

It Runs in the Family

2037 A.D.

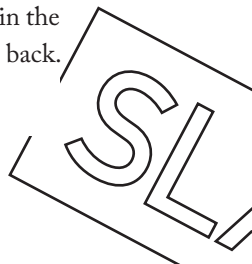
I won't beat about the bush. I don't much like my daughter. In truth, she doesn't like me either and didn't from the time she was a child. Most would think it unnatural for a mother to dislike her own child. I suppose so. Likewise, for a child to disapprove of her mother. More typically, it's the other way around. I liked her husband Roy better, not much.

When I was a girl, my father grew hops and green beans mostly on the farm. We had the migrant farm workers sleeping under the trees at harvest. Hard workers and respectful. At my age, it seems more dream

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By
William Luvaas

now than reality. It's something you learn about life, living so long. It's divided into chapters. All together mine would be a dozen. When you've been writing a book so long, you barely remember the early ones. I do remember that I loved running down the bean rows chasing my sister Beverley. We played hide and seek when our cousins came to visit. I squatted behind a row of beans, listening to them search for me in another row, shuffling and whispering, the dummies. We weren't supposed to move from our initial hiding spot, but I did. I'd sneak into the trees and hide behind an oak. Even as a girl, I didn't believe in following the rules. They never found me, except that time I was stung by a bee and gave myself up, screaming. Today, I wouldn't likely be stung what with pollinator die off. A single hive left on the farm now, my great-granddaughter Kennedy tells me. Back in the day we had a dozen. I would gladly be stung all over to have them back.



From the pictures Kennedy sent, I don't recognize the place after the last flood. It breaks my heart. Kennedy wants me to come see for myself, but I've seen enough in her photos: crops washed out, barn and outbuildings half collapsed and carried off. The farmhouse my great-grandfather Homer built in 1885 (where I grew up and my daughter Sunny was born), and always kept up nicely, has a water line six feet up the clapboard walls. They haven't bothered repainting, given the mold and mildew that has taken up residence in the walls. The furniture sat under water for two weeks before the McKenzie subsided and flood waters drained away towards the coast. Now it sits moldering in a forlorn pile by the barn. Sunny hasn't heart to burn it—antiques from Great Grandpa Kirby's day.

I can't say what it was turned Sunny and me against each other. Maybe Rachel, the love of my life. Sunny didn't approve of her. Of us. Of who we were. Rachel was a second mother to her and spoiled her rotten. Sunny repaid her by calling us an "abomination" after school one day. Who put such ugliness in a nine year old girl's head? Bigoted townsfolk talked in front of their children, no doubt. From a parent's mouth to a child's ears. Rachel forgave her. I once asked Sunny why God created us this way if he disapproved of us. She shook her head like I was posing a riddle. "He created you as natural born women, not what you became."

"So your God isn't in control of these things? I thought you believed he was."

"That's blasphemy, Mother," she cried. No use reasoning with a true believer.

Maybe it was a mistake to name her "Sunny." Expecting a child to be smiling all the time is expecting too much. Their cheeks would grow tired. There was something hurt and moody in her from the get-go. She didn't have a father like the other children; she resented it, and likely suffered because we were considered freaks.

Kennedy says in her Instabook, which she has given me access to, that they made it to the Coburg Hills during the flood. How I can't imagine, given roads flooded and water up to chest level on the I-5. From up there, she filmed the Valley below, covered as far as the eye could see with

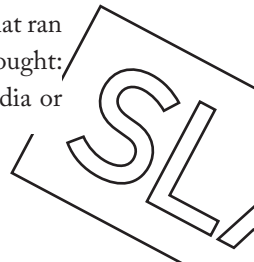
rippling black water, clear to Springfield and the buttes of Eugene in the distance, rising out of the water like atolls, up toward Albany to the north. The McKenzie lapped against the Coburg Hills, which formed its new bank. Overwhelmed by downpours from an atmospheric river, the Lookout Point Dam on the Willamette failed, then the Cougar Dam on the Mckenzie, sending a wall of water into the Valley. Kennedy insisted they must flee, given water rising six inches an hour, but Sunny didn't want to abandon the farm.

I recall, as if it was yesterday, standing with my father atop Kelly Butte, looking down at flood water covering the Valley floor and Springfield below, eddying around houses and submerging cars. People stood on rooftops, tiny and forlorn, waiting for rowboats to rescue them. The entire Valley had become river. Father took my hand and, as if bequeathing me a prophecy, said, "You can't build on a flood plain or farm it either. We're on borrowed time. Soon the river will take it back." The Kirby Farm was a quarter mile from the McKenzie. Its yearly floods had enriched the soil for thousands of years and provided us bountiful harvests. But we'd forgotten that the river had only loaned us the land and could reclaim it at any time.

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"I told Granny Sunny she was being stupid," Kennedy told her Instabook. "She said I lacked faith in God. 'What's God got to do with it?' *He once drowned the whole world, she said. Now he's doing it again to cleanse us of our sins. God's will be done.* I half agreed with her, but disagreed about which sins and said I'd rather be Noah than some Biblical redneck tending his flock by night. 'Sometimes God wants us to get the hell out. Doesn't your Bible say so?' You aren't making any sense, she said."

I've always loved the farm, but never liked Coburg, especially once the suburbs started crawling north from Eugene, like mutant amoeba swallowing everything whole. It was a hick farming town when I was a girl: Willamette street and a few shops catering to local farmers. But in those days, you could scoop handfuls of water out of Henderson Creek that ran on the south side of the farm and gulp it down without a second thought: clear, cold and moss-filtered. Delicious. Not a worry about Giardia or



other bugs. We would plunge our heads in on warm days after raiding the Marionberries, our lips stained purple. A few years later, I wanted only to leave that boondock town: farmers in bib overalls with a straw stuck in the corner of their mouths like a toothpick, church on Sundays and potluck dinners on Thursday night. But today I prefer it as it was to what it has become: gentrified and prettified and rigged with strip malls.

Back then, we were stuck in the past, while the times raced forward: JFK and the Civil Rights Movement and Free Speech at Berkeley and the anti-war movement and the sexual revolution. I was missing it all. Up mornings at five a.m. to milk the cows and slop the hogs. I'd help Dad plow or pick beans or hops, repair the machinery and barns in winter. They lacked a son so made do with me. Beverley wasn't any use, occupied as she was with girly things: softball and Girl Scouts and the junior prom and hunting a husband before she graduated high school. She found one in her prom date, Tommy *Harley* Peterson (not after the motorcycle but his mother's maiden name).

I was one of those kids who sat alone at lunch. Not a single date in high school. The town freak who wore dungarees and plaid shirts to school, while other girls wore frilly dresses. But I could tear a harrow apart and put it back together again; I knew welding and carpentry. Farmers are jacks of all trades; I admire that. Work was the best of it. It was the social bit I hated. I attended college for one term at Oregon State in Corvallis. That was enough. If I needed to learn something, I'd learn it on my own, like farmers do. I was proud of my straight F record.

After high school, Mother's friends arranged blind dates for me with local boys, fearing I wouldn't find a husband. They guzzled beer and smelled of cow manure. I didn't care how a boy smelled as long as he wore a condom. Soon the local boys were lining up to take me to a drive-in movie out Highway 99. It was a ritual in those days to lose your virginity at a drive-in. Making out in the backseat of some boy's Chevy, listening to Marlon Brando or Rock Hudson on the speaker phone. However, it was Marlene Dietrich's and Bette Davis's voices that really got me off, which should have told me something, but didn't. I'd become a little famous in the neighborhood: Katie Kirby, Coburg's wild child.



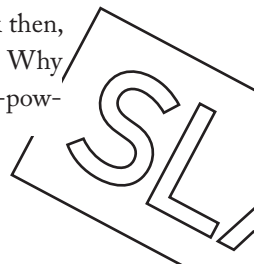
I started going into Eugene for the anti-war rallies on campus, and met a girl named Rachel one day at the farmer's market, who lived on a commune up the McKenzie. I drove her home in the pickup. We spent the weekend fucking, and I learned what the local boys couldn't give me. Dad was furious that I'd kept his pickup all weekend so he couldn't deliver sweet corn to the Lane County Fair. Two days later I left for California. I was twenty-two years old.

2029 A.D.

Looking out the airplane window that last time I visited the farm in '29, I hardly recognized the Valley as we circled for a landing: endless suburbs reaching their greedy fingers into farmlands, runways long enough for Branson Long-haulers to land, cruising in from London at 50,000 feet and 900 MPH. London to Eugene in five and a half hours. Imagine! They had expanded Eugene Municipal a few years earlier, when local boosters decided to make Eugene a metropolis. Plenty of room for expansion, with farmers selling out to developers. Wind generators on the Coburg hills and plenty of trees nearby to feed the biofuel plants and provide all the carbon-zero power the city needed. It needed plenty, given yearly heat waves that forced residents to install A/C where it hadn't been needed before.

Things didn't work out well for the boosters. They'd built themselves a world class airport just before people stopped flying. My plane was only one-third full, which was okay by me, since you wanted distancing. You never knew when a new variant would arrive. The ticket had cost me half of what I spent on my Hydrovan the year before, but I knew I wasn't up to driving all that way. This might be the last chance I got to visit my daughter. Like her or not, I owed her a last goodbye.

Exiting the air-conditioned terminal was like walking into a sauna. I'd called for an Uber, and there he was, slapping the front fender of his antique minivan and boasting, "This here is got one million miles on the chassis." People kept old cars on the road as long as possible back then, given we were running out of fossil fuels faster than anticipated. Why buy a new car when there might not be fuel to run it? Hydrogen-pow-



ered cars were still out of reach for many.

“Almost as many miles as you got on you, grandma.” He sniggered, thinking himself clever. The boy looked barely old enough to drive. His hair shaved close around the back and sides of his head, leaving a tonsure of hair circling the crown that stood straight up as if waxed. The current style. To my mind, he looked like a monkish space alien, which I suppose was the idea. Unisex was in, too. Unless you looked closely, you couldn’t tell a boy from a girl anymore, which I suppose was the idea. End of the binary era. No one was born male or female anymore. Some would ask, “How did you get here then?” I avoid the subject, not caring much one way or the other. Still, you don’t dare use the “s” word anymore. From what I can tell, young people don’t have “s,” and many believe that “s” is bad for the planet. Population Zero and all. I half agree with them and had only one child myself. Although I wonder how the kids reconcile their hatred of procreation with their love of species threatened with extinction. We can’t save animals if they don’t have sex. There! I’ve said it. I’m glad we had plenty of it in my day. Life was more fun back then.

“Hot enough for you?” the boy asked, sniggering again. From the rear, his head looked like a carrot top, neck a touch orange in fading light. We passed acre upon acre of deserted housing developments. Unfinished, really. Some houses nearly so, but doors standing open and windows shattered. Looted. Copper wiring and plumbing fixtures torn out of walls. Others mere skeletal frames. It reminded me of when I lived in Riverside County during the housing crisis of ‘08: developments abandoned mid-construction. I let out a heavy sigh.

“Listen, lady, I was only joking,” the driver said. “I respect old people. I’m not like some of them. I know dudes who bump into old guys on the street and knock them over. I figure it ain’t your fault I’m going to die young.”

“Why do you think you will die young? None of us can know that.”

“Scientists say we will. I don’t know anyone in my generation who doesn’t believe it.”

“How old are you?”



“Seventeen. About what you are backwards.”

“I’ll be eighty-six next week.”

He whistled. “Wow! You don’t look it, lady. Hey, I’m not objectifying you or nothin’, okay. I’m just saying—”

“It’s all right. I’m not offended.”

“In my line of work, you have to be careful what you say. I had a lady got pissed off at me when I told her I want kids some day. She called me an earth hater.”

“That’s an ugly thing to say.”

He shrugged. “In my line of work, you come to expect it.”

Seventeen years old and working full time! A pity. It was becoming a necessity for young people. We were returning to great-grandpa Homer’s day when all young people but for the rich worked full time. The boy sounded like a fifty-year-old New York cabby. No ambitions, no hopes, no desire to improve on his lot or belief that he could. Most young don’t have. So different from my generation when the sky was the limit. Even as babies we were expected to boom. Back then, he would have driven an Uber as a stepping stone to something better. The kids have stopped believing in something better. Except for those like Kennedy.

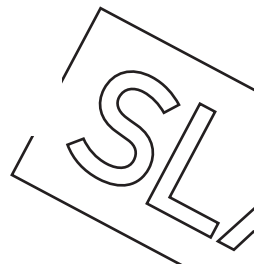
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He pulled up the long drive from Coburg Road and dropped me off behind the farmhouse.

It hadn’t changed a whit: barnyard beyond the drive; the great old barn, once red, had weathered to raw wood, chicken coop in a shed-roofed addition one side. Not as full of hay bales as it once was. Sunny kept a single Guernsey cow. There were stalls for four in the barn. The A-frame pig sty devoid of pigs. Rows of strawberries and corn to the north, a fringe of trees to the south. After Roy’s death eight years ago, Sunny had kept the farm up on her own. Good for her.

Imagine my surprise when my nephew Harley stepped out the back door and scooped up my suitcase. “Let me get that for you, Aunt Kate. You shouldn’t be lugging suitcases at your age.”

“I’ll manage.”



He shrugged and put it back down. I hadn't seen him since my sister Beverley's funeral two years before in Arizona. Vowed then never to see him again. His head was shaved bald but for sideburns spilling into a mutton chops beard under a silly Hitlerian moustache. Such a peculiar look, especially for a man with a weak chin, which looked like a soft-boiled egg bordered by his fierce black beard. Sideburns reached up pathetically in search of a hairline, his bald head glazed with sweat. I suppose men in the Liberty Corps considered it manly, along with their black storm trooper boots, baggy camo pants, and sleeveless white t-shirts. Standard uniform of the American Brown Shirts.

"I didn't expect to see you here," I said curtly.

"You don't sound real happy about it." He let go a raucous laugh, just as Sunny appeared in the doorway.

"We expected you yesterday, Mother."

"They held the flight in San Francisco until they had enough passengers."

"There you go!" Harley barked. "It's what you people have been rooting for. I'll bet you all wore face masks, right? Fascist government orders."

"I always wear a face mask. I don't need orders."

He laughed again uproariously. "I'll bet you don't, you fucking people. Am I right, Sunny? We got a country full of freedom-hating socialists."

"If you mean me, I'm neither."

He pistoled a finger at me and clucked his tongue. I can't say how many times he did that at Beverley's funeral reception. We'd argued fiercely about Liberty Corps' patrols on the Mexican border. I didn't wish to do that again. "If we are both going to be here, let's try to be cordial. For your grandmother Beverley's sake."

"I doubt Grandma B gives a damn anymore."

"Harley is always welcome here," Sunny said. "But you invited yourself, Mother." Turning to Harley. "She calls out of the blue, first time I've heard from her in years, and announces she's coming north to visit. Just like that. Like we talk every week on the phone, like normal people do—" turning to me "—normal mothers and daughters."



“When was the last time you spoke to your daughters, if I may ask?”

“That’s different! They rejected me, I didn’t reject them.”

“I didn’t reject you, Sunny. We don’t see eye to eye on things. I don’t want to be arguing with you every week on the phone.”

She made a “phooey” sound with her lips, turning to Harley again. “Imagine my shock! I stared speechless at her face on the screen for thirty seconds. I couldn’t speak a word. She hadn’t changed a bit. Except she wore her hair tied up in a bun rather than spilling down her shoulders hippie-style. Gone white. Her lips more pursed. But you couldn’t mistake her. ‘Has someone died?’ I asked. ‘No one died,’ she said, ‘but I likely will soon, and I want to say goodbye.’ How could I refuse her? It’s the Christian thing to do.”

“It’s the human thing to do. Christians don’t own it.”

She ignored me. “Like it or not, we’re family.”

“There’s some of it I like and some I don’t.” Harley’s explosive laugh. The only person I’ve ever known to assault you with a laugh. I don’t doubt he laughed every time he shot a burst of gunfire at poor fleeing refugees at the border.

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“Can’t we try to get along?”

“I’ll give it my damndest, Aunt Kate. I liked you once...as a boy. I really did. You were a hoot, like Mother said. I never agreed with your politics, but I liked your style.”

“And I’ll give it mine. We will try to be cordial.”

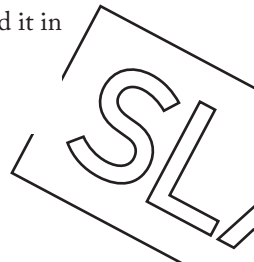
“Still, about the only thing we agree on is we all gotta eat and shit. Excuse my French, Sunny. But maybe you people don’t think so anymore and plan to give our last ear of corn to some foreign parasite.”

“I mourned your father’s death in Vietnam,” I said, hoping to find common ground. “Mike was one of the last Americans to die in that war. Such a waste. I know you think his country let him down by pulling out—”

“Leave it, Aunt Kate!” The pistol finger again.

“I’m frying chicken,” Sunny intervened. “I’ll bet you haven’t had it in ages, Mother.”

“Frying? In this heat?” I asked.



“You can’t beat Cousin Sunny’s fried chicken.”

“I never would have invited you both at the same time, but Harley just showed up after you called. I’m happy to have him.”

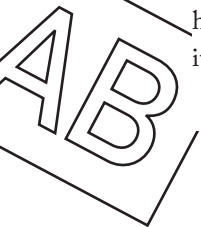
“I always just show up.” He laughed. “I never know when I’ll get the chance.”

You’re too busy assaulting people at the border. But I held my tongue. As best I could tell, he came up to visit regularly. Kissing cousins. I hoped not literally. She put me upstairs in the granny attic Roy built for his mother years ago. What an idea: spending your final decades mummified in an attic.

Harley did try to be affable at dinner, although it wasn’t affable weather. Maybe ninety-five in the house at seven p.m. Sunny had the doors and windows wide open and the fans on, but the breeze was no match for the humidity or the flies. They swarmed over our plates and the fly globe hanging from the ceiling, and fell off one by one, zapped by microwaves, making little plunking sounds against the floor. Sweat trickled down Harley’s cheeks into his beard. He didn’t seem to notice, used to it from the desert, no doubt. Sunny looked wilted after standing over the stove. “It’s the fourth day in a row and still May,” she said. “I worry about our berry crop. We won’t have pickers in this heat. Kirby corn won’t fill out like it should. Kernels will shrivel up like Indian corn. I worry about August. I hope it will let up, but if it’s God’s will....”

“There’s some of it makes sense to me,” Harley said. “It’s not all fake news. It never used to be so hot up here. Down in the Sonora, there’s days when we can’t go out on patrol. Maybe 125 degrees. A man’s brain shuts down in heat like that. The heart can’t get enough blood to it. The invaders come from hot places; they’re used to it. They cross in droves on hot days, knowing we’re laid up. Nothing we can do about it but try to find them later. It’s some say they don’t need water; they’re built like reptiles that way. But even reptiles need water.”

“Oh, for goodness sake, Harley. They’re human beings!” I’d tried to hold my tongue, but some things I can’t tolerate. At least he’d modified it to “invaders” rather than an uglier word.



“Have it your way, Aunt Kate. No one’s saying they ain’t human, just another form of human.” His laugh echoed off the walls like a dog’s startling bark.

“Pastor Gustafson believes it will pass,” Sunny said. “He believes God is testing us, and encourages farmers to plant and show their trust in the Lord. Otherwise we’re following Satan’s plan. If we put our faith in the Lord’s plan, he won’t let us down.”

“What is his plan? Drought and famine? This has nothing to do with God, Sunny. It’s a man-made disaster. No avoiding it, whatever you believe. All we can do is try to endure it.”

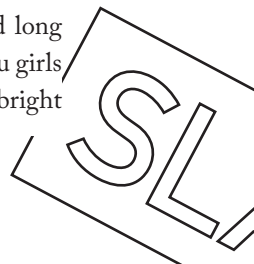
She glared at me. “Take Satan’s side and believe the heat is here to stay, and it will. You can’t ever give the reigns to Satan. He’s trying to bring hell up from down below and have us all burn in Hades. Hell on earth, that’s his latest scheme.”

“You’d be the expert on that, cousin. I don’t buy into climate change, but it’s like I say, some of what Aunt Kate’s people are proposing makes sense. Windmills and such. They’ve always used windmills to pump water from wells, and sailboats use wind power. They got wind turbines all over the Mojave and Sonora Deserts. Some places the wind never stops blowing. It makes sense to harness it. This aqueduct plan to bring water out from the Midwest makes sense, too. They’ve got too much, and we don’t have enough. Everyone wins. That’s good capitalism. Maybe you don’t agree, Aunt Kate?”

“I do one-hundred percent. I think there’s lots we can agree upon.”

“And lots we can’t.” His booming laugh.

It was so hot in the attic I decided to sleep outside. Beverley and I did most every summer night as girls, under the glittering canopy of stars. We’d look up in wonder and point out the constellations, sometimes invent new ones, and marvel at the Milky Way, that hazy swash of stippled paint across the sky. Then fall into sleep so sweet and deep it felt cosmic. Sometimes Father joined us, emerging from the house in his red long johns with a blanket under his arm. “I come to see what trouble you girls are up to and ask the heavens for a little rain.” The sun woke us up bright



and early, glowing red against our eyelids. I've never since known such sweet wakings.

I went to the spot on the front lawn where we used to sleep and threw down an old comforter I'd found in a cupboard. A Douglas fir had grown taller over the decades and blocked out a quadrant of sky. Otherwise it was exactly the same. Except the grass didn't provide as much cushioning for my old bones as it did when I was a girl. I covered myself with a sheet, which felt heavy, given it was still in the nineties. Heat had brought up the scent of the river, green and mossy and primordial. A smell you never forget, as you don't smells from childhood, stored deep in the reptile brain. Cricket chirps rose in crescendos, then subsided, like someone was conducting them. Beethovens of the night. It gave me hope. Some of what I'd known as a girl was still here. Maybe we won't lose everything.

At first, I thought it was my father's ghost walking down the steps from the porch and boosted up on my elbows, alarmed. Then realized it was Harley, wearing only his boxer shorts, bare chest aglow in the starlight.

"You gave me a fright."

He chuckled. "Sorry, Aunt Kate. Mind if I join you? It's hotter than a pisshole in the house. Not a breath of air. Ten degrees cooler out here." He towered over me, turning full circle to look up at the sky, taking it all in. He had a gun in his hand.

"It's a wonder, isn't it? Makes me half believe." He didn't say in what, but smoothed down his sleeping bag, nearby, and lay the gun beside it. He saw me looking. "No worries, Aunt Kate. I don't plan to shoot you." His booming laugh was an affront to the night. I believe he realized it.

"Why do you need a gun here? What's to be afraid of?"

"You never know. My Glock is never three feet from my hand, night or day. Nights in the desert especially. What some of you people don't realize is there's all kinds of invaders want to take what we have away from us. Somebody's got to protect it."

I was about to disagree when a curious thought occurred to me: Maybe we must enter another's world open-mindedly, without a touch of

judgment, if we hope to connect with them, no matter how repugnant that world is to us. Not condone it, just enter it. That's the only way we can comprehend their longings, needs and fears, what they love and what they hate. And maybe why. Although I can't imagine entering a Nazi's world. Harley's was something short of that. We lay quietly a time, looking upward, lost in our thoughts, which might not have been dissimilar—our insignificance in the face of such magnificence, comfort, too, in knowing we are part of it. It is our home. From what I could discern in the starlight, Harley lay atop his sleeping bag, head resting on clenched fingers, elbows stuck out like a boy's might, vulnerable somehow, his face relaxing toward sleep. It occurred to me this is my sister Beverley's grandson. We are connected by blood. A part of the Kirby farm rightly belongs to him. I'd half forgotten that the farm was in my name. Mother and Father left it to Beverley and me. Now that she was gone, it was officially mine. After I'm gone, it will pass on to Sunny and Harley, as our closest living kin. I'd regarded it for years as my daughter Sunny's farm. I must speak to her and Harley and propose that she have it until she passes, then it goes to her children and Harley. Meanwhile, any of them should be welcome on the farm if they need a place to shelter, which they all might soon. There's room enough for everyone.

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"Snakes mostly," Harley said, startling me. "It's new varieties up here, given the heat. Invasive species: copperheads and cottonmouths. We're safer with the gun."

"You must worry a good deal about snakes in the desert."

He raised up to look at me, surprised I should take an interest. "Whoooey, do we. Plus bark scorpions and black rats who sneak in to poison our water supply, including Antifa and some of your people, eco-freaks, and invaders. It's plenty to worry about."

"My people don't poison water supplies. We provide water for those who need it."

He didn't respond. Maybe he'd decided to walk a little in my shoes as well. After I thought he'd fallen asleep, lying like a statue without moving, while I tossed and turned, trying to get comfortable on the hard ground, he said, "Dreams are the worst of it. We all have them. Comes



with the territory. Soldiers' nightmares. Over and over, I see my dad lying dead in the jungle. No one gives a damn. They don't bring his body home in a flag-draped coffin. They leave it lying over there to mold and rot. Trouble is, you can't shoot a nightmare."

"I'm truly sorry," I said. "I think about your father often, my nephew, and what your mother went through after he died. I told her you could come live on the farm, but she's a city girl."

"Nobody never told me that. Thank you, Aunt Katie. I wish we had."

On Wednesday it reached the 110 degree mark on the mercury thermometer that has hung on the front porch since 1937 and couldn't go any higher. When we were awakened by the sun at six a.m., Harley looked ragged and tired, his bare chest glazed with sweat. I'd heard him moaning and muttering in his sleep. The wet dog smell of the river lay over the land in a heavy blanket, a milky haze blurred the edges of things. It was hard to breathe. Harley warned me not to go out in the sun without a hat.

It cheered me that we hadn't quarreled since my arrival. At Beverley's funeral, we had argued bitterly about climate refugees crossing the Mexican border, hoping to escape famine and gang violence and find safety in El Norte. They were met by Liberty Corpsmen like Harley, who turned them back or worse. Camps of starving people hugged the border from Tijuana to Ciudad Juarez on the Mexican side. Aid groups parachuted food and water to them, but got no help from the Mexican or American governments. The Border Patrol aided the Liberty Corps. Tens of thousands starved. The American people too wrapped up in their own troubles to give a damn. I'd volunteered with All of God's Children to leave caches of water and food along the most-traveled routes through the Sonoran Desert. Liberty Corpsmen often destroyed our caches and were said to poison the water. Harley seemed capable of that in our ugly exchange, his flushed face tight as a fist, eyes narrow slits; a sharpshooter sat behind them firing rounds at me. "Why do you hate us so much?" I asked "Have we offended you? I really can't understand it."

“Everything about you people offends me. You hate your own country and want to give it away to foreign invaders and terrorists. But you know what I hate most? I hate your goody-two-shoes Why-do-you-hate-us-so-much whining. You look down your noses at us, but if we look back, we’re assholes. I hate your fucking hypocrisy.”

“These ‘invaders,’ as you call them, are human beings. Poor, hungry climate refugees who have risked everything to get here. Brave and strong and worthy of our respect.”

“Hah!” He yanked up his shirt, revealing a purple scar six inches long near his navel. “Here’s the respect they give us. You don’t know shit.”

“I’m sorry someone did that to you, Harley. But surely the women and children aren’t terrorists.”

“Go ahead and put out your CARE packages, but I’ll tell you what—”

“Things need to change. We must learn to get by on less and share what we have with others. There’s no choice if we hope to survive. We have to see the world through new eyes. There’s room for everyone, and everyone should be welcome.”

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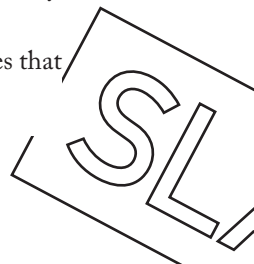
“We have to keep the bastards out. And I’ll tell you what! If I ever catch you in my crosshairs down there, I just might pull the trigger.”

There’d been none of that this time. We’d tried to get along.

We slept on the lawn again that night. I wore my swimsuit, still damp from our dip in the McKenzie earlier—in the swimming hole under the bridge that we often visited as children. There were swarms of people cooling off. From Eugene mostly. The overloaded electrical grid led to brown outs in much of the city, leaving many residents without A/C. A festive scene: children shouting and splashing, parents lounging in the shallows, drinking beer, or floating on innertubes, ferrying six packs of beer behind. Tubing was an old tradition on the McKenzie.

We lay looking up at the stars, diminished by a haze from the paper mills and biofuel plants and dust from parched fields, the cosmos distorted by our abuse of the planet. Heat lightning lit up the northeastern sky. Harley whistled. “Bad news! That’s going to spark fires.”

“I saw how dry the forests are flying up here. So many dead trees that the green has gone half orange. Such a pity.”



"I used to fight fires. Hardest work I ever did."

"How's your mother getting on? She remarried didn't she?"

"We don't agree on things," he said flatly.

"I suppose it runs in the family. Are your wife and little boy still in San Diego?"

He was quiet so long I thought he'd fallen asleep. "The thing is" he said at last, "Jessica won't let me see my boy. She says I'm a threat to them. She got a court order against me."

"I'm sorry, Harley. I don't believe you would harm them."

"Never, Aunt Kate. I've never laid a hand on them. Still, she got it."

The cricket serenade swelled and we fell quiet. When I was a girl, bullfrogs played bass down by the river. Silent now. A fungal infection was killing them off. When Harley started talking again, it mixed into a dream I was having about hunting bullfrogs at night as a girl.

"It's something happened that's took over my dreams, Aunt Kate. I can't shake it loose. We were out on patrol in the desert one day and come across some ragtag invaders escorted by armed coyotes. There was a firefight. I took down a couple. Then I see a head pop up behind a tussock." His voice trailed off. "You have to understand, Aunt Kate, I'm in the thick of it. It's him or me. So I don't think twice, I pull the trigger. And see—for a split second—a little girl's face in my scope, eyes huge and terrified, looking back into mine. It's too late. I hear the crack of the rifle echo around me...echoing and echoing through my dreams ever since."

He fell quiet as if awaiting my response. I couldn't speak, either in comfort or rebuke.

"I dropped my rifle. As far as I know, it's still lying there. That's when I come north, walked across the desert on one of their trails to Sells, Arizona and took the bus from there. I ain't going back. I'm no good for it anymore. That gunshot wakes me up every night, and I see that little girl staring at me, wondering why I shot her. Sometimes she keeps me up all night. There's times she hides her face, others she looks directly at me, a hole in her forehead. Sometimes she wears an expression like she expects it. She's trying to say something, but I don't want to hear. I'm afraid of

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what she will say. I can't get her face out of my head, and won't until the day I die. I don't hate them, Aunt Kate. You have to understand. No! Hate is an ugly thing. I only wanted...I wanted...." Shaking his head. "I won't be going back. Never. I'll stay here and help on the farm. Help others. Try to find some way to earn her forgiveness...that little girl. Somebody's daughter, sister maybe, her whole life ahead of her. I'd give mine to bring her back."

"Of course you would, Harley. I know you would."

