

Fall 2025

EPOCH

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The Rider

REMY BARNES

It is the summer of all things burning, all things dying. Smoke so thick we cannot tell where the sand meets the sky. Men pocked with scabs, sores, scars, sunburn, and rash wander the heat-blackened asphalt. No shadows. No streetlights. Fire on every ridge. The wind races across the mountains. We watch from the veranda. It is how we imagined the apocalypse but not how the apocalypse will be. Mark takes a picture of the Pantone orange sky. The color, he says, will be recreated for a couch cover.

It is the day before Labor Day and Mark and Samantha have invited me and Kaye over for a barbecue. We hire a babysitter to watch our daughter, Elise, who is nine years old and insistent that she not does not need a babysitter. Of course this insistence only makes the need truer.

It is too hot to actually barbecue so we order barbecue-style food from an app and have it delivered. We watch the little car navigating the peaks and valleys to Mark's hilltop home. When the driver arrives, he is sweating. The brown bags he holds have dark stains where his hand meets the paper. He asks for some water. This small request is shocking even to me despite the fact that I am a socialist. Samantha gives him a pink can of sparkling water. He opens it with a satisfying hiss and we are all surprised to see him drink it right there on the porch. We don't know when it will be appropriate to close the door. Doesn't he have other deliveries to make? I think but don't say. Then Mark closes the door.

"He was going to ask for something else," he says. "I could tell."

Mark has an e-mail job at an office in Century City. He oversees a team who oversees another team who oversees another team that nobody sees because they are based in Mumbai. Both the job and the company will be gone in a year. He does not like me because, save for drunken

buffoonery, I have no personality. I do not know this now but will realize it later during one of my several attempts at sobriety. I will have a breakthrough at an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting in a strip mall next to a dumpling restaurant in Pacoima and then immediately relapse by drinking eleven bottles of Tsingtao in an hour and a half. Elise, newly sixteen, will drive me home. She will not make eye contact with me. She will put me to bed. She will slip beneath my door an earnest yet sterile letter that I will dutifully read under my hangover's pure and blinding glare, which describes my lapses as a parent as the reason why she has chosen to live full-time with Kaye in Sacramento. But this will not happen for many more years.

We eat the meat and soupy vegetables out of Styrofoam containers—the white bread and yeast rolls left untouched, unconsumed—before retiring to the uncomfortable leather couch to watch television, something mundane to fill the places where conversation might occur. In the middle of a reality show about real estate, the electricity goes out. Save for our measured breathing, the house is absolutely silent.

We return to the veranda. With all its lights extinguished, the downtown buildings jut from the earth like antediluvian monoliths. Sirens shriek wraithlike through the miasma. But all of that happens below, beyond. Here, the greasy ash comes to rest on the surface of our rose-colored wine and thickens on our tongues when we sip. Kaye tries to teach us a card game, but the rules are too esoteric. Samantha says it's like trying to hear prayers in a foreign language. Samantha is a Foley artist for motion pictures, giving films all the clangs and bangs and clatter of everyday life. Her job done well, she says, goes unnoticed. I finish another glass of wine. Kaye puts her hand on my knee.

Samantha says she would like to tell a story, a story she's only told Mark and no one else. Only I notice Mark rolling his eyes. He stands and refills all of our glasses but hesitates when he reaches mine. Only I notice that he provides me with less than anyone else.

The story takes place last summer, when Samantha was going to spend a long weekend recording nature sounds in Kennedy Meadow, deep in the Sierra Nevada foothills. More specifically, she was hoping to record the call of the California Scrub-Jay, native to the area, for a film on which she'd been hired. A film about two birders who fall in love searching for the same elusive bird.

Samantha had gotten a late start and by the time she turned off the interstate, the half-moon was high, a thin slice of citrus against the stars glittering like wet ice in a cool drink. She climbed six thousand feet in a series of crisscrossing switchbacks toward Sherman Pass, and several times had to pull over to let another vehicle by. She played and replayed the Scrub-Jay's singular pitchy screech over her stereo to be able to distinguish the bird's song among the others. In a little over an hour, she reached the Inyo National Forest where, the year before, a number of brush fires had reduced vast stands of piñon trees to cindered trunks. They emerged from the loamy dirt like gnarled fingers grasping for the sky.

On the way to the campground, she stopped at the Drunken Mule, the only restaurant in the area, which was populated by a mix of local gentry outfitted in cowboy gear and Pacific Coast Trail hikers with dark tan lines on their sandaled feet. She drank a cold beer and ate a hamburger. There were two signs taped aside the cash register: one about the burn ban in effect and the other an informational sheet on how to spot the signs of human trafficking. One bulleted point among the half dozen or so: "watch for women alone." This struck her as odd and, somehow, incidental. She was alone now yet didn't feel as if she was in any danger. Perhaps, she thought, I am the danger. This detail she did not share with the group, but only with me, two weeks later in a stolen bed, because some things are better said in the dark. She should have known, she told me, something would go wrong when she saw the sign.

A mile past the fire marshal's station, the sole local authority, a pair of halogen lights cut the dark. Two thin figures on an ATV buzzed by, narrowly missing her Jeep and causing her to swerve off the rutted dirt road into the feathergrass. In the rearview, the ATV disappeared. She pulled back onto the road.

There was one other tent at her campsite. The patched canvas exterior looked like mottled skin. There was something unsettling about it. She found a spot beside the Kern River, swept rocks from the ground beneath a sprawling juniper tree, then assembled her tent. Coyotes yipped in the distance. The other camper coughed. Watch for women alone.

The sun was low and bright the next morning, the temperature cool. She walked a well-trod path like some strange pilgrim, holding aloft

an omni-directional microphone like a torch. She recorded coffee percolating on a far-off stove, a hiker somewhere traipsing through the underbrush, and an ATV buzzing along the foothills. Finally, somewhere to the west, came the trill of the California Scrub-Jay issuing its unmistakable warning of a coming predator.

She crossed a branch of the Kern River that was low even for the time of year, the water barely at her ankles. Above her eyeline, beyond the break of a hulking beaver dam, the green-gray river was still as a verdant stone. The way it fell from fullness to scarcity seemed like an illusion.

Dead sagebrush dotted the meadow like long abandoned cookfires still smoldering. At higher elevations, the sagebrush would still be blooming, purple petals emerging from leaves fragrant like incense, but she did not see them. She walked west for a long while chasing the birdsong. When she realized she'd lost it, she too realized she'd lost her way. She held the microphone higher, seeking the bubbling river in an effort to orient herself, but could not locate it. To make room for the audio equipment, she'd only brought a small bottle of water and no food. She figured she would not be lost for long. Perhaps, she admits to us now, this was a bit optimistic.

A slow fear began to set in once midday turned to the powdery purple of early dusk. Her water was gone. She peeled the pack from her aching shoulders and dropped it to the dirt. She took stock of her situation. A downed Ponderosa pine was splintered into soft woodchips the color of ash, among them, a number of dark crevices into which an imagined, or very real, prairie rattlesnake could burrow. Tin relics sprayed with buckshot and rusted the color of a bricklayer's hands lay amongst thistle and buckwheat. The desire to call out for help burned in her chest, but idiot's pride kept her silent.

She pressed her earphones to her head, sure she would pick up the din of civilization in some form or another. If sound could get her into this, surely it could get her out. Above her, bats clicked and swooped, catching crepuscular insects mid-air. Then, in her headset, among the chittering, she heard the now familiar buzz of an ATV. Breath moved through her lungs. The terror loosed its grasp. There, wherever there was, she thought she could pick up the road and then follow it back to her camp.

She emerged into a clearing of scrubby desert. Beneath her lay an

interlacing network of dirt paths for off-road vehicles. To the south, perhaps, she would find the main road. The ATV was maybe a thousand feet ahead. What was left of the sun glinted off the rider's helmet as they cut through the barren landscape. Given the severity of her situation, the exhaustion and dehydration, she thought to flag the driver down and ask for directions or maybe even a ride. Samantha waved her arms. The rider immediately swerved and began racing towards her at top speed, a haze of red dust in their wake. Soon, Samantha thought, she would be back at camp, just before the settling of the pitch-dark night.

The rider skidded to a stop. The dust rose and settled. Through their tinted visor, the rider said, "Do you have a truck?" Her voice was breathless and panicked. Her arms were toned and tanned with a crosshatching of scars all down her forearms.

When Samantha said "What?" the rider said, "My friends flipped their four-by-four over the ridge. My friend hurt her leg real bad. I need someone with a truck to get them out." She pointed, and Samantha followed her oil-blackened finger to the vacant ridge.

The driver took off her helmet. Sweat matted her auburn hair to her face. Her eyes were wide and truthful. She couldn't have been older than eighteen.

"Please," the rider said. "I just need to get them to the fire marshal."

It was likely an accumulation of a things that caused Samantha to agree. The caprices of circumstance, the fact that the driver was a woman with some amount emotional veracity in her face, and, perhaps most importantly, that Samantha herself needed help.

Samantha told the rider the location of her camp and then climbed onto the back of the ATV. She hooked her arms around the rider's waist. Her neck smelled of sand and heat and sweat. They rode fast. Samantha felt the stranger's heartbeat in the muscles of her back.

When they arrived, Samantha felt a pang of embarrassment as she realized just how close she'd been to her camp, not more than a twenty- or thirty-minute hike away. She'd hardly been lost at all. She peeled herself from the rider's back like a molting insect. The ATV hummed. A brief yet clarifying thought came to her then: she could simply thank the rider, pack her things, and leave, thus cleaving this moment from the previous. She did not know this person, had no

true loyalty to her. But Samantha had been raised on the notion that if someone asks for your help, you give it to them. This, she tells us, is one of the moments she returns to the most.

The rider rode ahead with Samantha following in her Jeep. The panicky adrenaline had found her. She was shaking as if a hard freeze had settled into her bones. She turned on the heat. The stereo defaulted to the AM sports radio Mark listened to the last time he'd driven. There was a Dodger game on and they were losing in the eighth. The ATV kicked up so much dust, Samantha could hardly see the way forward. The rider kept looking back at her to make sure she was still there.

They wound up the ridge from the meadow. The last bright volleys of sun shone in the corners of the coming night. She thought about calling Mark. Of course, her phone was out of battery. Even if she had called Mark, he would not have answered. We found out later, much later, he'd spent that weekend at a Holiday Inn Express in La Jolla with the woman he was having an affair with.

Two girls sat in the white light of a four-by-four utility vehicle come to rest in a tangle of sagebrush. The rider dismounted the ATV and then knelt before them reverently. They exchanged a few words and then the rider looked to Samantha. The headlights accentuated her sun-cracked skin and Samantha could not now tell how old she truly was.

The girls could have been in their late teens or early twenties. One, with dyed-red hair, had her pant leg raised. On her shin a thin trail of dried blood crusted with sand led to a silver-dollar sized scrape just below her knee. No doubt painful but hardly life-threatening. The girl seemed to be in shock and, when the rider asked her to stand, she seemed to not understand.

The rider said, "This woman is here to help you."

"Who?" the injured girl said.

"We need to get you into the Jeep."

"Where?"

The eyes and nose of the other girl were outlined by a pair of goggles, her chin and mouth darkened by grime. Samantha and this other girl helped the injured one to her feet and into the back of the Jeep where she could stretch her wounded leg.

"Go to the cabin," the rider ordered. The other girl nodded and climbed inside the cargo area with her friend. The injured girl stared

absently into the middle distance, her mouth hanging just open, blood in her teeth. Samantha couldn't help but notice the other girl looking at Samantha's audio equipment as if surveying artifacts in a museum.

The rider turned to Samantha. "She'll give you directions," she said. "It's not far."

As they passed the fire marshal's station on the main road, Samantha did not immediately consider why the original plan had changed. She has her theories now, of course but, then, she raced with adrenaline as if the injured girl's life was on the line. Samantha checked the girls in the rearview. The injured girl sat staring, unspeaking. She was in shock. Where had the rider gone? Why had she not led them there?

"Take a right here," the other girl said, and Samantha took a right. On either side of the road, ramshackle ranches and doublewide trailers stood behind long stretches of chicken wire. Signs read, "Do Not Trespass."

"What now?" Samantha said.

"I don't know the name of the road," the other girl said. "But it's Mariposa something."

Samantha examined the street signs, each peppered with bird-shot, said, "Mariposa Mountain?"

"Yeah, that's it," the other girl said. "Just follow it all the way up."

The dirt-packed switchbacks narrowed as they climbed the knap until it was only suitable for a single vehicle, with a sheer drop into darkness just off the passenger's side. In the back, the injured girl was making small noises now, moving her mouth as if tonguing a sore tooth. Her friend leaned close to her and said, "What did you say?" But neither her friend, much less Samantha, could make it out.

The rider was behind her now, the path back obscured with dust, as if there were only the three women behind and whatever was waiting ahead.

At the road's terminus, a small cabin. As soon as Samantha pulled in, bone-white floodlights kicked on, briefly blinding her. She felt like she'd been caught. She hit the brakes. A black pickup truck was parked in the driveway. Another branch of the drive led to the left, up a small incline where sat two sheds with locked links around their handles.

Two men appeared at the top of the incline. One was older with

a gray tobacco-stained beard, the other younger and covered in black tattoos. With the angle of her Jeep and the way the truck was parked, she would have no room to turn around, and she could not reverse the whole way back to the valley.

The rider killed the ATV's engine and began yelling to the older man. Samantha did not want to appear afraid but was. She depressed the driver's side door lock. The man with the tattoos rounded the Jeep and tapped on the hatch glass. Her first instinct was to keep it shut but the other girl said, "Could you open this?" and, almost automatically, Samantha did. The two girls shambled out. This was the last she saw of them. No one seemed immediately concerned about the injury.

The old man appeared beside her door. His eyes were bloodshot and the capillaries at the end of his nose were broken blue-black and red. He circled his finger, signaling her to lower the window. Within her there was this unconscious fealty to older men coupled with a—perhaps naïve—belief in the inherent goodness of all people. She rolled down the window.

"Where'd she find you?" the old man said.

"In the meadow."

"What were you doing out there?"

"Hiking."

In the rearview, the tattooed man was looking at the recording gear in her trunk. "What's this?" he said.

"What's what?" the old man said.

"Are you a musician or something?" the tattooed man said.

"No," Samantha said. "I record sounds for a living."

"What for?"

"To put them into movies."

"You out here with anybody?" the old man said. He was leaning into the window now, surveying the interior of the Jeep. Blotches the purple of sage petals bloomed across the papery skin of his arm.

"Put sounds into movies?" the tattooed man said, incredulously.

"A whole bunch of friends," she said. "A big camping trip."

"You staying at one of the Kennedy campsites?"

"Are you recording this right now?" the tattooed man said.

The rider appeared and closed the trunk hatch. Samantha was grateful for this small act. The rider said, "We need to get her to a hospital."

"We need to get the four-by-four," the older man said. "Is it wrecked?"

The two of them bickered for a moment about the injured girl's health versus the crashed utility vehicle out there in the desert basin.

"She's fucked up," the rider said and then lobbied Samantha. "Isn't she fucked up?"

Samantha wished she had not been brought into this conversation, into this relationship, whatever the arrangement was. She was tired and she was hungry and she just wanted to go back to camp, fall asleep and forget all of this. But exiting now would be nearly impossible and might necessitate some light vehicular assault. This was not to mention the truck blocking the turnaround.

"She hit her head," Samantha said, finally. "She probably has a concussion and needs to go to the hospital."

The old man looked at her for a long while, drummed his fingers along the door. Samantha held his gaze. Suddenly, he smacked the roof. Samantha felt her heart in her throat. But this was only the starting gun for the plan that was coming into focus: the tattooed man—the rider's brother, apparently—would retrieve the four-by-four while the old man and the rider would take the injured girl to the hospital. Both the old man and the rider thanked Samantha for her help. She shook their rough hands before the old man, the rider and her brother piled into the truck and pulled out. Samantha turned around and followed them back into the valley, relieved, assuming the incident was over. At the fork, the old man gave her a thumbs up. Then, they went one way and she the other.

She arrived back at the campsite a little after nine P.M., the night full dark. The long bright river of the Milky Way oscillated above the serrated teeth of trembling evergreen. The piebald tent, the other camper she hadn't met, were gone. The way the temperature dropped—the day all summer-warm but the night cool as autumn—made her feel as if she'd been away a full season. She'd forgotten the aborted search for the Scrub-Jay and could now only think of the events of the last half hour. She'd saved someone's life. Sort of. But, as she unpacked her camp stove to cook her evening meal, questions plagued her: why hadn't they taken the injured girl with them in the truck? Why was the old man so curious about her trip? How many campsites were there in Kennedy Meadow and could the rider recall the location of Samantha's?

She did not want to admit to us that paranoia had settled in. All kinds of things happen. Every day. Especially at night. When the door opens to these kinds of thoughts, others inevitably come through:

horrifying true crime podcasts she listened to, recordings she regretfully studied—Q042, and the Bittaker tape. The wind brought far-away voices, low revelry, making her feel especially solitary. She deconstructed her camp, packed it into the Jeep and then drove to the Drunken Mule.

My jaw feels tight and I realize I have been clenching my teeth. I say something like, “We could all use some wine.” Samantha says she’ll join me. When we depart, neither Kaye nor Mark say anything, but I can feel their eyes upon us even in the dark. We follow our phones’ flashlights to the wine cellar.

“Are you okay?” I say.

“Yes,” she says but I do not know whether to believe her or not.

She’s looking for a particular bottle. A pinot or something. It’s late enough that we should switch to red, she says. I wish I could think of something clever to say but I am in the grip of the alcohol. She finds what she is looking for. I touch her knuckle with my forefinger and, in a burst of chivalric purpose, offer to carry the bottle. We linger, each knowing that we will recreate this scene again in Evanston, in Ithaca, in New Brunswick, before returning to Mark and Kaye and the end of Samantha’s story.

She parked beneath a streetlight in front of the Drunken Mule. The only patrons were two hard-looking local men and an older touristy couple taking pictures with the namesake mule, taxidermied and anthropomorphized, standing on his hind legs with one of those orange beer helmets between his long ears. Samantha ordered a beer and a club sandwich that arrived on a stale hamburger bun. The bar had a campsite behind it with one spot left so she reserved it for the evening, feeling more secure sleeping among other people.

Not long after she sat down, blue headlights came through the windows along with the now familiar buzz of the ATV. The rider’s tangled hair swelled behind her as she pulled off her helmet. Maybe, Samantha thought, the rider had seen her Jeep and was coming to buy her a round. That she was romanticizing further enmeshment into these lives was not lost on her.

But when the rider burst through the doors, it became immediately clear she was not there to reward Samantha for her magnanimity.

Her eyes were red, and dried estuaries of tears cut streaks down her grimy face.

"My brother is going to kill my friend," she said to anyone who'd listen. "He's going to kill me."

The rider outstretched her arms. The uncanniness of the scene caused Samantha to view the rider as a player in some ad-hoc staging of a tragedy, giving a direct address, an appeal to the audience for some final sympathy before the curtain fell.

"Please," the rider said.

The bartender was already on the phone, which he then handed to the rider who tearfully relayed the information: her brother was unstable, had threatened violence before, and had remarked that her friend should be taken out back and "put out of her misery." The two men seated on the other side of the bar did not seem bothered by these events and continued their conversation albeit now quieter. The older couple looked on serenely, hands clasped in front of them, as if watching a television show.

When asked, the rider could not relay her address. She would give one set of numbers and then change them. Failing at this recollection, she said they lived at the end of Mariposa Mountain and repeated this location again and again.

When Samantha saw the black pickup truck pull up, and the old man step out, she wondered if she should say something, warn the rider, gesticulate wildly while screaming, "He's right behind you!" But she remained mute, immobile. She found she could only watch as the old man entered and attempted to corral the distraught rider.

The old man appealed to the bar, now a makeshift courtroom. "Look at her arms," he said. "Look at the way she cut them up. My daughter is fuckin' crazy."

"I'm not crazy," she said and then turned to Samantha, "Can't you tell them? You were there, weren't you? Am I crazy?"

The bartender was looking at Samantha. The tourist couple were looking at her. The men on the other side of the bar were looking at her. The old man was looking at her. The rider's yellowed teeth were bared, her pleading face framed by the hempen cables of her auburn hair. Her eyes the color of pond scum, red and wet, burrowed so deeply into Samantha, she felt as if she was being excavated. Or exhumed.

She wanted to be somewhere else, someone else, some serene sleeper in a quiet bedroom on the coast, but she wasn't. She was here inside the lives of other people. And at that moment, all she could think to say was, "I don't know."

That night, she drove as far as she could before pulling behind an abandoned Arco outside some skeletal oil town to bed down for the evening. She awoke to a knocking at her window and panicked thinking she'd somehow again been found by the rider. But it was just some wind-burnt stranger on a bicycle asking for a light for his cigarette. She screamed at him, she tells us. She told him to fuck off. She called him names she wouldn't repeat.

On the rest of the drive home, she listened to the raw audio data she'd recorded—first, all bird trills and cookstoves, followed by her unfortunate sojourn, replete with grunts and breathless cursing. Some stray thoughts like "the coyotes will probably eat my face first," and finally, the harried ATV ride. She almost didn't recognize the sound of her own voice as she bargained with the rider at her camp, a part she'd all but forgot.

"I could call for help," she heard her own voice say. "Or we could go straight to the fire marshal."

"No," the rider said. "No, we've got to get them now." The rider was so insistent. She was panicking, Samantha thought, and, in this panic, a single-minded fixation on getting back to her friends.

On the ride to the cabin, she faintly heard the broadcast of the Dodger game. They'd lost. There was the sound of the two girls in the back shuffling around, attempting to get comfortable while Samantha navigated the rough roads. When she heard the second girl ask, "What did you say?" Samantha pulled over. She rewound, turned the volume all the way up, and listened close, but the girl's voice was lost in hiss. She pulled her headphones on and pressed them close to her ears but there was just too much noise. The last thing recorded before the battery died was Samantha pulling up to the cabin saying, "What the fuck?"

Later, she called the fire marshal and explained how she'd been present at the bar when the incident between the rider and the old man occurred and that, earlier that night, she'd driven two different girls back to the cabin on Mariposa Mountain at the behest of the rider.

The fire marshal was more forthcoming with information than she'd expected: two sheriff's deputies from the neighboring county had been sent up to the cabin but found the gates locked and the house dark.

"In all likelihood," the marshal explained, "they took the injured girl to the hospital."

"Were they locals?" Samantha asked.

"The old man we know," the marshal said. "He gets thrown out of the Drunken Mule often enough. But the girls we don't. Or didn't. Never seen them before, and haven't seen them since."

This was all he knew or was willing to share. That is all she's willing to tell us.

The electricity has come back on and, now, we listen to a version of that recording, one from which Samantha has removed background noise and amplified unclear segments. She turns the volume up so loud it's as if the girl's small, gasping voice is scraping along the musculature of my skull. After, we play a short, telephone-like game in which we try to determine what the girl was saying. None of us can.

"What about the Scrub-Jay?" Kaye says.

"We ended up using a canned Mexican Jay," Samantha says. "Apparently the California Jay can't nest there anymore with the way the landscape's been changing. I'd misheard the call. I'd gotten it wrong."

"It's certainly unsettling," I say.

"She carted some hillbillies around," Mark says. "That's all."

"But the girl didn't know her own address," I say. "And the marshals never saw them again. Doesn't that—I don't know—disturb you?"

"There are plenty of explanations for that," Mark says. "Look, it's just a story. It doesn't require interpretation."

Kaye says, "At least you did the right thing."

"Did I?" Samantha says. "I don't know."

Though I will tell and retell it to myself for many years, the next time I hear the story about the rider it will be told to Elise while she is seated between Samantha and me on an airplane as we travel to visit Samantha's parents in Illinois. Elise, aged thirteen, will ask to hear the recording sometime and, to my surprise, Samantha has it on her phone. Elise will put headphones on and listen, face twisted in consternation, just as we all were those years prior in Mark's living

room. She will take the headphones off and say, "It sounds like she's praying."

On the drive home, I remark on the story once more, but Kaye does not want to talk about it. It's as if she wants to pretend the evening didn't happen at all. She accuses me of being drunk, which I am, but I deny it, naturally. This is what precipitates the end of our relationship. This is what will cause me to call her years later, on the eve of Elise's college graduation, to which I will not have been invited. Sober at last, I will make amends to those I have harmed from my rental in the Winter Park Mobile Home Community.

She will say, "Mark's house burned down."

"I know," I will say. "I heard." Though I don't, I hadn't.

We will have each discovered over the course of our lives that we are both unlikable and, because of this, alone, destined to be alone. Despite this realization, it will not draw us back into one another's company.

"You should come to the ceremony," Kaye will say. "We'd both like to see you." But I won't.

We slowly descend the hill from Mark's house back to flatland. As we pass through the city, I say, "You don't worry something like that could happen to Elise?"

"We will raise her right. She will go to good schools. She will not end up wandering the desert alone." She says it like an affirmation, trying desperately to manifest it into the world.

"No," I say. "It's not that." And it isn't. Not exactly.

"Then what is it?" she says.

Out the window, the sky above Los Angeles is red as coals at the bottom of a campfire. Ash falls like snow. It collects on the wipers. It collects on the windshield. There are people picking up their mail. There are people having dinner. There are people smoking cigarettes. Can't they hear it, what I can hear now? What Samantha heard then? There is something just beneath us growing ever larger, straining against the surface and threatening to breach.

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