hauling ass, for a moment it turned to the side and
Taffy caught sight of the people on it- it looked like the
people from the tow boat that just passed! Had they
dropped something in the water? Taffy turned in a circle, scanned the water. Taffy whipped the binoculars from his face, there was nothing floating here except the Jacob’s Party. He hooked the speedboat again, and it was much closer. A man could be seen on the prow, holding the railing with one hand, holding an automatic rifle in the other. He wore a helmet and what seemed to be a bullet proof vest with a golden crucifix painted roughly on it.

“This is what Gregory was talking about!” Taffy thought, and he froze with indecision thinking about the drawer where he kept the gold cross mounted on a chain to wear in the role of True Believer should the need arise. That single costume accessory seemed a very thin shield between his body and death. Taffy doubted his acting ability and his face flashed hot and blood surged in his ears: adrenaline was available.

“Fuck!” in his mind Gregory’s face appeared, like a guardian angel, issuing instructions. In this situation, do this. Okay! Taffy grabbed a coil of rope and rapidly tied anything that would float to it’s full length, empty jugs, a life jacket, a wooden oar. He looked out the back of the boat, it was time: he threw one end of the floating rope off the starboard side, and the other end off the port side, and then he pull started his little long
tail engine and set the throttle wide open. He watched the rope boom line floating behind while tying a rope to the rudder of the Jacob's Party so it would sail on a straight course. He hid in the cabin and 'nocked the speedboat thru a window. It reached his floating rope, avoided hitting the floating objects, passing between them. Taffy held his breath. Something like a prayer he visualized the rope, held up by an empty plastic gallon jug and a wooden oar, sliding under the hull of the boat and meeting the rapidly spinning propeller, twirling around the propeller shaft and jamming it until the engine died or the sheer pin broke. Thru the 'nocks Taffy watched with unblinking eyes. The speedboat pitched violently forward and the man with the gun flew from the front of the speedboat like a comic book superhero, Taffy could read the fanatic's lips as he took the Lord's name in vain a moment before plunging into the river. A wave of foaming water from the previous momentum of the speedboat washed over his bobbing head as it returned to the surface.

Taffy whipped the 'nocks from his eyes, “Praise the Lord!” Taffy returned to the 'nocks: There were three men, one fished out the man who went overboard. The pilot of the boat pulled the outboard engine up to see
the damage, then he picked up a rifle and took aim.
Taffy dropped the ’nocks and his the deck. Bullets
shattered every window of his cabin, glass mason jars
full of tomatoes rained down on his head, followed by
a water fall as the contents of his five gallon water
bucket spilled out thru large holes and returned to the
river. There was a pause in the hail, the fanatic must be
re-loading. Taffy scurried to the engine deck and
ripped the rudder to a new course so that the canoe
was now on the downstream side, shielded from the
fanatics by the Jacob’s Party. Laying low in the canoe
he jammed the choke and pulled the recoil on the
Johnson Evinrude 3 horse attached to the transom of
the canoe, and roared to life. Taffy cut the ropes with a
knife and the canoe shot away from the old heavy
shanty boat. At full throttle he lay as low as possible in
the canoe, looking back to keep the Jacob’s Party as a
shield. If he did it right, they would never even see
him. More bullets hitting the boat, passing thru the
plywood, hitting the water around the canoe and
sending sprays of water on his face. A thud on the
canoe, a sound of metal hitting metal, the Johnson
Evinrude took a hit. The bottom of the canoe, where
Taffy lay, began slowly filling with water.
My canoe went down just before a ten foot tall wing dam. I swam for that long pile of rocks, avoiding the suction off the current at the end of the rocks where the current swirled into a whirlpool. It would be fun in a canoe, but terrifying to a swimmer. I haled myself out on the white boulders and climbed over the top to the downstream side, hoping to avoid being seen if they followed, and I ran along the rocks and the sand until safe among the black willow saplings of the true shore. Safe. I squatted down in the fading light and tried to control my breathing so that it didn’t sound like a freight train, and held my pounding head in my hands. My body vibrated. I heard things thru my ears in a different way, listening for the slightest sound of an outboard engine approaching. The sound never came, I never moved. The canoe was down, sunken from sight, my foot prints on the rocks left no impression, the trunks of the trees and bushes hid me, there was nothing to murder me except mosquitoes. I moved my hand slowly and brushed them off, avoiding the great noise a slap would make. Each bite increased my anxiety. I smelled smoke. Thru a tiny gap in the leaves I could see the river, and there was smoke out there,
and then I watched as the Jacob's party came drifting down, engulfed with flames, it burned and floated away. The speedboat floated down too, the pilot clearing the rope from the prop, the other two men scanning with their 'nocks. The sun was going down, soon they would have nothing to see. Time was not moving for me. I heard the outboard engine start, and then move away, then come back up river, then down again. Six times. Then when it got dark they went back upriver and didn't return. I was crashing from adrenaline, nodding out from the exhaustion, I wanted to sleep but the mosquitoes wouldn't allow it. In the darkness I crawled out to the beach and lay down beside a giant cottonwood log that had been deposited there by high water. My eyes closed and I slept for a time that felt measured in seconds. I woke with a jolt hearing some night bird and that was it. I had to get the fuck away from that place, they might return in the morning, or sooner, with night vision goggles. I rolled up and noticed the mangled body of an Asian carp there, massive coin sized armor scales, the brutal looking bony spines of it's fins and tail, wide eyes and gaping mouth, an amazing creature with no natural predators in the Mississippi basin except humans, and most people didn't like the smell of them, had to wear
gloves to clean them. The carp's body had been chewed by something that left dog-like paw prints in the sand around it, a scavenger after having washed up dead on shore.

There was an impenetrable swamp further back in the woods, I walked along the beach looking for an exit. I figured I was on the same side of the river as the nearest town, Caruthersville, on the Missouri side, so that was good, unless it was occupied by fanatics.

I walked and climbed of drift piles, waded thru shallow water and at last saw a barge facility ahead, the square steel hulk of a barge docked there. Another sat up in a dry dock, having been repaired and waiting to be dropped back into the river to continue a life of being filled up and then emptied out. Everything looked rusted and abandoned, the weeds were high, nothing had been moved in a long time. I walked on, following the road out of that facility, which was now more a trail thru the black willow that were spread onto the road. The road followed the river closely.

For a moment I considered what to do if Caruthersville had been over run with fanatics. I had been to some good christian soup kitchens with delicious baked mostacioli, and the damn Patriot benefit card wasn't even working anymore. Maybe the
fanatics had some new membership deal I could hop on. What, maybe have to listen to a sermon fake praying for a minute? Easy enuf. The problem was lack of information. So far all I knew about the fanatics was they killed everybody who wasn’t them. Sounded a little too exclusive. I mean, give a person a chance to be born again before you kill them, right? I listened to my intuition, had been trying to do that more since Louise pointed out the fact that I had that magical ability, like probably most people but not everyone paid attention to the inner voice. Well it didn’t take a lot of intuition to tell that those fellas on the boat had it out for me, they could smell a heathen queer anarchist a mile away.

I walked on, coming to a huge grain silo complex with a barge facility on the river, it was completely silent, so strange for such a place usually filled with the noise of large fans and engines and slamming metal doors, wretched high pitched noises that residents and workers seemed to become adjusted to and not even notice anymore, but after work the liquor store offered a solution to the terrible silence. The clouds of dust and chaff spit forth from the auger tubes, blown on the wind down Main Street. The whole thing was silent and unmoving, but walking
under those steel and concrete skyscrapers of the Midwest, I sneezed. A park opened up right next to it, what a place this must have been, a park right next to a huge grain processing facility. Further down beyond the park a couple of fake paddle wheel boats that were surely casinos before the Catastrophe. What an odd town, this place has seen some changes, I thot. Then I noticed a motion ahead thru the the gate in the flood wall under the massive ramp that led people to the machines in the casino that swallowed their money in return for flashing lights and noises and the hope of winning big.

What had I seen? I stopped and stepped into the shadow of a large tree on the edge of the park, watching thru a break in the dike. A head appeared, then a body and four legs. Then two more beside it. Another pack of dogs gone feral, a collection of mutts seemingly of all shapes, colors, and sizes. Town dogs this time, too many to count. A skinny golden dog smiled and wagged it's tail as it lagged behind the pack. A tiny dog at the front seemed to be high up on the chain of command. What a great adventure they were on, just roaming around, scavenging, not taking orders from people anymore. A big dog at the front noticed me and stopped to stare. Then it let off with a
fusillade of barking that raised the hair on the back of my neck. My amusement at the sight of this pack quickly faded. I noticed how thin they looked as the hungry dozen turned in my direction. What did they live on in this dried up town? Had they run out of bunnies and rats and mice and dead fish down by the river? I thot of making a dash for high ground, up a tree maybe, then I remembered that Food Runs. I grabbed two fist fulls of tall weeds growing in the park and held the clumps out to the sides, now it looked like I had the biggest paws in the world. I advanced towards them slowly. The lead dogs stopped their advance, then seemed to decide that I was a bad thing. They turned and left. I continued walking, passed thru the break in the dike where the dogs had come from. Now on the bank of the river I saw the wreckage of a storage area from the casino boat, a gazebo that had large driftwood logs piled around it on the upstream side, white plastic chairs stuck in tress at the high water line, a dumpster that seemed to have floated for a short while like a barge before crashing into a maintenance shack under the bridge which connected to the securely moored casino boats. Everything was dark. The city gave off no light aura into the night sky, nothing but stars, the city had been returned to
country. It seemed there had been no one here since
the Catastrophe. This was Caruthersville? I looked for
a sign proudly proclaiming it. There was one, on the
bank. Caruthersville seemed like it had been bustling
once, lots of banks downtown, money from the
casinos.

I went to the big metal dumpster and climbed the
ladder to reach the elevated ramp leading to the casino
boat. I strolled down the quiet carpet to the doors of
the big multi-level boat. The entrance doors were
locked, but made of glass. In a maintenance closet I
found some duct tape and taped one of the windows,
then smashed it out with a metal chair, with the duct
tape it only made a dull thud and the safety glass
collapsed inwards. That was one of Gregory’s lessons,
he never said how he learned that.

I stepped thru and my ears were alive, the carpeted
floors made the interior perfectly quiet. I explored the
hallways and open rooms with my red LED light, but
didn't feel so worried about anyone outside seeing the
light since there was not a single window in the place,
the casino was a perpetual party night.

I laughed at myself on reaching the back of the
boat by the kitchen, there was a door there that was
wide open and there were signs of the dog pack,
scratches on the wood as they searched for food, blood stains and small body parts of rats that had been feeding on grains left by the casino cooks. I closed the door and locked it.

The kitchen pantry had it all. The rats and the dogs didn’t know how to operate the can opener. I cracked a big can and dumped the contents into a pot. There was a portable propane burner in the kitchen storage room, I took the whole mess deeper into the boat and set up kitchen on the blackjack table, figuring the scent of food would be trapped inside the casino and wouldn’t attract anyone. I ate hot beef stroganoff. Not bad coming from a can. The insanity of the situation struck me as I sat on the fancy leather upholstered high backed bar stool at the blackjack table, but the food took hold and calmed me. I found a bag and selected some road food from the pantry just in case I had to make a fast escape. I traded out my wet clothes for some found in a staff locker, black pants and white button up shirts for the shit workers of the Lucky Lady Casino. I hung my wets to dry.

I explored the casino, now properly fed and clothed. The silent machines and empty chairs seemed to resonate with the manic energy that once flowed there.
I crossed thru a tunnel to the second boat, it was 
more than a barge with a box casino built on top, this 
was a real boat, it actually had diesel engines and a 
pilot house on top. I sat in the pilot’s chair looking out 
from that tall vantage point over the quiet night river. I 
considered trying to fire the thing up, continue down 
the river with the beast, in search of a crew. Start our 
own country perhaps, throw all the mechanical bandits 
over the side and open a community soup kitchen, and 
everyone would love each other. Probably be hard to 
shove up on shore and then run down to tie up the line 
by myself, but that’s where everyone else could help. I 
got hungry again and went down to the kitchen, found 
a can of mustard sardines and opened it, sat outside 
that back door eating. A little furry face appeared 
around the port corner of the deck, a little dog with a 
curious look, it’s ears perked at me. The dog stood 
there and watched as I lifted a sardine from the can to 
my mouth, it’s eyes followed my hand back to the can. 
I didn’t recognize this one, wasn’t one from that pack. 
An outcast. I held up a sardine in it’s direction, and 
looked it in the eyes, tossed the fish in it’s direction. 
The dog rounded the corner to eat it. An old friend of 
the chef’s maybe.
“Hey Chef! How you like that? Too spicy? You like the fish, eh?"

Chef’s head cocked, ears pivoting. I opened another can, tuna packed in oil, dumped the whole thing on the deck between us. Chef lowered her head and carefully approached, keeping his eyes on me, she stepped up to sniff and then ate the whole thing in seconds. I fed her another can and then stopped, the dog was so hungry for good food that she would probably keep eating until it all came back up.

“Little chef!” I got up and went into the kitchen, put out a bowl of water for her. She curled up on the deck and we both sat looking out at the water, the moon, the dark line of trees on the shore, the rocky spine of a wing dam that formed the cove where the big boats were moored. Chef seemed happy, I guess something that shares food with you is usually not bad in the animal world, excluding humans, who will feed you the best meal you ever had in your life and then execute you. This dog had intuition, it found me there and liked the way I smelled. I felt heavy and lay down on the cold metal deck. When I awoke the sun had started to touch the eastern thigh, and a low deep red spread over our world. My body was cold except the side where Chef had moved up in the night to curl up
next to me. Feeling her body there, the warmth, the touch, something happened to me. I cried silently, the warmth of that dog's acceptance of me spread thru my body and the warmth flowed out of my eyes like there was too much to contain. How long had it been since someone held me close?

(hundred-two)
I slept again and when I next awoke Chef was not there. I pushed my aching body upright, squinting at the sun shining down on the aft end of the boat which was facing south. Yesterday had really happened. Just like that. I was happy that none of my friends had been on the boat, I could be grieving their death, or both of us could be flying hand in hand down that long tunnel into the light. Next! Who can say, that is a country I have never been to. Now what. I turned to the open door and stepped inside to see what sort of caffeine might be about. Standing in the dark I heard a terrible growling and froze. “Chef?” I said hopefully, but knowing that evil noise couldn't come from such a sweet dog. I stepped very slowly backwards, onto the open deck. The growling lessened. I picked up an old broom handle laying under the stairs and waited.
“Chef? Come here Chef C’mon Chef!”

Claws clicked on the linoleum tiles of the kitchen floor, and a dog’s head appeared from the door, it was Chef.

“Ah, so this is your place, you’ve been eating all the rats and mice here, and defending the place. You’re a little killer, buddy! You got a nice gig here.” I held out my hand and she sniffed and licked, me and the sardine scent on my fingers. I figured that my dark silhouette in the door frame triggered her defense. We were still friends. “How bout I open the cans and you guard the perimeter, okay?” Chef gave me a little dog smile with the tongue hanging out.

* * *

I was relaxing in the tiki lounge when the boat jolted. My drink hit the floor as I quickly moved downstairs to look out the portal on the starboard door which faced the river. A wild wind was blowing and lines of ominous black clouds were moving in from the east. The storm front must have pushed the big barge into the dock. I had thot it was a boat docking next to us, so I relaxed seeing it was only a possible tornado. Brown leaves flew sideways in the air, rain began to fall, the
sky was dark in all directions. I saw Chef on the deck outside trotting towards the open kitchen door, I met her there and she shook off the water on me, the cold made my skin tingle. It seemed I would be hunkering down in the casino for a bit longer, I had a boat and a friend again, gone from nothing to double in a day.

Chef followed me up to the pilot's house of the outside boat, we watched the storm from behind solid windows with a view in all directions. I played with switches until discovering the auxiliary batteries, flipping some switches I made the radar screen come alive. I looked at the storm in chromatic digital definition. A Midwest thunderstorm. Lightning bolts shot down and flashed multiple shocks to the Earth, Chef didn’t like thunder, so I opened the door and she went below.

After the rain stopped I would leave. I needed a plan. Somewhere to go. Where the fuck would I go from there? St. Louis. How would I get there? Minneapolis. Take a bus maybe. Was there full on civil war now between the Patriots and these mysterious fanatics? I needed information. None of the links on the boat worked, all the frequencies had been altered after the Catastrophe, and this was all pre-catastrophe tech. I dug around the cabinets, found the library of
paper charts, a road atlas of the U.S.A., I scanned the southeast corner of Missouri, the boot heel of the state. Here was Caruthersville. Kinda the middle of nowhere.

“Highway 55 runs north and south here, I could hitch up to St. Louis. Wait- who the fuck is gonna pick up a hitch hiker during a civil war? I needed a truck stop so I could talk to people. And Chef was coming. A terrorist wouldn’t have their dog with them, right. If they didn’t care about me they would care about the dog. People love dogs. Failing this plan, I was going to stow away in a truck’s cargo. Crawl inside a load of culvert pipe or something. The problem with that is, how do you figure where the truck is going without blowing your cover? All the things that could go wrong flooded my mind. I had to let it go. There would be a way. Just one soul with a tiny flame of understanding that we were all one people, all interconnected, that to help ME out would be to help THEM out. That specific person had to be a truck driver heading north on highway 55.
Taffy started walking. The rain stopped in the night and the stars and moon shone thru. He put a rope on Chef and she didn't seem to mind after awhile. They walked thru the dark, silent town, out to grass lined roads where the crickets and cicadas ruled. In the distance: headlights of trucks on the highway.

There was a car on the road ahead, dark, a derelict it seemed, and abandoned auto such as littered the roads these days. As Taffy got within 100 feet a spotlight from it pegged him and he froze.

"Shit."

A car door slammed. A voice came from a loudspeaker, “Drop the bag!” Taffy dropped the sack full of canned tuna and sardines, then held his hands open. Moments later a voice spoke from the darkness next to him, “Keep your hands where I can see them.” Taffy turned and saw the vague shape of a soldier in uniform.

“Dammit. Everyone is always scaring the crap out of me. What are you, a ninja or something? How’d you do that?”

“What are you doing out here? There’s nothing down this road.”
“I was just taking the dog for a walk after the rain and I got lost. I'm just visiting. You like dogs?”
“Walking? Where were you walking from?”
“Listen I'm feeling a little like- you know, who are you with? Who do you work for?”
“I'm a United States Marine son, maybe you've heard of us.” Taffy caught a sight of that particular flag on the shoulder of his fatigues.
“Oh great. Thank god. I mean, the GOOD god, not the BAD god. Okay anyway, I'm happy to see you. I got jumped by these fanatics out on the river, they damn shot my boat out from underneath me. I barely got away! I've got a guardian angel or I wouldn't be standing in front of you right now. I'm damn near ready to sign up with the Patriots and fight against them.”
“That's a hell of a story. In fact, I commend you! Good job. We could use someone with skills like that, you should go sign up tomorrow. You could sign up with Merdeavion and be fighting in a few weeks. The marines will take a bit longer to get thru boot camp.”
“Boy I'm ready. First I gotta get back to my people and get someone to take care of my dog.”
“She's a beauty.” the marine said, “Actually she helped save your life. Me and my patrol buddy have a
Taffy walked back to the car with the marine. The marine who was driving insisted that the dog sit in front. Taffy and the other marine got in the back seats.

“We’ll take you inside the perimeter, to the gas station, and then see what we can arrange to get you out of here.”

* * *

Taffy & Chef were dropped off, the soldiers returned to their patrol. This empty lot was set up as a re-fueling station for the Patriots, the gas station consisted of some bright lights on the generator trailers, and big tanker trucks dispensing fuel. For 3 hours Taffy asked truckers for rides, most looked at him like he was crazy, someone reported him to security. The Merdeavion employee called backup, and the voices of the marines from the checkpoint rattled thru the radio, “You knucklehead! That’s the kid we dropped off there, he’s been cleared. If he doesn’t find a ride by the end of our patrol then we’ll take him outta there.”
The Merdeavion employee told Taffy, “Okay. Keep asking for rides. It's up to the driver if they want to take you, that's in their contracts.”

“Alright.”

A driver who had noticed the episode came down from his cab, “I'll give ya a ride. Going to Little Rock, dropping the load, heading back to St. Louis.”

“That sounds perfect. I wanna get the hell outta here.”

“Nice dog, how old?”

“I dunno. She just found me yesterday!”

“Huh. What's her name?”

“Chef.”

“I got a dog, sweet pit bull.”

Taffy climbed into the truck and they rolled out of the refueling depot into the rain freshened night.

“If you're hungry I got snacks in the back.”

“I love snacks.”

(hundred-four)

Taffy wandered up and down the hills of Little Rock. The few cans of food from the casino were running out, Chef was eating half of it. Taffy found the salvation Army easy enuf, tried the door. Locked. A
fellow waiting out front said they would open in a half hour. Taffy sat on the concrete and waited. The middle of October and it was warm out, nothing but a t-shirt. Up in Minnesota they must be on the second layer of clothes. Taffy thot of Franklin, farther away now than ever. The kind truck driver had been re-routed, he was somewhere in Texas now. Taffy tried the truck stop for awhile and then despaired. Maybe Little Rock could at least refill his empty casino bag. It said Lucky Lady right there on the side. There had to be kindness for strangers somewhere in this town.

The Sally opened, somehow Taffy ended up last in line. After a long while he had his meeting and was told that they only serve families. The case worker gave him a short list of food shelves. Every one was open on weekdays, but this was Friday. Shit. Taffy hit the streets- a grocery store dumpster, anything. For lunch they ate the rest of the cans. Taffy found the corporate fast food strip downtown, soggy fries from the dumpsters, burnt or stale tortillas. A strange cup of fried potatoes with cheese and sour cream which Taffy didn’t share with Chef. One entire discarded beef, bean, and cheese burrito. A couple hot dogs from the gas station trash. Chef got the dogs.
Taffy and Chef walked past the pure white capital
dome with it's golden gilded nipple, wandered down
to the heavily wooded train tracks at the bottom. There
was undergrowth that made it impossible to see more
than 20 feet, nobody would jack him there. Taffy
untied the bundle of corrugated cardboard to make a
mattress out of, laid down on this and slept. In the
night there were strange noises and drunken cursings
out on the road. Several trains roared by, preceded by
a track truck with wild scanning equipment mounted
on the front bumper and whose flatbed was loaded
with soldiers. Seeing this, Taffy dragged his hobo
mattress much further back into the woods.

In the morning Taffy was shaking with dew and
cold, a snail crawled across his shoe, he moved it to the
tree nearby. The sun was shining somewhere, there
was light all around, but no heat in these woods, in
this bottom. “C’mom Chef!” The dog rose and
stretched, shook off the cold and followed Taffy to the
bike trail. Taffy headed away from downtown. There
had to be a better place to drink coffee than
McDonalds, tho you could go into an old Mickey D's
and spend a buck and sit and talk to yourself for hours
and probably be left completely alone. Taffy needed a
place where the sun was shining, the heat for cold toes
and hands, gloves! Gloves would be great. A sleeping bag. Wool socks. Shit. It wasn’t even really cold yet. Taffy walked went until the sidewalk turned to gravel and a pair of train tracks appeared, walked up the stairs there of old iron and concrete built right into the lime stone layers of the hill and climbed up away from the Arkansas River that ran thru the heart of town, up the hill, until the sun shone on his back and it felt like things would be alright. Taffy spied an E-Z mart and stepped in, after typing up Chef to a pole, and straight to the glass coffee pot waiting there like a fat little Buddha. At the counter he handed his card to the man to see what would happen. “Declined. Got another card?”

“No. That’s it.”

“You better get into the service office on Monday and get that figured out. Lotta trouble with the computer stuff now days. Boy, I thought it was confusing before, now! Go ahead, take the coffee, I give you this one free.”

“Thanks a lot!”

Taffy stepped out the door, spied the vast grass and garden area across the street: The Arkansas School for the Deaf it said on an arch over the entrance road. He crossed the four lanes of busy morning traffic.
“God dammit!” it was still a shock to see so many people returned to their mindless driving habits in the post-Catastrophe world, and for Taffy, coming off the river, it was completely disturbing and offensive. For a moment the weeds and shoots from trees took the streets and turned over the pavement, burst thru the cracks and sprouted lush biological cauldrons in the middle of the once bustling intersections. Humanity bounced back: lustful, headstrong, unwilling to learn from past mistakes, adaptable, resilient, in the short term. Perhaps this was just a little hiccup on the way to total extinction, a path we started down thousands of years ago. The corporate government shrugs, what can ya do? Rip off the rear view mirror and paint the windshield black, put the pedal to the floor. Consideration of the 9th generation to come? That’s not a free market. 

Taffy left the road behind for the relative sanctuary of the grass lawn and gardens of the School for the Blind. The noise of the four lane was buffered by a ten foot wide corn fence in the long garden running the length of the road, and behind that a jungle of tomato plants six feet tall, all propped up with sticks and rope to achieve such height. All type of vegetables were grown there, and a vast fenced area where many
chickens ranged. There was no one in the garden at this time of day. Taffy sat on the hill leading up to the school with his coffee warming his hands and body. Chef lay out on the grass as the rays warm her and the grass.

Taffy looked down at the road, and felt his mind flood with thots: So this was the new world, a street clogged with cars? This city had returned to pre-Catastrophe activity. Walking around downtown Taffy had seen a few other like himself, digging for food in the trash. Homeless folks had been unheard of after the Catastrophe, but that wasn’t because society had started accepting them and taking care of them, it was more because there weren’t enuf police to chase them all out of the squatted empty houses. There were still very poor people, and still excessively rich people. Private jets still criss-crossed the sky, and armored convoys transporting chief executive officers rumbled thru neighborhoods where folks grew vegetables in their yards to survive.

The nation had been humbled, but it had not yet learned the lesson. How long did it take Germany to learn from the mistake of the war? Some of them remain ignorant, and teach their ignorance to others. The re-United States remained a vicious empire. How
long would it take this empire to learn the lesson of common humanity? The soldiers were nice enuf to me, because they wanted me to join them, not knowing what was inside my mind. I could never take orders from someone else. I was too old to be a soldier, old in the fact that people had shared their wisdom about the futility of war, I knew the whole thing was a bullshit business racket.

How many crappy governments would we have to endure and adapt to during our lives? This was the third for me. Bureaucratic messes, media mind control, violent repression of dissent. The entire world, having survived the worst disaster in recorded history, has now involved itself in a massive land grab. Externally and internally. The cold civil war that had been going on for a century in the United States was now hot. Well, much hotter than it was, the government had been raiding house and shooting and burning whole families for a long while, neutralizing radical political groups using whatever means worked. Being in control of the media, they got away with it because those people were lawbreakers, or crazy, poor, black, brown skinned, or illegal immigrants. It felt like it was all coming back, and who had the organization, the money, the ability to fight their plans? Nobody.
Taffy shook his head rapidly side to side, trying to free himself from the grip of this mental focus. This was all a bunch of negative thinking. Stay positive, Taffy told himself, looking down at the sweet dog sleeping. “I’m going to grow old with this dog.”

Taffy looked around the garden, and wished for a set up like this, something with a few friends somewhere the authorities would not fuck with them, because it wasn’t worth it or because they didn’t know they were there. The secret economy, it was the only way to escape the control of the machine. Like the underground railroad could get your body free, the underground economy could free even more people, people who still seemed to be in chains could actually be free, revering the illusion on the master, but if you get caught... The same as if you get caught being free anywhere, they lock you up, they put you into their machines to work. They set up their day labor office in the ghetto, the modern version of the kidnapper, slave trader. You get minimum wage while the CEO gets a 12 billion dollar bonus for destroying you and the Earth you live on. Burn it to the ground! Stay out of jail! Stay alive. Be happy. Are these things contradictory? Can you destroy the oppressive system you are a part of without destroying yourself? Having
been connected to it all your life, how could you have the heart to destroy it? You love it. Secretly you want to be a billionaire. Matter and energy are not destroyed, they can only be transformed into something else. Destruction means the creation of something new. This system was created by people, it can be destroyed by people, and with every oppressive part of it that is destroyed, a little part is changed, hopefully into something healthy for all people of the world, and not change into another different looked oppressive machine.

Taffy shook his head again to shake it off the train of thought, and then laughed looking down, nothing in his possession but a cup of coffee and the casino clothes on his body and an empty empty bag. Ah, but that bag had such potential to be filled! And here was this creature that had decided to travel with him, Taffy was happy to have this friend. Over thousands of years people have taken comfort in these small things as the armies of hate swirled around them, killing, raping, stealing.

After considering the big picture, Taffy realized that this moment was the best of times.
“It's like how communism didn't really turn out like communism, more like fascism, and capitalism didn't turn out like capitalism, it turned out more like fascism. There's a trend here. This desire to control everything—people, animals, minerals, the water, the wind, everything.”

Taffy sat in the passenger seat, listening.

“These pencil pushers in the suits, they are just one arm of the fascist state, one tentacle, you also got the cops and the goddamn city inspectors crawling around with a digital camera up yer ass, all those fuckers working together on the same project and they don't even know what the project is. If you look back at the progress of this country you can see how fascism has been installed, it's the most amazing example the world has ever seen because nobody even knows it's there, they just keep cranking out the propaganda on tv and the pharmaceutical companies flooding doctors offices with medication to calm the anxieties of people who are feeling that something is wrong, that feeling in the back of your mind as the many tentacles of the state clamp down on you in the darkness.

“Shit.” Taffy swallowed, “I guess you're about right.” Taffy sympathized with the subject but the
vehemence of the oral delivery was terrifying, as tho at any moment he might pull a gun from under the driver's seat and demand the immediate start of a revolution. Even tho the man was driving and occasionally looking out the windshield of the car, most of the spittle from his hot rant landed on Taffy's face.

“God damn fucking right I'm right! I'm you, man!” the maniacal laughter of a situation gone horribly wrong. Taffy looked at the driver. The driver looked just like Taffy, only 30 more years on him. Was this how Taffy would end up, a maniacal wing nut who picked up hitch hikers? Taffy stared in horror, then realized there were worse fates. Yes, it can always be worse.

“What, you thot you were gonna stay young forever? Ha!” crazy laughter from the driver's seat melted the car as the went around a curve on the highway and Taffy landed on a bicycle riding down one of the extremely steep hills in Little Rock, flying, tires vibrating from the speed, his hands involuntarily clenched the handlebars as his older self, still in his car, roared past on the left, screaming out the open passenger window, “Get a fucking car you hippie! Ah ha ha!”
A pulsating sound filled the sky, Taffy looked up to see a flying saucer, hovering and occasionally shooting out bolts of luminescent energy into the distance.

“God damn government!” his older and insane self screamed into the sky, “Fuckers!” A beam of radiant light shot down from the ship and engulfed Taffy’s older self.

Taffy woke up in the jungle.

“Whoa.” he raised himself up to sitting position and looked around, Chef’s head came up from down by his feet, looking curiously at him. A freight train rolling along slowly blew it’s horn. Taffy relaxed. Maybe the sound of the train was the inspiration for that dream. Taffy smiled at Chef, “I love waking up from a nightmare and realizing that your reality is not so bad as some of the things your imagination can think up.” Taffy decided that if they were to sleep down there again tonight, he would move the camp somewhere else, in case that spot contained some tormented residual life energy: a haunted jungle.

It was Monday now and Taffy went to Capitol Library to check on the status of his Patriot card. First to the cafe: the E-Z mart on Markham where Elmer would be working. Yesterday Taffy had bummed money from someone downtown, after hearing about
his card troubles they sympathized, bought him a pay-as-you-go card in the name of Jesus, “We're the good Christians, you know.”

The burgeoning civil war seemed to have given them a bad name. Taffy got the coffee and they got to go to heaven, what a deal. He sat in the garden and plotted the day out, sipping coffee. Shaken off the dreams and cold dew he headed off across the grass, stumbling into a mushroom patch, “Giant puffballs!” he knelt and squeezed one, then plucked it and tore it open, all white inside, no gills. These were indeed giant puffballs and ripe for eating. “Too bad I don’t have a skillet to cook these in.” Taffy left them growing and headed up to the library. Still no word on the benefits being restored. “Guess I might as well keep working this sympathy card.” The people yesterday had suggested the temp labor place downtown. Almost the lowest rung of the working world, next to an undocumented worker who was picked up on a street corner and worked twelve hours until dead tired, then dropped off at the corner again with the promise of more work tomorrow, and the boss never again showing up. Totally stiffed.

Taffy made a cardboard sign and stood down at a busy intersection with a ‘looking for work’ sign. After a
couple hours a truck pulled over and Taffy spoke with
the man thru the open passenger window.

“Can’t pay you much, hard times. Got a couple
days of work I need help with.”

“Sounds perfect.” Taffy said.

That night Taffy sat on the patio at Vino’s
downtown eating pizza and drinking a pitcher of beer.
Taffy raised a toast to the man who hired him, “To
money: the keys to the city.”

(hundred-six)
Today as I went to get my morning coffee Elmer
accused me of stealing his milk crates, cause there was
a milk crate tied to the rack of a bicycle I found in the
jungle. He’s handing me back my change for the
morning coffee and breakfast burrito, and he says,
“Cause you know, some people take them and it’s not
theirs.” Sometimes in these circumstances I am so
astounded at people’s narrow logic that I am struck
silent. The argument in favor of a poor person using a
milk crate on their bicycle while surrounded by a
world of destructive automobile pollution could
encompass an entire book the size of a dictionary. A
massive index of crushing responses flowed in my
brain, all that came out was, “Uh, I found that bike in a bush.” Everyday I’m in there, handing the fucker money, and he accuses me of stealing. How the fuck does someone like that stay in business treating his customers that way? They must like it. A free dominatrix. Fuck that guy. He should be handing out free foot massages to everybody riding a bicycle. I was so offended that I considered showing up later that night and robbing the place.

Then there’s the guy at Asshole Liquors further east on Markham. The closest store selling booze to my campsite in the woods by the tracks, I don’t go there much cause I’m broke and trying to save money for hill knows where a trek across half the country to get back to Minneapolis just in time for 30 degrees below zero for a week straight shit.

Asshole Liquors was owned by a former cop, a guy named Apricot Brock told me, and be careful cause he’s shot a bunch of people who have tried to rob his store. Apricot Brock said the actual police asked Asshole to ease off on the trigger finger, like, good job fighting the bad guys but give us a call and let those of us who still have badges do the shooting. You know, make it official.
I'm drinking with Apricot Brock again, down by the tracks at night, as usual, and a few young drifters come thru, oogle types, people without much interest in the fine aspects of civilization. One young guy goes up to pick up some beer and comes back with a 30 pack and says Asshole wouldn't sell it to him, even tho he had the money on his card, so he just stole it.

“You stole from Asshole?” my drinking buddy said, “Hole-e-shit! Did he see you climb down the stairs across the street?”

“Yeah, he came out running after me but I got away.”

“No you didn't. There's cops on the way down here right now. They know exactly where to find us. Everybody get up and start running.”

I followed my buddy out of there. Some of the oogles tried to follow us but Apricot Brock told them to fuck off. We crossed the tracks and climbed up capitol hill a ways, bush-whacking off the trail to find a good spot to lay low for an hour or two. We heard a gun firing from below.

“Oh damn.” Apricot Brock said, “Sounds like Asshole didn't wait for the cops. He's gonna be pissed if he accidentally shoots that cube of beer.”

“I remember doing that when I was his age.” I said.
“Not from Asshole you didn’t.”

Apricot Brock showed me a good place in the jungle to sleep. He lived down there, when not roving the country on freight trains. There was a low shack he had crafted out of wooden pallets, covered with tarps and dug into the side of the hill, it was invisible from the outside, looked like a bunch of impenetrable trees and bushes. Brock showed me a spot nearby to set up a similar situation, shouting distance. “Always good to have someone watching your back.” Apricot Brock had cast iron skillets and pots that he let me cook with.

I headed out immediately and got a bag of grits and a can of jalapeno nacho cheese, I learned to eat grits this way from someone on the river.

Two days after that young drunk stole the booze from Asshole, a city inspector came down to the hollow by the tracks, the party spot, driving a four wheeler and poking around, following trails that went back into the woods, giving squatters notice that they had to leave in 7 days. “Plenty of houses and jobs up top.” the inspector said, “No reason for ya’ll to be hiding out sown here amongst the rodents. Healthy looking men. You know you got a place. We need you. Come on up! Drinking and drugging aint no way to live your life.”
“Hold on now, I have been drinking, actually have a hangover right now that I’m fighting off with a morning beer, but there aint nothing wrong with homesteading.” Apricot Brock said, “We’re simple people. We live simply, travel simply. Simple. We’re not doing anybody harm, just living, and you think it would be better for us to go up there and join your side and start killing people cause that’s the right thing to do? Well, I don’t think that’s right. I tell you what: if those fanatics come down here, you won’t hear from them again. I can promise you that.”

“At least get you a job.” the inspector held up his hands as tho he were holding up an invisible bundle of money, “There have been a lot of beggars around town and people don’t like it. You get a job, you can get a house. Live in a damn house. Running water, proper sanitation, electricity! Can’t tell me you don’t enjoy that stuff.”

“Man, I got a job. I’m saving up money as we speak by living down here and not paying rent. Not paying bills. If I get into a house here and start paying, soon I’ll be trapped, never get outta town again!”

“Little Rock is a good city to get stuck in.” the inspector said.

“True, everyone here has been real nice, mostly.”
The inspector let out his breath, “Well, spread the word fellas. 7 days. I’ll be back thru with the crew. Can’t let people live out here. You show up at any of those churches on that resource list and they’ll help you.”

“Uh huh. Alright.” I said, holding the paper.

At least he didn’t say, ‘I’m just doing my job.’ That line always makes my blood boil. So that was it. I moved my cardboard mattress to the spot that Brock showed me and doubled up efforts to conceal the place. Apricot Brock took a different path to his place every time so that none of them would get worn into visible trails. The inspector never found our places.

“They might still find me if someone tries to move deeper into the woods and lead the inspector back to us, so keep an eye out, don’t let anyone move in too close.”

“This was no coincidence, huh?” I said, “Two days after that guy stole the beer and came down here. Fucker doesn’t even live here.”

“Yeah, he burned a bridge that’s for sure. He aint welcome back here, I’ll run him off. Tie him up and throw him on a train. Bye bye.”

“You ever do a runner on a liquor store like that?”
“Oh yeah,” Apricot Brock smiled, “all the time when I was younger.”

The guy that picked me up when I was flying a sign and paid me to work was named Jimmy Jameson. He was building a bunker in the back yard of his house, cinder blocks and concrete with a tunnel leading to the house. “I don’t mind you knowing about it, it’s no secret. If the shit hits the fan tho don’t come knocking, I’ll blow any head off that I catch in my sights. You know how it is.”

“I’m the perfect person for the job, just saving up enuf money to get outta town, you’ll never see me again.” Inside my head I was laughing: WHEN the shit hits the fan? The fan was covered in shit. The fan was buried in shit.

While waiting at the pickup spot for Jimmy Jameson, I thot about how Little Rock was still as friendly as I remembered it from visiting there ten years ago. Then an old friend named Barton, who I had met 10 years ago, drove up in his ancient rusting truck and he poked his skinny neck out the window, greasy hair blowing in the wind. We exchanged heartfelt
greetings and nodded our heads trying to remember back to those ten years ago when we met, what our lives were like then.

“Damn, when was this guy supposed to be here?” Barton said.

“Like an hour and a half ago.” I said.

“Fuck that! Let somebody else have the job. You should jump in and come work for this guy I work for.” I ditched the bunker gig and jumped into the truck with my friend taking a load of metal scrap to the processing yard. Helped him haul the buckets of copper, brass, iron, aluminum to the digital scale where the workers measured it and wrote up a ticket for payment. Barton took the ticket to the window where a white haired man punched the numbers into a keypad and swiped Barton’s business account card.

“Not bad.” Barton said, “Prices are up for sure, there’s no mining imports to compete with, and now with this shit going on it’s even hard for companies to ship from state to state. This shit is gold now! It’s got to the point where if you got a property and it’s vacant, you gotta have someone staying there just to keep the renegade scrappers from going into the basement and yanking all the metal pipes and wires out of the house. There’s a lot of people paying cheap ass rent or in less
desirable location, living for free as caretakers. There are crews that patrol neighborhoods, cruising for prospects: no curtains on rooms in empty houses, no cars in the driveway, mail all piled up. It’s coming down to turf battles. I have a gun in the truck, and I might chase off someone I see casing empty houses down there in Garsonville, cause maybe later I will want to scrap them out, you know? Ha! Gotta make the whole neighborhood off limits to those guys. It’s pretty easy going tho, the guy I work for gets his scrap legit, he’s a straight up guy, he won’t fuck you over. It’s not a lot of money, but it’s money.”

“What kinda work does he do to come up with this scrap?”

“Construction stuff, connection to construction people. He’s lived here all his life. He goes to the owner of a condemned house and offers to scrap it out and split the money. Everyone knows him, and they trust that he won’t rip them off. Pretty solid trade now with this new scarcity. It used to be way more unpredictable. Sometimes you were rolling in it, sometimes just scraping by. After the Catastrophe it got good. You’d be surprised how many houses go to hell after being abandoned for a year, and with there being, you know, less people wanting houses, they just
take a questionable rehab house and say, fuck it, tear it down. Then we show up. Hah, let's go stop by the White Water and have a couple brews.”

We drove back to headquarters down by the tracks, where the cheap land always seems to be, thru shady overgrown streets with little ditches and bridges of stone and concrete culvert pipe for the driveways. Barton introduced me to LeRoy Garson who stood in the doorway of his house shaking my hand.

“Got a letter from the city today, looks like they’re back to their old ways of fucking with me every chance they get. Gonna have to clean up the stuff that’s outside of the fence, separate the metals, load them right onto the truck. We gotta get this shit out of here. Pump up the tires that are flat on the cars out there, make it look like it’s not a junk yard you know, cause it’s actually legally a city street even though the road doesn’t go anywhere but to my house.”

That’s what we did. Barton plugged in a little radio and we listened to a classic rock station.

Barton told me I could come to stay at his house, in that neighborhood of Garsonville where LeRoy owned a dozen shanty houses, many of them were shotgun shacks built ages ago to house the railroad workers. You could hear the trains from his house easy, they
slowed and stopped, racked up and moved on, the noises of the steel wheels and steel cars was a rhythmic dance, all the piles of scrap in LeRoy’s yard listened to the song.

There was a community of friends that lived down there in Garsonville, under the shadow of the capitol building. That night I slept in a warm house, drank beer around a fire in the backyard. October 24th. I hadn’t known the day for awhile. It was getting cold at night now, which everyone but me was thankful for.

“Been a damn hot ass summer.” Barton said, “Get’s as humid as hell in Little Rock.” Then he told me a story about seeing a family of alligators down on a wing dam in the Arkansas river, “But you don’t gotta worry about them, they can bite you good, but probably not big enuf to take you down. It’s the big crocodiles down south that can roll you right down in the water, just grab your leg and they start rolling, right to the bottom where you drown. Then they eat you.”

I told him that was good to know.

I stayed there for a few days, working for LeRoy in the day, at night I brought Apricot Brock up out of the woods to hang out at the fire in the backyard, and he was thankful for it, “Can’t even have a campfire in the jungle with those inspectors coming around.”
“They’re fucking with us too.” Barton said, “But being a home owner here I guess I got more protection than ya’ll.”

Apricot Brock came to work a few days at LeRoy’s and was grateful for the cash, even spent a few hours of his own time picking up pecans off the ground in the neighborhood and on LeRoy’s property where a massive old tree dropped nuts like a slow rain, making a loud noise as they fell on his tin roofed garage.

Thru my research at the capitol library I found that the Patriot benefit cards that had been disabled would be restored in 5 days. I made plans to buy a ticket to go see Franklin in Minneapolis. Then I got a letter from him on the link, a crew from Minneapolis had come upon a sweet travel deal to the west coast and Franklin had gone with them.

“California!” I said out loud in the quiet library. California. The last time I was there you could hardly cross the street for all the cars clogging it up, the streets were jammed with cars day and night, parked two deep in driveways so you had to walk off the sidewalk into the street to get around them. The place was dominated by these gaseous machines. I found it offensive and I couldn’t stay there, I moved to Minneapolis. Now with the winter coming on the land
of fun and sun sounded appealing, and Franklin was there. Memories were fresh of the harsh winter, hunkered down in that house, the descent into madness. Fuck it then, California. I started researching transportation out west, what was running, what had been blown up. Dear god! China had occupied Alaska and Eastern Siberia, I hadn't been following the news lately, living down in the woods and all, we were a little disconnected from the world. Californians were worried about China's apparent goal of occupying the entire Pacific Rim. Well, I decided to take my chances. Another week in Little Rock and then I would have my road stake, loaded with money and the re-boosted Patriot card I would step into the teleportation unit. A jet airplane. Holy shit. Planes were the only reliable thing moving. Everything else was subject to being bombed. I was going to miss the friendly south, kindness, easy living. All would be replaced by the madhouse mentality of the bay area, the swirling madness! Including all the fun and great things that comes from such a gathering of diverse people. What was life for, to be comfortable? To live easy in a neighborhood of friends? Yes, that was one way. Never the way I had ever taken, and apparently was not yet ready to take. I made plans. There would be
music making, art doings, feasting, drinking, sunshine, swimming in the ocean surf, and cavorting with old friends and lovers. I smiled. It was beginning to feel like that faint light on the eastern horizon after a long cold night.

(hundred-eight)
I sat on the grass downtown today looking out at the Arkansas River and scratched my head, hitting the bump on my eyebrow I first noticed while on the Mississippi River a while back. It seemed bigger now. This was not a good time to get eyebrow cancer, dammit. But who ever heard of that? I thot about finding a doctor, or maybe getting a razor blade and cutting it off myself. That's all the doctor would do, right? Maybe test it. Weird little bump. Maybe I should let it grow, get real big. I assumed it was my body's revolt against a toxic world, but maybe it was just something that happened to a body, such amazing and mysterious things that we walk around being a part of.

LeRoy is done with the project he had for me, and I've got the money now, just a few days waiting for the date on my ticket. Can't believe I'm going to California,
to see Franklin in a few days doesn’t seem real. I start feeling anxious, scared. Changes. After my last day of work the three of us sat drinking whiskey.

“California huh?” LeRoy said to me, “You seen the protestors on tv?”

“No. Haven’t watched tv in a long while.” I said.

“Thousands of assholes in the streets, blocking traffic, screaming and shit, getting arrested. They say there’s almost a hundred thousand in prison camps. There’s gotta be some other way to get their voice heard, some other way to change things than doing all that shit.”

“Man, they’re just trying to make themselves be heard by the politicians.” Barton said, “As for changing anything, I don’t know that they are changing anything. Looks good for the cops tho, they all get paid overtime. Hell, I think there is another way: they could all buy guns and start a militia, and actually DO something to challenge the bullshit instead of performing these little rituals in front of corporate media cameras, tossing their bodies on the gears of the state. Fuck that. You think the Vietnamese people kicked the US out by throwing their bodies in front of the US soldiers? No. They picked up guns and
the guns said, “Get the fuck out.” That’s what we gotta do. Pacifism never did anything without the threat of violence being the alternative.”

“Well, there you go.” LeRoy said, “If everyone were in a militia, nobody could fuck with anyone, cause there would be that threat of violence to back you up. People now, nobody has guns, nobody is organized, its all the cops fucking with everyone. We should have access to the same force that the state holds over our heads, because they aren’t going to start doing the right thing just cause we demand it, there has to be a consequence to the state, because a brutal response is the only thing that the state comprehends. It’s hard to talk like that, because the state is people, those soldiers and cops and pencil pushers, those are all people doing a job. I served in the military, I used to be one of those people. I know how it feels like to be a part of the war machine.”

“I guess we all work for the state in some way,” Barton said, “but it doesn’t have to be that way! They could all join together and get out, it could happen over nite. If everyone saw the truth about the government, being this mindless beast gobbling up all the power it can. Since the state isn’t human it will never evolve a morality towards all people of the
world and suddenly start treating them with compassion and justice. All states are playing a game, and the game is to consume all the other states. It has nothing to do with protecting it’s people, except that the state needs people to continue playing the game. The state protects it’s important people, the rest are excess to be disposed of or ignored.”

“What happens when the game is won, and there is only a single state controlling the world?” I asked.

“Judging by previous empires that have conquered large areas, I imagine that world government would eventually consume itself, then fracture into thousands of little states, and the game would start over.”

“Dear god.” I said, “That is not the world I want to live in. THIS isn’t a world I want to live in either, but here I am. Keep on dodging the bullets I guess, what else can we do.”

“You could try to stop it.” Barton said, “We can’t be waiting around for the aliens to land and show us how to live in a good way. That might involve putting our privileged lives on the line. Millions of people around the world have died fighting the state, and millions have survived fighting it. So when are we gonna pick up that weapon and join the rest of the world, fighting back from inside the belly of the beast?”
LeRoy shifted in his chair, “If you can make something better than the United States of America, then I wish you all the luck. I know we could do better, but we could do worse to. You’re all fired up Barton, how about you leading the way?”

“I’m scared shitless. I used to be a pacifist and then I decided that was a bullshit scheme that was sanctioned by the state, they love for people to just lay down in front of them and get arrested, it’s a total joke. Then for awhile I was nothing, hopeless. Now I’m starting to see what it takes, and it’s hard not to just say fuck it and take you slice of the pie and head for the hills. There’s really no revolutionary movement in the US, it’s all been neutralized. People are frightened to even talk about it. You’re just a terrorist now if you try and talk revolution, end up in jail for talking theory. Dammit, why do the fascists always win?”

“I got your back, kid.” LeRoy smiled, “Secrets safe with me.”

“That’s it, isn’t it.” Barton said, “If we’re all afraid to come out publicly and talk about it, then nothing is ever gonna happen.”
On my last night in town there was a show at the Laser Pussy house across town, we all rode bikes out there and enjoyed relaxing in the fine home of the two handsome and friendly bears who lived there. It felt real nice to be in a queer house, they often seem too far apart while traveling. We all watched college football on a big screen in the living room, then danced to the music in the basement. Damn, punk bands were starting to tour again. Things really were getting back to normal.

We ended up back down in Garsonville and the neighborhood showed up for a going away party. Any excuse for a party. We drank and burned things. A crew of people who cooked Food Not Bombs every Sunday showed up. They had been cooking food and taking it down to the park by river, hungry people showed up every Sunday. They had been doing this for years. All thru the Catastrophe even. It wasn't one of those cheesy feel good white kid activist things, this was a community they were a part of. Sometimes they would bring amps and guitars and drums and play music by plugging into a power outlet that stuck out of the grass and weeds in a concrete median strip, right in the middle of an asphalt parking lot. They cut loose
and it was a good sight to see. People loaded their plates and watched the Crisco Kids play, 3 brothers who in addition to playing the music helped find and prepare the food.

There we all were at this party, and I thot it must be a full moon for all the people that came out, folks from across town too. Wax boxes burned bright in the fire, oiled rags, old telephone books. I would be missing all these people. Apricot Brock gave me a flask of whiskey. Someone brought out a guitar and played, Barton danced a slam-jig around the fire and spilled many drinks.

I felt the long distance and wild shit that had occurred to me washed away, these people had helped me out of a desperate situation in life and I hadn’t hardly realized exactly how desperate I was. It’s an incredible feeling to have someone reach out their hand to you and raise you from the abyss.

There I was, heading for a jet airplane, hard to believe. I cashed in good for this ride, but it seemed like such a deal. Strolling thru the Little Rock airport, only two planes flying, one plane every few days, the announcement over the p.a. system- “Threat level is Red. If you see any suspicious behavior please report immediately to security personal or by picking up the
white phone.” At the front entrance to the terminal, tanks and soldiers welcomed travelers.

I showed up hungover and stumbled thru security, head throbbing. It was great. I was laughing while standing in the security check, halfway naked and being scanned, my few worldly possessions being blasted by x-rays.

“Bag check!”

Oh shit, I thot. She pulled mine from the rolling tongue of the machine and, protected by gloves, removed my water bottle from the side pouch. Whoops, no liquids allowed. I put on my shoes as the bag was being re-scanned and then strolled into the secure area. There was a huddle of people waiting to board the plane, nod at the jovial pilot, and fly into the sky with a wild blast, at ten thousand feet a stewardess sand a song about flying with the airline and all the peanuts you could eat. I read the catalog behind the seat, was this current? Could I still buy a battery powered bug vacuum that would instantly kill any insect from up to two feet away? Dear god, why didn’t we fight these people when we had those guns in our hands? Back when we decided on survival. Thot we would live to fight another day but ended up scattered, exhausted, joyously leaping at the opportunity of wage
slavery to gain a few necessities, comforts, and luxuries. Now we will never give them up. Houses of our own, cars, electronics, babies, bar tabs. It all starts with an airline flight. Now we're in the position to turn our head at the things the state was doing in the world, we had to sleep at nite, so we rolled over, away from the window that showed a scene of the empire and all it's oppressions across the world. A whole generation of angry youth rolled over in our sleep and embraced the warm body of forget.

The state had stalled out on the road! The loyal mid controlled slaves obediently got out and gave it a push start, a black cloud exploded from the tail pipe, suffocating those who didn't get back in, and those he stood in front with questions raised were flattened beneath it's wheels. The state rolled on.

I watched the Arkansas River fall away as we circled up, leaving behind that water which flows as I once was flowing, down to the bottom. Easy. An entirely different world on the other end of this flight, no Mississippi Basin, all rivers into one. The other side of the mountains. I was happy for it. Fuck all that shit, it could just keep going without me for awhile. All love to my dear friends there who I hope to rise above it.
I felt comfortably old. I felt like I knew how to laugh in the face of death. I could never forget that misery is easy to escape from. Anything can be let go, that obsession over having fucked up, waking up every morning thinking about the fuck ups, and each day wasted in worry about what to do about the fuck ups. That’s all gone, the past, it’s filed away in memory with no more potency than an advertising jingle alongside it, because that is where I put it. If you are fortunate you will accumulate wisdom and it will form this picture for you and you will see how to create happiness. I still worry. I still have anxiety. A light bulb does not turn on and stay lit. It takes energy to make it burn, every day to be aware of everything that is affecting your orbit, pulling you where?

The grand canyon out my window to the right, to the left the white smoke of a forest fire. The nose of the plane drops, I open my mouths, ears pop, mountains loom large in the round port hole, brown crags of rock. Las Vegas is under the wheels, the stewardess sings another song, “Happy Trails.” She loves it. She loves this life. We are all her sweeties. She is older than the other stewardesses. She knows the secret. She has embraced her fears and is not afraid.
We dropped from the sky. I looked out, down at the ground, brown hills. The ailerons extended from the wings as we slowed into the final approach and the flat pools of the south bay came into view, a hard turn to the right and there was water out the window, the ripples of the bay, a sliver of land already covered by rolling fog, and over the pacific ocean more lines of fog imperceptibly moving in. We dropped and fell. And it seemed like we would be landing right there in the bay with a great splash, a $300 log ride from 30,000 feet. Some one my side of the plane gasped, alarmed at the right of rapidly approaching water under us. I wasn’t afraid, I had been this way before. The sun was edging down, everything red, and as we dropped from the sky and the Earth turned the sun winked at us as it closed the door. A brilliant red welcome. The runway appeared and we kissed it, the air brake flaps sprang up from the wings like hair on a cats back, the engines reversed and growled us to a halt. A great smile crossed my face and I stared out the window at the runway, the taxi way, terminal, nothing. I made it. Somewhere out in this mad swirling world was Franklin.
I made my way down to the exit ramp but there was no tearful reunion, yet another checkpoint, customs. An officer perched behind a podium waited at the end of a roped off isle, like a mini-judge, with officious energy he asked for my identification and boarding ticket.

“I threw that out after I got on the last plane, figured I didn't need it since I was already on the plane!”

“No one told you about California customs?” the officer asked incredulous.

“Customs? I just came from Missouri.”

“Anybody coming from east of the Rocky Mountains has to go thru customs. The Bible Belt is the source of the insurrection, as you may have heard.” the officer looked at me skeptically while swiping my Patriot ID card, “Missouri. Beautiful country down there, Ozarks.”

“Yeah. It is.”

“Alright Mr. Jason Smithe, we're going to have you step into Room Number Three over here.” with a wave
of his long sleeved black button down shirted arm, he indicated a windowless security door.

“Oh no! Is this because of the boarding ticket?”

“Everyone coming from the red list is required to answer a questionnaire and be photographed.”

Another officer appeared from behind the judge officer, holding his arm extended towards the door, the other arm waved him in the direction, “Sir, step into Room Number Three.”

I stepped. The second officer followed me in. It was the classic table and two chairs, the door shut behind and clicked as it locked. I bounced a few random curses off the metal walls.

* * *

The interrogation was actually the perfunctory modern information/identification probe, an hour long, multiple identical questions phrased every possible way to incite a slip up in your story, a moment’s awkward pause, some combination of answers to raise an eyebrow and forward you to the seven day intensive terrorist detention facility. Then there was the standard 360 degrees digital body scan, blood/skin sample. Nearly painless except for the indignity of being naked and then memorized by a robot.
On the outside I begged a smoke off the nearest person loitering there, and as I stared at the lights of the city trying to focus my mind a man shuffled up asking for money, “I aint got it.” I mumbled and shook my head. Cars moved out there, you could hear the sound. God. This place was just as full of people as it ever was. How could that be? A madhouse like it always had been, a place where I would not be perceived as abnormal, a place where a touch of madness granted you access to the first level of the city- the street. A place where you could be alone even while surrounded buy a million. I didn't want that. I had done that before. I found a link and dialed the number Franklin had given me.

* * *

The house was a dark blue with green trim right on Shattuck, the wooden fence topped with a vine that sprouted copious brilliant purple flowers, I couldn’t remember ever seeing such flowers anywhere else. They were magic. The smell of the ocean air was magic, and the rosemary bushes that grew and gave off into the air, this smell of savory herbs and sweet flowers everywhere. I had forgotten about this. Certain
things that compelled people to love this place, that convinced them to stay here and pay exorbitant rent. The fabulous culture of everything could not be denied. Another pilgrimage to the queer mecca.

I took the wooden steps to the porch, raised my hand to knock, and stopped. Should I just walk in, was this a community punk house? Anxiety fell on me and I was paralyzed. Was Franklin still my friend, who was this person that I left those many long months ago, seasons ago. Shit. I felt tired, very tired. My bag weighed me down and I dropped it, then sat on the steps to look into the night. I heard a voice inside, and I got up, went to the front door and opened it.

“Knocking!”

(one hundred eleven)

“It was snowing when we left Minneapolis.” Franklin said. He was sitting on a comfortable couch in the living room of the blue house.

“We got out just in time.” Julius agreed, sitting next to Franklin.

“Totally skipping out on winter!” Scab said, sitting deep in a lazy boy recliner, the sound of crickets and
scents of angel trumpet flowers wafting thru the window screen.

“Scab!” Taffy put his hand on her shoulder as he sat in a wooden chair next to the recliner, “It’s so good to see you. Where have you been? Tell me a little.”

“I was the last one out of my relocation camp, I signed a contract to help shut it down, demolition & clean up crew. Then I moved back to Minneapolis and was in my own world. Working, doing art. That’s it, food and bottles of ink. I ran into Julius on the street and he pitched me, and here I am, ready to eat and draw where the snow don’t fall. I think this will be good for me, since I’ve never been here before, I don’t know how great it used to be, you know? I’m excited. Ask me how I feel two years from now, I might puke on your shoes at the idea of spending another day here. But now, I’m fired up!”

“Yeah. I know what you’re saying. That’s why I’m here too, making a break.” Taffy said, “I’m disoriented as hell tho, right now. I spent the last few months in a much wilder place, cooking meals on campfires, digging a hole to shit in. Totally different thing. Don’t know if I’m ready for the party every night social city life.”
“You’ll adjust.” Franklin said, raising his bottle of beer.

“Happy Halloween!” Julius rose his bottle to the center and they leaned into the cheer, Scab wasn’t drinking so she thrust her fist into it and beer spouted from the mouths of clashing bottles surrounded by laughter.

* * *

The Halloween party was fun, farmers with hay stuck in their ass crack, demented robots, animals of all kinds, dozens of sluts, wizards, and cave people. The sound system blew up, or maybe the DJ was too drunk to figure out how to deal with the technical difficulties. Taffy found himself in the bathroom snorting coke from the end of a house key dunked in the powder and drinking vodka out of mason jars. The party was rerouted back to Franklin’s house where the stereo was fine and wild booty dancing immediately broke out. Those too drunk or tired to stand fell on the couches and their friends crawled up on them, grinding nastily while their eyes rolled, sometimes three deep. Taffy laughed and thot he would probably not sit down because it seemed like it might be a long time before
you could get back up again. On towards sunrise Taffy went to sleep with Franklin in his room on his giant mattress after a short fury of hands down pants, biting, pulling, release, stretching calf muscles while pulsing glands released the fun for both of them.

“Did you like that?” Franklin asked.

“Yes.” Taffy smiled with his eyes closed holding his warm body tightly.

* * *

The next two days were a slow recovery. Taffy read the news and listened to stories of current events in the bay. The fanatic insurrection seemed so far away.

Trolleys were being installed on roadways thru out the bay, creating major transportation arteries serviced by these trolley cars run on diesel or electric motors. The system was hastily erected, tracks run above ground on previous lanes of automobile traffic, as in St. Louis. Like in KC there were also wild de-paving projects happening in the bay, the officially organized and also guerrilla actions blowing up roads and parking lots to take immediate advantage of the growing season. Taffy went outside for some sun and was in time to witness a string of small explosive
charges ripping down the street out front, showering chunks of black pavement onto houses and thru some living room windows.

“Ooo damn!” Taffy put his hand over his mouth as dirt rained down at the chaotic ground zero scene, but the residents emerged from their houses laughing and cheering, filled with the hope that fresh food would soon be harvested there. They picked up pieces of pavement wearing gloves and threw them into a waiting dump truck.

“God man.” Taffy said to Franklin as they reclined on the ratty couch in the living room amid empty bottles and a coffee table that had been shoved under the dining room table to facilitate a line of dirty dancing. “How often do such large bags of coke come into play around here? I couldn’t possible do that more than twice a year.”

“Oh it’s too expensive, I couldn’t afford it more than that.”

“I guess that’s why you see people who get rich & famous always crashing & burning so hard, cause if you can have everything you want whenever you want it, that’s too much!”

“Yeah. By the way, don’t forget you owe me sixty bux.”

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“What?”
“Ah! Just kidding. I did a lot of work with Jimmy in Minneapolis, I got some money.”
“I think that’s all I want to know about that.”
“Exactly.” Franklin smiled.

* * *

Taffy helped out with the vegetable garden that was being started in front of the Blue House where Franklin lived. The plot occupied the entire center of Shattuck, a north-south running street, to take advantage of maximum sunlight.

Buses, trucks, emergency and military vehicles were the only things still rolling on four wheels and burning gas. Incredibly, Taffy watched from the porch of the Blue House as rich folks rode by in pedal powered vehicles, powered by 2-4 people who worked as the “engines” to pedal these rich people’s “cars” for them while they sat in back on cushions relaxing and making phone calls! Witnessing this hideous display of wealth for the first time, Taffy instinctively picked up the nearest loose object to throw at the yuppies, but saw a Merdeavion officer patrolling the street with an
automatic rifle slung across his back. Taffy cursed and put the empty bottle back down.

Franklin found the rest of the cocaine he had lost at four in the morning on Halloween, he stuck his house key in the tiny bag, snorted it, licked the metal, and walked to the grocery store, returning with the fixings for a super nachos. “I bought a movie from a guy on the corner, ‘Astronomy Discoveries’. Nice, huh?” Franklin said, rain dripping off his umbrella.

“What year?”

“Pre-Catastrophe. I’ve never seen it.”

“Sweet. Raining out, eh?”

“Yeah. Guy on the corner said it’s forecast to rain for five days.”

“Damn.”

“Yeah but would you prefer to be walking thru snow?”

“I need a raincoat. Eventually I’m not gonna be hungover and I’ll want to move around outside.”

Franklin set his bags of food sown and took off his coat, “Guy on the corner invested in an umbrella, nice big one so his customers can stand under it too.”

“Fucking genius hustler.” Taffy said from under the blanket, “Maybe he could let me operate a franchise on some other corner. I need money. I’m broke.”
“Ah, you just got here, take it easy. Something will work out. You can stay here awhile.”

“Yeah, thanks. You know soon enuf I’m going to need my own place. I got accustomed to it on the river. The thought of being jammed together with anyone kinda freaks me out. I’m afraid I’ll go crazy.”

“Yeah. I know. For me too. But it can’t be too far away from me. You would think it would be easy to find a place here, but the damn rent is just as expensive as before! All these people croaked, they bagged them up and shipped them out, and then it’s like there was this whole waiting list of people who swarmed in from hell knows where willing to live in a closet for five hundred bux a month. I swear it seems like there’s more people here than before the Catastrophe.”

“Yeah well, here we are, right? Not just visiting this time.”

“True. Let’s eat nachos.”

“Alright.”

Taffy leaned back on a pile of pillows with that hangover lump in his diaphragm, the gut knot, watching ’Astronomy Discoveries’.

“I just remembered this weird dream I had the first night I got to California.” Taffy said, “I was on a boat, a huge weird houseboat floating along, and none of the
crew is watching where we are going, we just spun around when we hit the shore or a tree or a sand bar or whirlpool, just spinning down the river. It didn't seem okay to be doing this, I kept wanting to go look out the windows and see where we were headed, but nobody else was looking, so I didn't either."

"That seems pretty obvious. You're feeling like things are out of your control? Maybe you should let go of your worry. If you are worried and anxious or relaxed and happy, both ways you'll still be floating, right?"

"Okay." Taffy smiled and pulled Franklin close, Franklin wrapped his long arms around.

"This show is mind blowing. Exo-planets by the hundreds!" Franklin said, "Near earth size planets orbiting stars similar to our sun. I realize this is just a computer simulation of what it could look like, but just thinking about 3 earths orbiting the same star is mind blowing."

"I remember when people wondered if our star was the only one that had planets around it."

"Ha! What an arrogant proposition. Fucking narrow minded religious nuts and their dumb ass old books."

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“Hey, the bible has some good writing in it. It's been edited by thousands of people over thousands of years, maybe the longest running artistic collaboration by humans.”

“That’s right, you grew up with that shit.”

“There are questions that science can’t answer, it’s true, at the very bottom of everything, science doesn’t have any more answers than religion.”

“But science does have less falsehoods, lies, and obvious un-truths.”

“Okay, maybe you got me there.” Taffy said, “There’s no proof in religion, just faith. Like when you read fiction, you have to suspend your disbelief while reading the story. Like you know it’s all bullshit, but you want to have fun and explore someone’s mind, so you keep reading and pretend like it’s true. And it starts to feel true, and your mind explores what that, like having a dream while you’re awake.”

“Yeah. I love science, but I do like a little fiction with my reality. The cold truth is not always the most comfortable ride.” Franklin brandished a corn chip with re-fried beans and sour cream on it, “Sure enuf, I have softened the edges of my reality with lot of different drugs.”

“How’s that working for you?”
“I’m only on the pills now, the free stuff. Had a little too much of the roller coaster. I’m more into the steady road trip now.”

Taffy turned his head from the screen where a black hole pulled light into it’s mystery, “Shut the fuck up, Mr. fucking ‘don’t-let-the-government-control-your-mind’ is now eating the corporate feel good candy! No fucking way!”

“Calm down. I knew that was coming or else I never would have said anything. So yeah. The pills keep me from doing other things that seem to be really bad for me. Like drinking excessively. Things got bad back there, some bridges were burned. Part of the reason I’m out here. Really making a break. I’m happy you’re here too, this is awesome. I feel like I made it, beyond just surviving, you know? Like I think I know what to do to be happy, I can see the way.” Franklin looked at Taffy, “Are you happy to be here?”

Taffy pulled his eyes away from the swirling galaxies and nebulae on the screen and smiled at Franklin, thinking of all the uncertainties, noticing all the pains in his body from the difficult road, feeling the tormented emotions of a hundred loves that were connected but now broken and burnt and lost, the
numbing armor that always tried to keep anyone from getting in and that kept his emotions from getting out.

“It’s really good to be with you. I’m about as happy as I think is possible for me right now.”

“That sounds like a yes.” Franklin said, and scooped a corn chip loaded with the yum directly into Taffy’s mouth, “Eat yer nachos!”

(hundred-twelve)

November 4th, election day. Taffy raked the accumulated leaves of an entire season from the sidewalks and pathways of a house that had not been inhabited for years. A friend of Franklin’s named Alex was living at the Blue House and running a restoration business, making abandoned houses habitable, and they were doing the whole block, house to house, loading up a truck in front with everything to be taken back to the mulching center. Easy work, but repetitive. Taffy’s back started to ache.

“Good thing we got the government exemption to drive this truck. Sure I wouldn’t want to be biking all this shit in a trailer.”

“Hell no.”

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“Are you going to vote?” Alex asked Taffy while taking a break to lean on his hard rake, “First female Latino is running for governor of California! C’mon!”

“That would be something.” Taffy agreed, “I’ve been out of touch with electoral politics. Spent a lot of time out on the Mississippi River, just floating, doing my own thing. No link. No other communications really. Got to the point where I hardly cared what the rest of the world was doing, I cared about what I was doing. That’s was life and death for me, what my hands and feet were doing at that very moment. Then the world came and found me. Fucking fanatics.”

“There’s a lot of refugees from that area coming out here. People say it hasn’t been like this since that dust bowl happened, generations ago.”

“Yeah. Damn, the whole reason I was out there was so I didn’t have to be a part of it all. I don’t think voting to decide who sits at the top of this pyramid is gonna affect how people at the bottom of the pyramid are getting along. We’re all bottom, and they are the few at the top, and this woman is Latino yes, but she’s top of the pyramid people, and what does she know about us here at the bottom once she’s been let into the top? It’s all for appearances. Doesn’t matter who’s finger is on the trigger, the gun still kills whoever is in front of it.
Everything stays the same. Little changes. Little differences. It's a bummer."

"You are way into the negative. Pessimist, that's the word. Remember the first black man in the white house? It wasn't about what he was gonna do, cause he could never get elected if it was gonna turn the boat upside down, but it was what that did for African Americans that mattered, and for all non-white people, for them to be excited that one of them could be president."

"What happened is that people of color just started believing in the system more, trusting it, and meanwhile the same old shit went on. Wars, oppression, exploitation, first world colonial domination now with a black face you could trust. Perfect for the white dominated power structure that still existed. Now in California what do they need to satisfy the restless and dissatisfied Latino population? A friendly Latino face for governor, performing the same old shit as every other governor, protecting the interests of the capitalists. So where does it end?"

"I think you're wrong. People saw it was the same old shit and realized that they had to take action themselves. It wasn't just whitey that was holding them down, anybody put into that machine became a
fascist. We need more time I think, and a gay president.”
“A dyke!”
“On a big chopper!”
“An African Asian Mexican American leather dyke from Montana!”
“I hope I live long enuf.”

* * *

Taffy showed up at the blue house, the bus stopped a block down Shattuck he climbed the stair and opened the door, collapsed on the couch. The house was silent, unusually quiet.
Taffy awoke on the couch as the door burst open, a dozen people flooding in, shouts of “Leticia Bonita!” and “Fuck the state!” Franklin jumped on top of Taffy as he blinked into the light.
“What happened?”
“We’ve been at the gay bar, watching results come in. Leticia won! The anti same sex civil rights proposal also won.”
“Oh shit. Are we rioting now?”
“Well, half of us are stoked that Leticia won, California’s first Latino female governor. The other
half is obviously pissed that our rights have been revoked again, and then a small percent of us are still pissed off to be under the rule of any authority at all.”

“So we’re gonna drink a little more and see how we feel.”

“That’s right.”

“Oh yeah, good idea.”

Cotten was a tranny boy that Taffy had hooked up with on previous travels thru the bay, flopped on the couch next to them, “Man, this is total déjà vu! Remember when Obama was elected, bam! Crazy, people were freaking out, running down the street, yelling his name! Four hundred years of slavery and oppression, and then Obama. For hundreds of years Latinos have been slaves of the global market, and now bam! Leticia! All these barriers of racism dropping, and the entire Latinos everywhere feel empowered. Gender and sexuality are still taboo, people are freaked out by the concept of any sexuality besides a man and woman making babies into infinity. How many more hundreds of years will our existence be denied? Get over it!”

“Fuck yeah. So you’re on the side of rioting.” Taffy said.

“Hell yeah. Let’s burn some shit.”
“It’s those fuckin Mormons again.” Franklin said.
“I think they time these elections to pass this evil shit while this big break thru of another useless politician is voted into office. Everyone on the street is celebrating when they should be mourning.” Darling said while standing in front of the couch, her librarian glasses focusing on them, “There are fiestas breaking out all across the city tonight. I would feel like such a party crasher to go out protesting tonight..”
“Fuck it, we cant be drowned out.” her girlfriend said, “Let’s go do something. I cant just get drunk and celebrate a woman being elected, half of me wants to, but the other half is still queer and just got shit on by the state!”
“What are we gonna do, bust up a mormon church?” Franklin said, :They got us outnumbered, fucking hyper-breeders!”
Darling made a fist, “That’s just it, all the rural christians and their religious mind control bullshit, how can you fight that in a majority wins situation? The whole structure is against us, when the majority is so screwed up and afraid of our sexuality that they’re gonna oppress us.”
“It’s an endless battle.” Darling’s girlfriend said.
“My name’s Taffy” he said, waving his hand. “We haven’t met yet.”
“Shella.” she shook his waving hand.
“Should we call some people. see what they’re thinking?” Cotton said, his blue eyes on fire.
“Let’s try it.” Darling said, “I know it’s blowing off steam, but let’s do it. Maybe it will snowball.”

* * *

Taffy was on the front porch smoking and drinking a beer, thinking too much. Women, men, singing Leticia’s name, screaming when cars honked as they drove by.
“I don’t want anyone to be the governor of me. Yep, still the anarchist. Cant stop believing in what is right cause it seems impractical and is repressed by the empire i live in. No presidents. No governors. No gods. No masters. All that. Fuck That. But still, the first female Latino governor of California! Think about that!” Taffy raised his bottle as a chorus of chanting, came from the corner and a round of fireworks went off. A group of laughing people walked up Shattuck towards the gathering. Taffy sang loudly, “Leticia! Leticia!” the people cheered and sang.
They spilled out onto the sidewalk, Taffy, Franklin, Darling, Shella, Julius, Donna, and Aleanna walked towards somewhere. Phones rang, talking, they walked past lots of wildly celebrating people, at last coming to a bust hub near the light rail station. A group of friends was there, it had the look of a party that had no house. Another group of people hanging out here were celebrating for Leticia as governor elect. The two groups mingled as they occupied the area. A fellow had made an impromptu sign with cardboard and black marker than he held up for people to see, it said, “No More Mr. Nice Gay!!” Lots of people honked and cheered him, except a few who stomped on their gas pedals and squealed their tires to get away from the fag before they caught his gayness.

Cotton and Darling got into a discussion about transgendered people with a Leticia supporter, after seeing the transgender awareness button Darling was wearing. “So why not just accept how you were born?” the woman said, “I was born a woman and sometimes I wished I wasn’t. When I was younger I was really
pissed about the inequality and I wanted to be on the other side, but finally I accepted what I was, you know, and I played the hand I was dealt.”

“And that’s your story. That’s you.” Cotton said, “If you’re happy that way, great. For me, I felt strongly about being male and not being forced into the female gender role just because this one part of my body seemed to be that way. People alter their bodies all the time, and for reasons I think are dumb, like sucking out fat to make you look thin, and breast enlargements, all this stuff to make you body look like the current standard of beauty. It’s their body, not mine. I would never tell someone what to do with their body.”

“It seems like such a weird and scary thing to go thru, a sex change.”

“There’s a lot of scary stuff in the world.” Darling said, pushing her black rimmed glasses up with a forefinger, “Like think about getting a surgery done where they take someone’s organ who died in a car crash and put it in your body, what the fuck! That’s so intensely freaky to me. I wouldn’t want someone’s organ in my body. That is so creepy to me. But that’s me. I wish them good luck with that.”

“So you take the hormones, right?”

“I do.” Darling said.
Cotton shook his head, “I used to. Don’t need to anymore.”

“What’s that like? Putting testosterone into a woman’s body.”

“Well, it felt like I was getting what should have been there to begin with. My voice dropped and I grew hair, it’s like going thru puberty again. Hopefully a trans person gets to do this close to puberty so they don’t really have to go thru that again. I was 23 when I started taking hormones. It felt good tho, to get it done and stop thinking about doing it all the time.”

“So- but, you still have female parts, right, like you could get pregnant?”

“Well, it’s not likely I would get pregnant, cause I’m not attracted to male bodied people. I date women.”

“But don’t you think that if you can bear children, that makes you a woman?”

“I never wanted to have children. I identify as male. Think about a woman who had a problem and had a hysterectomy, you wouldn’t stop calling her a woman just because she couldn’t create babies anymore, and so just because I could become pregnant, why should that make me a woman? Are men who get vasectomies not men anymore? Some cultures probably think they aren’t men. Really, the problem is trying to shove all
these different people into dualistic gender boxes, that's the problem, why does it matter so much? Why are people so fixated on gender?"

Darling jumped in, “Think about the very first thing most people ask when a baby is born: is it a boy or a girl? From that point on the whole structure of the baby’s life directs them into one role or the other, by the time you’re old enuf to think about gender it can seem like all that programming that began on the day you were born is just how you are supposed to be, even if it doesn’t quite feel right. Gender division is given huge importance in our society, people spend billions of dollars on gender specific products, separate bathrooms across the world, separate clothing, so many things. This plays right into the hands of exploitative businesses marketing all these products to us so we can become a real man or woman, and then find the perfect heterosexual mate to create more gender specific consumers!”

“Wow. Okay. You got me thinking at least.” the woman waved her hands, “Do you have a blog or something, you seem very articulate, like you’ve written a book!”

“No! I don’t. It’s just my life, and I’ happy to be living it.”

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“Enthusiastic living! I like it.” the woman smiled widely and bounced with the drumming that accompanied the chanting crowd.

Shella came up and offered some of a flask, Darling drank.

“You’re drinking!” the woman was shocked.

“Yeah, we’re getting fired up, out to fight the prop that passed, so what do you think, will Leticia support it?”

“I guess she has to, it got voted in just like she did. She’s not anti-gay tho, she mentioned that in her acceptance speech.”

“It’s not right, making a whole group of people second class citizens.”

“But you’re legal now, right? Legally male, so you can get married to a woman.”

“I’m queer. I don’t let anyone tell me who I can love or fuck. You know what I’m saying? It’s no one’s business but mine and the person I am with. This prop is mixing church and state, it’s fanatic stuff.”

“Hard to imagine fanatics gaining any power now, with the things they’re done. I think Leticia will help, she’s religious, but not a fanatic.”
“I don’t trust politicians at all, they’re working in a system that is full of homophobia; it’s part of the structure, just like racism.”

“It’s taken a long, long time to get people of color into office, that’s true.”

“And I wonder how long till queer people are accepted. We don’t wanna deal with this shit for hundreds of years.”

“It might not take that long. Things are accelerating, don’t you think?”

Darling shrugged, “Well, there’s nothing to do but keep fighting, what else can we do?”

Some of the crew from the Blue House were holding the signs opposed to the prop that were out for the election, yelling and singing along with the hard core Leticia celebrants. A cop car rolled thru the crowd, blaring it’s horn and demanding thru the loudspeaker that they clear the streets. The passenger window rolled down, “You look like you’re having too much fun.” the cop inside said, and everyone continued screaming. A device appeared in the open window and a stream of pepper spray flew out and coated the crowd, the cruiser sped down the street, dousing the entire block with pepper spray. Jubilant cries turned to anguish. Cotton, Darling, and the
woman they had been talking with collapsed to the ground holding their faces, burning.

(hundred-fourteen)
Taffy woke with a burning in his nose. Not cocaine from a dance party this time and not from chain smoking and drinking and not from the burn of vomit rising from the wrong tube. More like a cold coming on or being fought off. It made him remember the night of the elections, that bullshit.

"Bad timing, always." Taffy said to the ceiling of Franklin's room. The window was broken and drafty, Taffy tried to wrestle the blanket back from Franklin who had rolled up in it like a burrito. Taffy gained on his share of the spread, Franklin groaned in his sleep and mumbled, "Noo...." Franklin was a light sleeper, ready to wake up in an instant to curse Taffy’s nightly thrashing arounds.

"It's cold and my back hurts." Taffy said, "This sucks."

Another sound came from Franklin. Taffy tugged at the blanket one last time to wrest a foot away that needed to overlap his own feet. Now the draft was gone, but Franklin had been disturbed, he moved and
rolled, sidled up to Taffy for warmth. Taffy was beginning to feel like this blanket was some umbilical cord between them. What a strange new world this was from life on the road, the river, on his ship in space. No one slept on his bed then. Ever. Not even the hot prospects of erotic pleasure could persuade him. Taffy preferred the bed to be his alone to manipulate as he would, adjusting the pillow and blanket however he wanted, and whenever he wanted. Sexual pleasure involved no one else. It was at his discretion always, in the tent, in the woods, under the water, on the boat while drifting down the river. A completely Ayurvedic response to a bodily request, business was taken care of when the body requested it, mind and body and environment being one thing not thing. Here in the city everything was different. Every day it seemed Taffy found himself holding his piss in his bladder for a moment when a crowd of people was not surrounding him, a spot behind a tree that wasn't occupied by the eyes of another person staring out some window. Or even a bathroom that was within a miles walk and did not require two dollars to use it. God in hell!

And now there was this person attached to him at the hip, Franklin, weaving knots in the synapses of the other mind, off hand comments and jokes becoming
cattle prods shocking the other into rage, laughter, tears, ecstasy.

The moon waxed into fullness. Today Taffy was to obtain the key to a house he might live in for the winter. Such as winter was in California where a morning of frost was equivalent to a blizzard in the Midwest, frost on the ground a near catastrophe. Now Taffy felt a cold coming on, and this while moving into a new house. There wasn’t much to move tho: a box of some things he had collected from free boxes at punk houses and thrift stores and a few things left out on the sidewalk by rich people that he had collected in a mockery of shopping. A Peugeot bicycle he had rebuilt from pieces, it had been abandoned under the steps of the blue house in Berkeley. The new house where Taffy would live was in West Oakland, a piece of land that jutted into the bay, a lot of it created by filling in the bay, a community surrounded by freeways and shipping facilities, the tall white shapes of steel cranes that lift the steel containers from truck to ship, from ship to truck. Even with the reduction of traffic in the post Catastrophe scarcity of gasoline world, the freeway was still a constant noise, like a distant surf on the shore, but there was no surf because it was a bay,
so like in Vegas a surf had been created, the gentle white noise of air pollution.

Damn the routine. Walking. Drinking coffee. Eating. Reading. Over and over until dead. Well, Taffy thot, the routine is broken today. Sickness. New house. Tonight Franklin was on a date with someone else. All fine and good things, even the sickness has it's own fuKN kind of spaced out high feeling as the body fights and heats and burns and drips. When you get well again then to remember to quit fucking around and live life, cause one day you'll go down and you won't come up. Every thing goes to the bottom. When you pay attention to the slope of the hill you can appreciate the feeling, of how it's so much easier going downhill. Once you've climbed to the top of the mountain and drank from the magic flask. The swirling madness of the day began.

Unseasonably warm November 15th. A beautiful Autumn day. Flea market at the Ashby train station. Took a train to the city, picked up the key from Bonche at 24th & Mission, got a burrito at El Faralito, went back to the East bay, borrowed Alex's government car and drove my boxes of good junk to the new house.

"Where the fuck is that house? Wrong street."
Strange to be driving, Taffy thot, going so fast. He
found the house. Painted bright colors, totally gay, great. Awesome. Wood floors, old fireplace looks like a castle. Sweet. Return the car as the strange burning takes hold, the fever battle, ride his bike back to the house and be the only one there, nobody else moved in yet, and Taffy was tucked into bed holding a phone talking to Franklin as he slipped into a heated sleep. See you tomorrow. Are you alright with this? No, I hate being sick. I mean the date. Oh yeah have fun, bring me chicken soup tomorrow okay? Good thing you got a house all to your self. Yeah, it’s great, can I borrow a pot to cook in? Oh yeah, it’s not set up yet, huh. The Blue House has tons of pots, we’ll give you one of ours. I’ll bring it to you tomorrow with chicken soup in it! Okay great. I love you. I love you. Bye. Bye bye.

Taffy pushed the red button and looked out the bay window of the living room with tired stoney eyes. He passed out for hours and woke up feeling better. The Peugeot wanted to go for a ride, and Taffy found himself somewhere in Emeryville, the salty smell of the ocean water smelled good, but also not good, cause the shit factory by the bridge was upwind. Taffy walked on the succulent spears of ground cover ice plant and down to the muddy shore, water stretched out, the
freeway running to the Bay Bridge, illuminated gantries of the loading cranes down on the docks, daily launching capitalist ventures in standard sized ribbed steel containers painted in primary colors. That’s where Taffy was going. The other side of the water. Taffy sighed and mounted the bike, back thru mad freeway traffic to street psycho minds. The little house appeared before him at last, sanctuary. He unlocked the door and entered. Green tea, brussel sprouts, kale, hummus, pita bread, dried apricots. The Patriot card was burnt, but the local Bay Care program was giving 300 bux a month for food. Good enuf for the basics. Swinging from rope to rope, monkey bars, until someday there’s nothing to grab and the ground flies up to meet you.

Taffy thot of an old friend: Quincy, the post-punk slam dance pit ballet dancer. I knew Quincy when I lived in California those years ago. He was the best thing about the punk shows in town, spinning thru the pit, pirouetting thru a mob of punks, extending leg and pointed foot, a pose in the middle of the swirling madness, then back into it, spastic, bulging eyes, swinging around on a wooden post that held up the house during a basement show, finding inspiration in the reactions of inarticulate punks flailing about
wildly, one would bounce into him and that was the quarter in his slot, he flew off like a pinball from a bumper. Quincy danced with everyone this way, we laughed and loved it. Years later I heard he took his own life, leaping from a parking garage in the middle of our hometown. The ultimate dance move? Fuck that. I’m getting tired of people dying or killing themselves who I want to hang out with when I’m older. I read a story about a man who was 105, went thru two wives, bunch of children, nine other brothers and sisters, outlived all of them. He was happy tho. All those fucking people he knew all his double length life, all dead, but he had something going on in his mind that made him alright with it. He accepted death. He was happy. He hung out with young people and taught them stuff like how to grow vegetables and how you shouldn’t hate anybody. After all the fucked up things this old black man saw and felt and experienced thru this century, he decided not to let anything get to his happiness, he decided not to burn up his life being sad or full of hate. He lived and loved, corny as it sounds, that’s what he did, and he rolled downhill a long way, died a happy, spry old man.

The next time I think someone is reaching out their hand to me I am going to take it and help them. I’m
going to give them food, clothing, shelter, emotional support, friendship, whatever they might need, I've got to ask, and give it. I don't want to be a part of another person going down before their time and remembering back to one moment when maybe I could have spoken to them, reached out, stopped the wheels in motion. Saved their life. I know it's not my fault, it was their decision, right? But I could influence that decision, if I recognized it.

It's hard to see in the present. Looking back, everything is so obvious. So I could just give a lot more. How much can I give? Some people give almost everything. Some people give almost nothing. Often the people that give everything actually have nothing, and the people who give the least are those that possess the most. The nature of greed and giving. The roles can reverse, luckily, I think, or there would be no point and I might follow Quincy into the unknown beyond death to find a place to sleep without the possibility of waking again to endless suffering.

An entire pot full of green tea with a smackrel of honey down my throat and I am still here, in this empty house, thinking drumming on the wood floor the empty room is an echo. This is a nice little house, and it only gets down to thirty degrees here. Ha!
Surrounded by friends in the new season of the world, far away from the past and place that as a memory is sauteed over time until fuzzy and warm and caramelized and savory. Remember the top of the hill? Fuck, wasn’t that some crazy shit! Now all we need is another pot of green tea to really feel on top of the world. I roll out the thick and amazing sleeping bag I found for five bux at Out of the Closet Thrift Store and I lay down on it, the tea won't let me go so fast, so I drift and dream. There will be dancing dinner parties and a garden in the backyard, a huge garden in a vast empty yard. My thick sleeping bag cradles me, and I have a bubble of my uninterrupted thots. I think with this place I will be able to appreciate Franklin when I do see him. This is a good place for me.

* * *

The next day Taffy awoke feeling spectacular. All was right with the world, the library was open, the sun was shining, and he was invited to a dinner at the Blue House. Franklin showed up for lunch at Taffy’s new house with a pot full of homemade chicken soup, which they ate, and then went to get coffee.
“So I made the decision.” Franklin said, “I’m going to transition.”

“Wow. I’m happy that you made your decision. Let me know how I can help.”

“I’m not going to do surgery, I don’t think that’s for me. It’s too expensive anyway. I’ll start taking hormone shots as soon as I can. I’ve already started dressing femme again.”

“Yeah I noticed.”

“It’s easier to dress in drag out here cause you’re not the only one doing it. There’s thousands of people walking around who really don’t pass for the gender they’re presenting. I think it was a really good idea to come out here. There’s a huge community of trans people, and that fact draws in more people all the time, like gravity! I see people on the street who seem to be transitioning, or gender fucking, whatever, and I think I should know them, but they’re form some entirely different social circle, and that’s so cool! That’s comforting to me, to feel like there are more than like six of us total in the whole place. All these people sharing a similar experience, all across the city.

Minneapolis would have been alright for it, Minneapolis is like a shining purple rhinestone on the buckle of the bible belt, but I had to get away from all
the old roots and ties there, I felt caged. I had to go and come here and do this. And I didn’t even know that’s why I came here until I just now!”

“Yeah! Cool. Wow- now that I know for sure you’re going to transition I feel kinda sad. I feel like I am loosing you.”

“I know we talked before about it, but I know that things can change too. It’s good for you to tell me how you feel.”

“I think it makes total sense for you to transition. If I didn’t seem enthusiastic before it’s because I didn’t want to be another person trying to sway you in one direction. You decided what you want to do and I’m with you. Where do I stick the hormone shot?”

“Yeah, you can totally help with that. I’m not into the needles so much. Maybe I’ll get used to it.”

“Oh wait, I just thot of a question. If you are now going to identify as She, and I identify as He, does that make us straight?”

“No way, are you joking? I’m queer for life.”

“Good, cause I still want to be queer too.”

“Great. Take it to the streets.”
Holy shit! I ran into Aston today. He looked much better than when I saw him in Little Rock. He approached me with humble confidence, told me that he had found counseling for the abusive behavior he had done to Julius and others, and that he had changed his behavior and was going thru a reconciliation process. He was also currently working with a volunteer sex education group doing outreach in the Bay Area, counseling youth and others about sexuality and consent and sexually transmitted infections and birth control and handing out condoms and dental dams. Wow. That made me feel good. It’s good to be able to stop hating someone because they made good.

Aston made me think about my own life. How have I abused people, and how have people abused me? Am I a good person? Have I been irrevocably damaged? The pattern repeating, like a hammer fall each time, I’ve been driven down by each lesson learned the hard way.

Franklin out on a date with someone else again! I hadn’t thought about how it could happen more than once. A funny feeling, like being replaced! Unpleasant. This is what we agreed upon, an open relationship with a focus on communication. Easier said than done.
Polyamory, many loves. I try to remind myself of the opportunity this presents to me, I am free to do as I will! I could hook up with someone, freedom. I can do what I want.

What I want is to stop thinking about how Franklin is out on a date with someone else. Dammit. This will get better with time. There's all the years of social programming to de-program from, and even genetic programming to overcome. There's plenty of people in the world still, even after the Catastrophe. We don't need to have breeder pods. We don't need to fill all these empty houses back up. Some people think we do, some people think that's the way god wants it. I don't want to have any part in that. Marriage of church and state. Fuck marriage. What have I done? These long years of social interactions, friends and enemies, strangers, love turned cold revulsion, infatuation, crushes, long forgotten talks, barely remembered journeys with forgotten companions... Here I am at the present end of the line, what of it all? The sum of this total, there is no blank space anymore it has been written upon and buffed over and written upon again. Everyday the mind hustles these things off to the warehouse, stacks of documents all to the ceiling, but just one word can bring much of it back out.
Innocence is emptiness.

I cannot imagine being confused by a new emotion, I have felt them all I think, and I know what to do when I feel them. I would never go back to innocence, what painful lessons. No one can shield you from them, the hard way to learn seems the only way sometimes, even if you know better, sometimes you have to find out for yourself in the lab to comprehend what was meant in the lecture. You have to feel for yourself exactly how hot the fire is. To the ones I’ve hurt during my life, I thank you for suffering under my ignorance that I might learn another way. To those who have abused me I say, you fucked up. I know what that feels like too. Bumper sticker advice: a true apology is changing the behavior. That’s all. Just learn the lesson and share it with others, shake off the shit and leave it behind.

I saw Franklin the next day and it was so good to see him happy, he said, “How was your day?”

I leaned back smiling, “Well, something I noticed, the wooden frames of the post office windows in the downtown Berkeley Post Office spell “ABBA” like the disco band, like the way they spell it, with the first A and B backwards. Pretty neat, huh?”
“Let me ask you something. Did you also find a wingnut laying on the ground today? Think hard. This is very important.”

“Uh, no.”

“Alright, that’s good to know.”

“What if I did find a wingnut on the ground?”

“Well, it’s a sign. They say if you find a wingnut on the ground, you’re a true wingnut. It’s not a bad thing, just the opposite. Makes you respectable, a living deity, and you can spout off incomprehensible wisdom and sing songs on the street really loud, like ‘Love Shack! Baby Love Shack!’ Have you ever seen that guy in The City? He puts a smile on my face.”

*   *   *

A week passed, furious activity at the new house. Building raised bed vegetable gardens. Gardening in the middle of winter, no wonder people perpetually packed themselves into this part of the world, the climate was a fantasy.

The neighbors two doors down turned out to be some wild ass lesbians, and then a fellow raised himself over the fence in the backyard when they were out there working and welcomed them to the
neighborhood by tossing a box of mint chocolate cookies thru the air. A guy living in a RV parked across the street introduced himself, and said if they ever needed help, just call out his name, which was embroidered in white thread on his black knit hat, “Security!”

A week of dance parties where they all dressed up in tight fitting clothes, stockings, hats, strips of leather and red ribbons, slutty and fun, mini corsets, black leather knee high boots, hot pants, skirts, black eye shadow and red lipstick. Houses and small bars, crossing the bay to the lights and bustling, people danced and focused on nothing but each other and the dance, so many smiling faces in one place.

Wind from global warming in bay area makes it impossible to ride a bicycle during most daylight hours. Bike riding is a night time adventure, nightlife, you might bike somewhere and get stuck by staying the night, wake up after a night of party and the winds have come, you have to take the train or a trolley home.

A punk show under the freeway exchanges, 3 levels of roads, six stories tall, machines hurtling overhead, at the concrete base of one the kids danced in the dust, small gas generator powering the amps, 3 bands,
Frannie walked around with a stock pot and wooden spoon banging on it, “Donations for the band on tour! (This is fun!) Taffy saw some friends from Little Rock play in their band, on tour, “What are you doing here?” they rocked. The last band’s bass head and cabinet fell over while they were playing, the head seemed busted. Someone in another band got their head and the rock went on. The wild ass dancer with the chelsea haircut took the mic and screamed and flailed and rolled on the ground while her girlfriend kicked dirt on her, and the generator ran out of gas, the amps went dead and the single bulb illuminating the world went out and the drummer kept playing, the show ended with a drum solo. In the after show glow someone set up empty beer bottles on a concrete barrier and a rock shooting gallery broke out, a dozen people with really bad aim. The girl who took the mic ran up to the line of bottles, picked one up, threw it against a steel electrical box, “Fucking break that shit!” and we laughed hard. More beer, hanging out at another house in West Oakland, and Rhianna finally got the courage to ask Odetia out on a date, Odetia said yes, and then they made out. Back at the house 3 of them lay down on sleeping bags and wool blankets on the hardwood living room floor, and Henry the
kitten curled up next to Taffy, sleeping there thru the night.

* * *

Suddenly I'm stressed about money! scarcity had returned. Do I really need a job? Dammit. Saw the mailman come down the street, dropped an envelope in my hand. a form from the government to apply for cash assistance. I laughed. I looked for a pen. I needed money now. I wanted it. fuck being left behind.

What am I doing out here? This city. Gregory had it all, there in the woods, not even working to death farming but just gathering, hunting. Old school human living. Simple. And here I am in this mad city, depopulated from what it was, but still insane, and filling up with more people every day. It’s exciting, fun. Meet someone new everyday. Already the stealing, the violence. Saw someone get mugged coming out of a corner store. Took his coat and wallet. I had to buy the guy a beer. Soon enuf, the shopping cart people will be back, sleeping in corners on the streets, run out of whatever squat they were in. Half the fucking properties empty in this city, and people being pushed out, sleeping on the streets, making
room for the rich folks who don’t want to live on the east coast cause it’s too cold. Why can’t some make a virus that destroys capitalism. It’s not so simple. As long as a single person still lives, exploitative capitalism also still lives. Fuck. Good luck to that last asshole, trying to rent out apartments to the squirrels, trying to sell bottled water to the fish.”

* * *

Taffy sent letters to Louise, Crasstina, Sand, all friends back in the Mississippi River basin. They wrote back, Crasstina and Sand talked of coming to visit when the cold winter was wearing on them. Taffy invited them to stay at his house, “You’ve settled down Taffy!” Sand wrote, “I don’t move to a place anymore. I just live wherever I am. Until further notice, all this could change.”

Louise wrote back at last, “I’ve been working things out, got my old job back, found my family. Some of my family. I did the right thing. I really had to do this, as much as it sucked in a lot of ways. I missed you. I didn’t want to admit that but being out there wandering with you was another world from where I am now. Total freedom, no responsibility. But then,
leaving and accepting responsibility back at home made me feel like I had a purpose and a place. Always paradox. I sit on the steps of the porch here and look out at the clouds, trying to catch a glimpse of the vastness that the horizon on the open river gave me. Everything in the city feels so small to me now. On the River with you was like being a kid again. Awesome. I would like to come visit you, I don't know when, but soon I think. I could even transfer out there for awhile, ha! That sounds fun. Do you hate me for leaving? Do you hate me for being out of touch so long? This world is far away from the one we shared."

Taffy smiled and put the letter down, walked out into the sunny day to meet Franklin. Franklin’s co-worker had found shoes on the sidewalk during lunch break that day, new shoes, and gave them to Franklin who gave them to Taffy and they fit perfectly. Taffy set aside the shoes he had worn since Minneapolis, took the laces out which he liked, and put the old busted ones with split seams and falling off soles into the trash.
In the months to come, climate change began causing strange effects in the Bay Area. Some bugs from South America hitched a ride and then jumped ship in the ports of Oakland, they flew and crawled, traveling in trucks, invading homes. Taffy felt them crawling on him at night too, trying to stay warm in the chilly bay area night they snuggle up to people, pets, and huddled around the gas pilot light on the stove in the kitchen to stay warm. Huge bugs! Some people were starting to be driven mad by it, walking around with bug nets wrapped on their heads and fly swatters. “It's just like living in Little Rock.” Taffy said to Alex.

Some corporate g.m.o. plants escaped the experimental fields at the university and in the central valley, spreading wildly in the new humid climate. Giant collard greens overshadowing native species, part of Taffy's job was to chop them down with a machete, the juice sprayed back into his face. Taffy considered eating them but their monstrous size was creepy.

Sea levels were rising exponentially, the state built a wall west of the Golden Gate Bridge to maintain levels in the bay and now there is no more tide. The
Sacramento and other rivers were fully diverted to the central valley for agricultural water supply and giant pumps were installed to remove excess rainwater from the bay, keeping levels from rising in the low areas.

Taffy’s shack was done: pallets, plywood, corrugated steel roofing, discarded windows from gentrification developments. Clothes and sheets hang on a line in the yard. The freeway in the distance, long blows from air horns of ships, steel on the water. A train rolls thru the bottoms, sharper horn, steel on steel. Someone up the block shouts, a dog barks.

Taffy rode his bike to the train platform on 7th and took the escalator up, high pitched whirring electric motors, members of the new symphony family, instruments only just being discovered. Taffy met Alex and they drove to the hills, another block of mansions being refurbished, the yards and gardens had gone wild in the time elapsed since their owners departed. Each hillside home took a day of bushwhacking just to clear a path thru to the backyard, the vines rampant and thorny, the rose bushes extended and foreboding, the weeds went deep into the soil and in this hunkered down place they fought being removed from paradise. Sometimes a rattlesnake slithered away from their activity.
“Stay away from that pile of mulch.” Alex said. Taffy looked down at the strange lump of shredded wood chips, “Why?” “Cat shit. You can check for yourself, but I guarantee you: cat shit under there. Anything piled up like that, leave it. Don’t even fuck with it. We’re gardeners, not janitors. I’d charge em’ twenty bux a turd.” “Really?” “That’s not our job. Fuck that.” “How much would you pay me to pick them up?” “Back to work Taffy. I’m not gettin’ any younger.” The leaves of November formed a playground where two or three people might roll around while making out, and disappear into the many colors of autumn on a mattress made by the trees. Squirrels, rats, opossums, racoons, deer, feral cats and dogs, all leapt away from the machetes, the clippers, the snips. The battle against nature continues, asserting human vision upon everything within our reach. This is what we do. Keep everything organized and separate. Dead leaves do not lay on living grass, this has been made illegal. Vines growing on fences do not grow up the branches of trees, nor out into the walkway. Grass does not grow over onto the sidewalk. Grass is trimmed
back in a perfect line. Plants that have flowered get their dead blooms removed. Dead things are removed from the natural cycle of birth and death, creating an artificial hyper alive garden which has no material rotting on the dirt, no dead rot left to sink back into the earth and rejuvenate it, the soil grows thin over time, and fertilizer is shipped in from the factory where death is allowed to exist, death torn apart and dried out, ground into a powder, reconstituted into tiny identical pellets.

Taffy and Alex stuff the green plastic garbage cans with death. They are full, Taffy jumps in, packs death down, brown and green, old and new. Death is packed to be shipped away, this hillside home is safe for a wealthy capitalist now, nature has been beaten back and the new residents can focus on squeezing more money out of the world, inspired by this vision of domination.

There is a fine line, Taffy thot, between living with nature and living against nature. Taffy looked at the house, a mansion compared to where he lived. People have to make shelter, eat food, use tools, some things must die to keep us alive. When we begin to kill just for aesthetics, a line is crossed. Calling medicinal and edible plants that grow wild “weeds” and

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systematically pulling them up, killing them. Millions of people have been exterminated because people didn’t like the way they looked. Manifest destiny has been transferred to include all races and genders. Now anybody can dominate the earth, anybody can join the military and push a button to dominate the wild and free. Coast to coast, we live on conquered land, the white christian genocidal slave holder mentality has been magically transformed into the wonderful American melting pot of total righteousness.

Or- could a manicured yard be beautiful, can illusion be beautiful?

Taffy looked down at the mowed grass, the trimmed hedges, the rose bushes empty in the November air. “It’s just a yard, get over it. I’ve got a yard too, and it’s soon to be full of vegetables to eat so I can save money at the grocery store, so I can work less and have more fun. These people are never home, working five days a week, that’s why I’m here to fix their yard, I know their yard better than they do. Whatever. If i was making a six figure yearly salary, I would probably pay people to do all sorts of ridiculous shit. How could I claim to be righteous, having never been in the situation?
The Manifesto: in the awareness that i have been programmed to consume things that i do not need, i decide to spend as little money as possible. Does having fun require spending money? Does survival depend upon spending money? Then is it really fun, is it really survival, or is it slavery? It is unfun. It is a desire that has been manufactured in me by external forces, In the awareness that i live in a world of people that are trying to possess me and my time as money in space, i decide to work as little as possible and earn as much as possible. I decide to enter circumstances that require the least expenditure of money. M With my free time and small money i decide to enjoy being alive and to help others enjoy being alive.

Taffy had a philosophical discussion about with Alex about being an over achiever. I said to him, “Nobody ever really wins.”

“So we all loose?” Alex said.

“There are no winners because there is no win.”

Taffy pulled his rake under a Blue Hibiscus bush and with a rake full of dried leaves uncovered the remains of a human body. The face stared up at him, hollow eye sockets the home of insects.

“Found another body.” Taffy shouted over his shoulder, “Fucking croakers.”
“Alright. We’re done.” Alex said, “I’ll call the meat wagon.”

Taffy stared down at the bloating human figure he had uncovered, then collected the tools that lay scattered about the yard, “Gonna havta sharpen these machetes for tomorrow. We dulled them up today.”

“Yeah, probably start sharpening them every day if it keeps going like this.”

“Oh hey Alex, I got rent and bills coming up due, can I get paid this week?”

“Oh yeah, how about tomorrow?”

“Sounds good.”

“You doing alright?”

“Yeah, I don’t need much. I’m used to living on the essentials.”

Alex smiled, “I used to live like that. I’ve gotten accustomed to the luxuries tho, big ass house, truck, eating good. Sometimes I think about traveling, not just short vacations. Sell everything and go go go! Then I come to me senses and freak out. Can’t let this lifestyle go. Can’t make the jump. I’m too far into it, the comfort. I like comfort. Got tired of the struggle. That’s the direction I was headed, even before the Catastrophe. Then after all that shit, the camp and all, I decided, fuck this, I gotta get mine and hold it down.”
“It could all go away tomorrow! There’s no guarantees!”
“That’s true.”
“That’s why I live like I’m traveling, all the time. No plans to settle down. I could be here a year, a week. There’s a downside to it, for sure, I’m the perpetual stranger. Who the fuck is that guy? By the time I make a good friend in a town I seem to be headed out the door again. A string of best friends across the continent. That’s the hard part. Missing people. But it’s also the good part. The older I get the worse that feels, like I’m abandoning people. Writing letters, phone calls, not the same as being with them.”
“You can’t be a real deep part of a community if you’re never there. I think that’s true. You’re out of balance.”
“Balance.” Taffy snapped his fingers.

A city full of people. I year ago I thot- I felt like I would be alone forever. Here we are, elbows gouging each other on the train, in cars, on bikes, passing each other, standing together in long lines at the grocery store,
lines of people everywhere. Ridiculous. Lines of people extending beyond the city, crossing state lines, people waiting to get into a restored house in the Bay Area. The Restoration. That’s what they were calling it. Rents were going up. Gentrification again. Anger. Sweat and stress, work, work. All the things that make a great city. We filled our house with enuf people to lower our rent, built three shacks in the backyard, turned our three bedroom house into a six. Used whatever materials we could find. Eight by eight foot shacks. The rain fell today and the insides of the shacks stayed dry. Good job house mates! I live in one of the shacks. I felt like it was closer to nature, more like I was on a shanty boat, the cabin of an earth ship, floating on the molten mantle of the earth. A crust ship. It felt better to think of it as moving than stuck in that backyard in West Oakland. I was happy. We planned out the garden, it was going to be beautiful, winding paths thru vegetables, a paradise, with chickens.

Then this fucked up thing happened. My housemate Jeffe was attacked. Thinking about it, if I was the descendant of someone kidnapped from Africa and forced into slavery, and who was still treated with racial prejudice by various people and institutions, I would be pissed at the race of people that had done
that to me and my people. They called him White Boy as they held the sawed off shotguns to his head, saying they were gonna kill him. It seemed to be a lot more about business tho, they kept saying they knew what Jeffe was doing and that he better stop it. I think they believed he was a drug dealer moving in on their territory. Why would they think this? Jeffe hung out on our porch with a guy who was trying to sell us weed. Jeffe was just to be nice, smoking weed with him. Maybe one of the muggers saw us hanging out? Who knows. Jeffe was two blocks away from home, all drunk from hanging out with some neighbor friends, and these three guys come rushing up, wearing the identical black baggy pants and pulling shotguns out from under black hoodies Like they were trying to be ninjas. They put Jeffe on the ground, made him take his shirt off, held the barrels of the guns to his head. They told Jeffe he was going to die and he fucking believed them. Jeffe thot that was it.

He stayed with some friends in San Francisco for the next week, m just to get the fuck out of town. They took his wallet and house keys, so he was freaked out. I changed the locks the next day. I stopped walking in the neighborhood, only riding my bike so I could try to get away if the same thing happened to me. I looked
with suspicion and anger at every young black man I saw on the street. I felt fucked up about it, but the fact was true, maybe one of these black men WOULD pull a gun and mug me. This was a neighborhood infected with desperation and hate. Damn, but there were lots of good people here, maybe most of them kind people who were just working their ass off to survive like the rest of the multi-colored variously-privileged working class. It’s like riding a bike and a hundred cars pass you in a safe way, and then one asshole almost kills you and you think, “Fuck cars and the people who drive them!” It’s always the assholes of any group who you remember, not all the respectful ones. I called Franklin and told him all this. I wondered if I had fucked up by moving here.

“We did warn you.” Franklin said.

I hung up the phone and held my head in my hands staring out the window of cafe down on 7th Street. The bar tender came over and set down a cup of home made chicken soup on the counter in front of me.

“Tell me what you think, I just made it.”

“Hey, thanks a lot!”

The man had very kind eyes. He was black. His simple action turned my mind. Ever since the attack I had been moving thru this neighborhood feeling like I
was behind enemy lines. His kindness turned my mind away from hate.

“Starting to rain out there.” he said to me, “Rain takes a long time to fall. That rain hitting the ground out there, making everything wet, it took a long time to gather up there in that cloud, and took a long time to fall down to the ground. I think about the Lord, how he made all this, and I can’t control it. It humbles me.”

“Yeah.”

The man smiled, “I’m gonna go out there and look at it.” He went to the door and stepped out under the awning to gaze at the sky.

* * *

Everyone else cried but me. I heard the sound of maniacal laughter spraying out of my face. I had taught myself to laugh in the face of death and that lesson was not going away. Our house was under water, up to the roof. We now lived IN the bay, the roofs of houses all around had become the islands. We were relieved of having to pay rent, and now lived in a squatted second and third story of a corner house in our old neighborhood. Everyone else had been evacuated. We felt like it was an opportunity, so we
got some canoes and boats and squatted the place. There were a bunch of people doing it, at night you could see the fires burning in second and third story windows, waters of San Francisco bay between. It was beautiful, except for knowing that most of the residents were living in crappy school gymnasiums on higher ground.

The earthquake breached the sea wall west of the Golden Gate bridge which formerly held back all the melted water from the polar ice caps. The breach wasn't total, the ocean waves at high tide slowly pumped water into the bay, it happened slow enuf by luck that most people had time to flee. Lucky too that the Sacramento dam held and all that water continued flowing into the central valley for irrigation.

West Oakland was 15 feet above sea level, now it was six feet below. The quake caused liquefaction of all the areas where the bay had been filled with random soil, in Oakland and San Franco, and these lowlands subsided into the bay. Rent got real expensive then, evictions at gun point by goon squads. Everyone from my house and the Blue House came to live in the West Oakland archipelago. Technically homeless, we were now free from paying bills, and on sunny days with mild wind we took the boats out and taught ourselves
how to sail. Beech front property, but the beach was the roof of our neighbors single story houses.

All the bridges and tunnels were closed from quake damage and fear of collapse, ferrys and random boats and driving the long way around became the transport between cities.

One night my dinghy was stolen while we slept, and I had to make a boat out of large sheets of foam ripped from the walls of the house we lived in, all tied to a wooden pallet. A couple of oak handrails, formerly from the stairwell, were turned into my rowing oars.

I sat on top of our third floor balcony watching the sunset one evening with Franklin, “Remember the dream about boating I had when I first got to the bay? This is not at all like that dream.”

* * *

The next notable event was no surprise to anyone who had been paying attention. The San Taurians came out of the closet. They had been on Earth for a long time, but kept their existence a secret. Their physical form was similar to a humans, so it was easy to disguise themselves. When asked to point at the night sky and
reveal the location of their home star, they will reply that their home planet is not in the observable universe.

The planet San Taurus was having environmental troubles too, and the San Taurians wanted to collaborate with Earth folk on methods to deal with the environmental problems. Their atmosphere was also totally fucked from years of abuse, apparently inspired by centuries of influence from observing human culture from afar. It’s a mad universe! The San Taurians who were wealthy offered to share their global air conditioning technology, but it seemed that there were oppositional movements among other classes of San Taurians, which was part of why the aliens had not made friends with Earth sooner.

“Last year it was the mugging.” Jeffe said to me, “This year the flood and the aliens. You know? Seriously? I’m wondering what could possibly come next.”

“You’re a survivor Jeffe. That’s a good thing.” I said.

“We just keep surviving. Yeah. A repeat survivor. I just want it all to settle. Lounge around playing music with people. It’s like every day now is survival. It’s too much.”

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“It’ll get better. I think.”
“Until they start designing floating condos, we’ll be surrounded by yuppies in fucking speed boats!”

(one hundred eighteen)
Anarchy will always exist in the underground, if that delicate social flower cannot survive under the burning hate of authoritarian oppression. As long as someone up there is holding a gun to our heads we will crawl in the dark on the dirt to continue loving and living our life the way we want to. Our ideas cannot be exterminated.

Another generator brings electricity to the dark space under the over pass, the windows of the train shine out illumination as it howls thru the concrete sky above us, every twenty minutes, loaded with people going anywhere but here. Like magicians we channel our electricity into coils and wires and thru cones vibrating, we form groups for this music making and we dance, we climb on top of the steel containers that are sitting on truck wheels and take off our clothes, fucking there. We make out between trucks, our things falling out of our pockets. There are hay bales here too,
and we roll on them. We drink whiskey, beer, and eat a bag of specialty donuts. Together, feels free and safe.

Reality returns with the sun. West Oakland light rail station. Concrete under foot, dusty black rails.

The train comes howling into the concrete station with a gust of wind and robotic beeping. I am on top of the overpass now.

The scene is always somehow grim. Only the drunk and insane are smiling. I am leaning towards the insane, so much cheaper and easier to relate to. I ride and get off, stopping at the top of the stairs, I see a young woman’s face staring intensely out at me from the train I was just on. In a few moments she will be gone. Our eyes lock for that instant. She knows it too. I look away. The train leaves. Every day this happens, every night, people look out, people look in, look at each other hard, feeling all kinds of things, judging, loving, hating, wanting. The train moves on. The moment is over. They never see each other again.

Later down on San Pablo Avenue the social services office swallows me, sitting on the floor in the back against the wall, the chairs are zip tied to each other, too close for me, inside my bubble, the three foot proximity bubble, so many damn people in there, shuffling in line, sitting with numbers. Mine is A019. A
baby in the corner starts to scream. A hideous noise. Condoms! Condoms! I curse to myself. The sonic baby device has disabled my compassion. A man shouts from somewhere, “No babies inside the building!” I get up and go to the other side of the lobby, away from the tortured little soul. Read my comic book. It’s all I’ve got right now, just that book between me and the madness all around. A fantasy. I do escape. The reality is screaming babies. Half the lobby turns their heads to look and see what evil with sharp teeth is pulling the guts out of that baby to make it scream that death scream. The mother laughs and shrugs. She has already been driven mad by the thing. In this moment i think i hold a ticket marked A019 and it will allow me entrance thru the gates of hell which must surely be somewhere nearby. Having grown up christian, I consider this explanation.

They call me forth, and thru the chaos I am given an interview time. In two hours I can return. Thank god. I return and soon meet with the interviewer, a Cambodian woman, she is very kind. Tells me her life story. When I told her the name of the state I was born in, a glint stirred in her eyes, her best friend lives there. She shows me photos of her daughter, tells stories of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, slitting the throat of
her father. She wanted to go back after so many years, start an agency to help the people of her homeland, it was the dream of her and her friend in Colorado to do this. Her daughter would be 18 in two years, out on her own. That’s when she thot it could happen. I wished her good luck. I was approved for food stamps and i picked up my things, left the cubicle, stepped into the photo and thumbprint scanner room, let them microscopically digitize parts of me, allowed them to form a virtual symbol of me. Come back tomorrow to pick up your card, get here before ten, the lines get long.

Rode the black 3 speed bike up into the hills of Oakland, met up with Alex to do some work on fancy houses, houses that people wanted to move back into. The return of the pyramidal power structure. Those at the top liked to look down at those on the bottom, and not metaphorically.

The gentle curve of the Earth rolled along the horizon, beyond the San Francisco peninsula, the round ocean beyond. I thot I had seen too much of what this world, too much of it’s human side. I longed for that solitary hermitage up under a giant oak tree, simply enjoying the passage of my breathe in and out of my body. Curiosity had got the best of me. I was a
piece of society now. A cog that pretended it wasn’t a
cog, hoping that pretend would cast a spell of reality.

Curiosity! I wanting to know everything! That was
my youth, I wanted to learn how to read and then read
all the books in the world! This was magic. I started
with the bible, with the cool red edges, and people thot
it was so important. I wanted to know how machines
worked, I tore them apart to see what was inside of
them, then wired them back together differently and
plugged them in too see what would happen. They
exploded. Curiosity. I was a cat in a former life. When I
was about 7 years old I went to the Hewlett Packard
company christmas event, in a giant room that muse
have been the cafeteria for the factory there was a
parade of popular television characters, Sesame Street,
and there came Big Bird, a towering yellow creature!
“It’s fake,” I said, “Look at the legs!” I snuck out under
the velvet rope to hold the crowds of squealing
children back and I peeked under the skirt of Big Bird,
and what I saw was terrifying. Big Bird’s legs were
attached by stilts to a human being up in Big Birds
head. Big bird was a human being. Fuck. “Get back
here!” my mother yelled, and I ran back to the safety of
the velvet rope, terrified at the collapse of illusion.
What other things in this world were illusions? I also
thot, cool! I know something that nobody else does.

“What did you see?” my sister asks me. I looked around with wide eyes, fearing retribution from the authorities for discovering this massive hoax, “There’s a guy on stilts under there!” She looked at big bird, “Nuh uh!” There was no way to convince her, “Uh huh! Go look.” She shook her head, “No way, I’ll get in trouble.” One of my two parents scolded me again, “Stay behind the rope, Robert.” From behind the rope I watched Big Bird stroll down the isle, surrounded by his comrades with suspiciously human movements.

Alex slashed down thru some ivy entanglements and opened up a broader view of the western skyline, and he stopped for a moment, the metal singing of the machete silenced so that only bird songs reached them, “Remember when people used to worry about someone pushing a button and blowing up the world? It’s like a joke now, it’s like, we wish we could go back to that, just the POSSIBILITY of world destruction, just a vague possibility on the horizon. Now the reality! Turns out we were blowing up the world every day, all of us, every time we put the key in the ignition, every time we burned that fossil fuel. Scientists have decided to call this age of the Earth the Anthropocene Age, “Anthro” meaning “People” in Latin, cause we
have had such an effect on the environment of the earth. Isn’t that something.”

“That’s depressing.” Taffy said, “I’m depressed all the time now. I used to remember when I wanted to know everything, and now I wish I could forget everything.”

“Depressed? Specifically, what about?”
“I dunno. Everything.”

“You don’t know. Everything.” Alex looked at him a moment, waiting for further response but Taffy just stared out at the horizon, across the Oakland hills, the bay, the weird dark blurs of strange ships anchored out there., “You have the opportunity to be happy Taffy, the luck of it! You have food, shelter, love. And you choose to be unhappy. The world is full of people in fucked up situations, miserable people! People with no food, no water, no shelter, people with bodies that are rotting away, painfully clinging to life. How dare you squander your life, go out and be happy! Live your life, it’s yours! Don’t sit around being miserable when you could be happy. Go help the desperately miserable people!”

Taffy glanced at Alex, “Today the woman knocked on my door again. Asking for money. A few dollars just to get something to eat. My face went cold, no, no I
said. People coming to my house asking for money. This is a bad precedent to set, this aint the salvation army, this aint the people’s bank! “I’m broke.” I said, what I always say whenever anyone asks for money. As long as I think I am earning every dollar I make, that’s gonna be my answer. Maybe I could spare a buck, but I don’t want people to think I have money laying around just to give out like Halloween candy! But compare us, that woman and I, I haven’t begged for money on the streets in many years, I have learned how to get what I want, and I was born with some privilege too, I probably have a lot more money than she does, I probably could spare a few bucks. But I wont do it. Why? My spine aches with the labor that earned me that money, bent over the yard of a person richer than I, pulling weeds in the hot sun. I can’t give it away like that. To someone who is gonna show up on my doorstep every week and tax me. No. I’m suspicious of people asking for money. But I will always drop a dollar into the hat of the accordion player at the train station. Even if it was my last dollar, I will always give it to the accordion player. The accordion player plays on and on and doesn’t say a word, doesn’t alter the song when I drop the dollar in, maybe smiles a little wider, the accordion player plays
on, filling the tunnel with music. I should have given a
five or ten. I will always give to the accordion player.”
“That’s good. Hold on to that. If you can’t relate to
that woman that shows up at your house, you’ve lost
touch with who you are. Have you forgotten what it’s
like to be living on the street, to be on the road? Have
you forgotten so soon? The next time she shows up on
your doorstep you cook her a grilled cheese sandwich
with iced tea.”
“What if she never shows up again?”
“Then I guess you fucked up. Get over it.” Alex
went back to slashing the vines, “This is kinda fun,
huh?”
“It is actually.” Taffy smiled, “Are you imagining
battling your way thru a horde of assholes like I am?”
Alex smiled and took a vigorous swing at a swatch
of ivy, “Hah!”
“You know what’s really weird. That millions of
people died, maybe even most people died, but
capitalism totally survived. Barely even hiccuped.
Here we are, working our asses off once again. For
money.”
“Well. They can call it whatever they want. Same
thing has been going on for thousands and thousands
of years. Human beings fucking with each other,
climbing on top of each other to get to the top of something. Fuck it. I don’t even want to know what’s up there. Just let me alone with a little money and time off, relax with my people. Enjoy life. No stress. It’s not so bad if you just love being alive.” Alex grinned and slashed at more vines, “Ha!”

Taffy smiled, “People are too adaptable. It has helped us survive as a species, but individually, we are getting screwed. We shouldn’t tolerate this shit again. We should stop adapting and start resisting. You know, a long time ago, I vowed to never work at a shit job again. It’s not worth the psychic trauma. If I have the urge to quit, I listen to that urge. I walk off the job. No amount of money is worth the death of your spirit.”

Alex looked at Taffy, “So how are you feeling about this job?”

“Well, I’ll tell you. I’m not gonna grow old doing this.”

Alex laughed, “As you stand there planning it, life happens.”

“Bumper sticker.”

“Nope. T-shirt.”

* * *

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I am dirty and sun burnt, the day is done. I transition into my time. The fun part of work, getting off, the ride downhill. A smooth running bicycle is the difference between happiness and misery. The tires are good hard and rolling, I love it. The gears in the hub are fucking with me, skipping out of gear, spinning free, they want to retire. The metal is done being gears, it wants to be rust now. I understand. The gears have gone out now, the hub lays at the bottom of the new bay where I threw it. The graveyard of all things. I unlock my boat and row home. Next! Chicken soup. It’s better now. The battle seems to claim a little piece every day.

We get wine to celebrate being alive. We drink it together. The fog comes in from the ocean, slides thru the city, moves over the calm water of the bay. We live among the clouds, they surround, pass thru us, and we are drunk.

Audible Waves: The Vibrators (Whips & Furs), CSS, Queen, Condenada live at Thrillhouse (SF), Reckless (live in West Oakland), Hog’n-Tha-Glory-Hole (live), DNR (live), Frozen Teens (live), Street Legal (live), Toxic Shock (live), Judas Priest songs permanently recorded into my brain, weird mix tapes in Xarick’s shack, Rhapsody, Kate Bush again, La Fraction, Taylor Dayne. (Records that are fun to listen to at 45 instead of 33: Judas Priest: Live In The East, Strip Mall Seizures).


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Fucking Theater: Fanciness VS The Void! (In Minneapolis at the Open Eye Theater and on my birthday in Kansas City, MO, at the Studded Bird), The Reign of Persephone (fire show at the Bedlam).

Thank you to all my friends.