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This novel excerpt presents the stories of three residents of the fictional town of
Charity, Nevada.

CHARITY, NEVADA

by

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CHARITY, NEVADA

“This is my favorite rock,” Chad said. He smacked his palm against the slab of granite as if it were the haunches of a horse. “It makes sense.” Kathryn hoped he was talking about the boulder itself, and not the copper plaque on the ground that read: “Here we rest our weary souls; We here take respite from our toils.”

“Come on,” Chad said. He climbed on top of the boulder and stretched down a hand. As he pulled her up, he said, “Your hands are soft.”

The boulder wasn't high, and was situated directly in the middle of the older part of town, where Fourth Street intersected with Larsen. Though her new vantage point didn't offer much in the way of a better view, Kathryn thought maybe that was a good thing. The view from higher ground would be depressing: a cluster of faded trailers and graying wood houses with patches of yellow lawn, then beyond that the strip malls that splayed out into the desert. There used to be a couple of old mansions and a train roundhouse from way back when, but those had been condemned and torn down when she was in grade school.

“Think about it,” Chad said. “Some guy saw this rock, like, 150 years ago, and was like, ‘Here's where I'm stopping. This is home.’”

“Seems arbitrary,” Kathryn said. “There's nothing here but dirt and sagebrush.”

“There's the creek by Mill Street,” he said. “And the hills. There used to be silver.”

It was early evening, and somewhere else they might be having a glass of wine at a nice restaurant, or watching the last of the sunset over the water. Chad handed her a flask. “Still drinking the Beamer, Katie?”

Of course she wasn't. She'd changed her drinking preferences along with so much else since she'd left here. You didn't drink Jim Beam in Washington, D.C. But she took a sip before handing back the flask. “I remember at parties back in high school,” Chad said. “You and Jimmy B. were like this.” He crossed the fingers of one hand and took a drink with the other.

“How classy of me,” Kathryn said. On a pole across the street, a blue and white canvas banner twisted in the wind. Every so often, Kathryn could make out the words “Bobcat Pride!!!” in athletic block lettering. “So when does everything start tomorrow?” she asked.

“Ceremony's at eleven,” Chad said. “Drinking starts at ten.”

“Perfect.” Kathryn took a bigger swig the second time around. She was only in town for another week—housesitting for her parents while they took a sightseeing tour of Australia—and was surprised at how little things had changed in the five years since she'd been back. Even her parents' house was exactly the same, with its beige shag carpet, wood-carved coyotes, and teal-and-pink color scheme. The constancy was both monotonous and comforting, and Kathryn found herself wavering between feelings of nostalgia and claustrophobia.

Right now was one of the nostalgic times. She remembered the parties Chad had mentioned—in caves out in the desert, or at friends' houses when their parents were

away. Chad had always hit on her after a few drinks, and she'd always found a way to turn him down. But for now, Kathryn decided the idea of having a favorite rock was interesting—even kind of reassuring in a way—so she and Chad made out for a while after it got dark.

“In 1862, a small band of settlers arrived at what is now Charity, Nevada. The party included Jeremy Cochran, Cyrus Larsen, Terrence Holly, and Mr. and Mrs. Evan Williams. In the years previous, Cochran and Holly had been minimally successful prospecting for gold near what is now Lodi, California. They had thus determined to seek their fortune elsewhere, and to help fund their venture, they called on former business associates Larsen and Williams. It is unclear why Larsen and Williams traveled out from New Jersey to join their associates; however, records indicate the entire party, including a local guide and several unnamed subordinates, left San Francisco bound for Nevada Territory on May 17th, 1862.

“Larsen’s journals indicate that the party arrived at a small creek on June 5th, where they made camp and planned to rest for several days before continuing on to Virginia City and its thriving mining industry. During their short stay at the camp, Cochran and Holly reported the discovery of a vein of silver in the nearby hills. Though the validity of this initial claim is now held to be in doubt, Larsen and Williams

apparently were convinced to continue to Virginia City without their companions and to return as quickly as possible with supplies and laborers.

“Larsen, Williams, and the remainder of the party arrived in Virginia City on June 16th, 1862. The two men spent a week making preparations to return to their associates, with Williams bearing the additional task of securing accommodation for his wife, Sela, who was in fragile condition and would stay in the comfort of the established town. The men left Virginia City with three wagons and eight hired workers on June 23rd, 1862, and rejoined Cochran and Holly eight days later. Upon their return, Larsen writes that they immediately began drilling and blasting for mining shafts, and started erecting a permanent structure for lodging.

“The first verified vein of ore was discovered on July 29th, and this discovery not only convinced the original party of four to remain at the site, but also spurred the arrival of hundreds of other speculators in the coming months. Williams would later receive word that his wife had given birth to a daughter in Virginia City on the same date, and had named the baby Charity.

From A History of Charity, Nevada

by Gerald Thurman, 1914

“Feel the magic,” Esmeralda offered. “Discover a magical experience.” But as usual, none of the mall’s customers would bite. Maybe it was because she no longer

smiled when she made the pitch, not like two weeks ago when she'd first started her job with Magic Pen, Inc. Maybe it was because the Magic Pen cart looked like crap and was smack in the middle of a space where people were trying to walk. Maybe it was because she was half-Mexican in a town full of white people. *Don't blame your life on your racial heritage*, her white mother had always said. She was probably right. But so was Esmeralda.

"Magic awaits you," she mumbled to an older man in a shiny purple sweatsuit. The man didn't even look her way. She'd been at it for over an hour, so Esmeralda allowed herself to step back and blend in with the gaudy drawings that festooned the cart. They looked like children's experiments with color and form. Really they were digital prints that came out of a shrink-wrapped packet from corporate. The manager had left them out for Esmeralda on her first day, to decorate the cart however she saw fit. *I want you to feel you have some ownership over this whole endeavor*, his note had read. *You want me to do your work for you*, Esmeralda thought.

A boy with a half-eaten candy bar wandered over and started grabbing at some of the drawings. "I can make a better dinosaur than this," he said.

"Want to try this magic pen?" Esmeralda asked. She opened one of the thick markers and handed it toward him.

The boy took the marker, and Esmeralda steered him to a pad of blank paper, which he immediately started stabbing. "It's broken," he said.

"Wait," Esmeralda said, and gave him a new pen. "Now try this one." He stabbed at the paper with the new pen.

“It’s broken, too,” he said.

Esmeralda took the new pen and brushed it over the paper with light, broad strokes. Angry little spots of red appeared. “See?” she said. When she went over the paper again, the spots turned blue.

“Let me see.” The boy held the marker gently this time, and stood on his tiptoes while he went over the page. Esmeralda held her hand behind his back without touching him, in case he lost his balance. He marked in wide horizontal strokes, turning the blue spots to orange. After he’d gone over the entire page, he turned back toward Esmeralda and grinned.

“Henry,” a blond woman yelled from over by JC Penney. “Get over here.”

The boy turned around toward the woman and held up his marker. “They’re magic!” he said.

“Right now.” The woman held several shopping bags in each hand. “You have crayons at home.”

Esmeralda leaned over the boy and tore off the sheet of orange stab marks. “You can come draw again next time you’re here,” she said, offering him the paper.

The boy turned to her and slammed the pen into her palm. “You’re fat,” he said, and ran off toward the woman who’d yelled.

Every piece of mail I get is emblazoned with the word “dismount” in slapdash blue or black half-cursive which I suppose indicates the fact that I live in a garage but I’m unclear about why the word has to be on every single piece of mail since the mail carrier should know by now it’s been over a year. What’s even more annoying is the consistency of the handwriting which suggests that either the scrawling comes from one specific person down at the post office or the postal service runs some kind of weird sloppy penmanship program as part of its standard carrier training each fall and spring but that doesn’t make any sense. One time I cut out all the dismounts for a few months and collaged them onto my refrigerator door with rubber cement to make sure and trust me they all look exactly the same except for the colors of the envelopes and the way some of the half-cursive letters cover over part of Mr. Derrick Olson or Current Resident. Sometimes I jot dismount on bills that I’ve clipped to my mailbox for carrier pickup and so far they haven’t been returned undelivered and I haven’t gotten any late notices from the gas company so obviously my checks have gotten to wherever they’re supposed to go which leads me to believe that the whole labeling thing is suspect and brings me back to the question of why they have to write anything on my mail in the first place. There are of course some interesting possibilities because I do happen to dabble in certain classified information relating to several unexplained incidents that have occurred in the Charity vicinity over the years and I’m sure the federal government is not happy about this and of course the post office is a government entity. My dad God rest his soul would probably tell me to get the hell out of here just to be safe and to cut all ties and live permanently on our land out near the old dried-up lakebed like we used to before he died but my dad also

taught me to consider the evidence and make informed decisions and since I have no hard evidence as of yet I can't actually *prove* that the sloppy dismounts are a means for marking mail that the post office then treats in a special way like maybe by looking through it with x-rays to find out its contents and keep tabs on me to make sure I don't go too far in finding out the truth. Plus legally Uncle Sam can't do anything to me through the mail or otherwise because all I do is live peacefully in my garage apartment and run a lawful business where I educate the public and conduct legitimate extraterrestrial research. Of course my dad would have something to say about the business too something like why the hell are you doing it so I have thought about some answers I would tell him and they are that one I need something to do two I'm following your example by educating people the way you educated me and three didn't it ever bother you that everyone thought we were foil-hat-wearing wackos who lived alone in a trailer off the grid and didn't pay taxes and killed rattlesnakes for dinner because we didn't trust the supermarket. None of that is technically true except the trailer but it's how they think of us so now I try to meet people in my store and around town and I'm trying to correct that impression and make friends with them now that my dad is gone and if the only thing spooking me is the word dismount scrawled across my mail I'm willing to take my chances.

Kathryn and Chad had gotten back in touch like everyone else does these days, via Facebook. About a week before she left D.C. for Charity, Kathryn saw Chad's post about Founders' Day. Knowing no one else who'd stuck around since they graduated, she sent him a message saying she'd be in town.

One thing led to another, and now here she was, standing in the fairgrounds parking lot and drinking a bloody mary from a red plastic cup at ten a.m. She and Chad had met up with some of his friends from the Fish and Game Department, and they'd all gotten started early.

"Ready for my big performance?" Chad asked as he sipped on an Irish coffee.

"What exactly is your big performance, anyway?" Kathryn said.

"I'm a ribbon holder."

"A ribbon holder?"

"For the dedication of the new football field. Me and Principal Colton will be holding two ends of a giant-ass ribbon, and Mayor Marv's going to cut it with a huge pair of scissors."

"Just like in the movies," Kathryn said. "Because of your feats on the old field, I imagine?"

"That's right," Chad said. "Embarrassing, but right."

"You're not embarrassed."

Chad shrugged and refilled his coffee.

Kathryn would be embarrassed. Or would she be gratified? High school had certainly been her high point, in many ways. Senior class president, homecoming

princess, salutorian: the whole works. But it's one thing to be successful in a tiny town in the middle of nowhere, another to fit into what she now considered the real world. Time had left this place behind, and after high school, she'd been only too glad to leave it behind just the same. "A podunk dog and pony show," was how she described Charity to friends in Washington, and looking around at the oversized pickups, outdated hairstyles, and ill-fitting jeans, the description was certainly apt. Still, there was something innocent and genuine about the crowd milling around the parking lot and waiting for their version of a big event.

"It's time," Chad said. He looked like the rest of them, and for a brief second, Kathryn wished she did, too.

"Break a leg," she said.

"Locket-Tristan Prize Fight A Sensation"

Wedding Plans Set for October

Local heavyweight pugilist Corey Locket tangled on Saturday last with Jerry "Jewel" Tristan of San Francisco. The fight lasted six hard-scrabble rounds before local wonder Locket went down, upon a mighty Tristan uppercut to the jaw. This after Locket had landed numerous well-placed punches on the famed California fighter. The referee determined a knockout after a dazed Locket was unable to stand before the count of ten.

The occasion was well-attended by Charity citizenry, including Mayor Cyrus Larsen, Doctor Robert Sellers, and Misters Jeremy Cochran and Evan Williams of the Charity Mining Corporation. This was the first event to be held at the newly-christened Charity Fairgrounds, generously erected by the corporation for the benefit of our fine town.

The fairgrounds will be the site of another memorable event next month, when city patriarch and Charity Mining Corporation co-founder Evan Williams will lead both of his daughters down the aisle at a double wedding, with a reception to follow.

Charity News and Ledger

September 16th, 1882

Esmeralda sat on the hard wooden stool by the Magic Pen cart and looked around the mall. If she was overweight, then so were about 75 percent of the customers, she thought. Which didn't mean it wasn't true. She watched the shoppers trundle their plastic bags of clothing and bakeware and ceramic trinkets from store to store, and wondered how they could afford all those extraneous things. Most of the shoppers were women, and they must have had husbands with good jobs, or maybe even an income of their own from selling makeup or PartyLite candles at private parties. Esmeralda had thought about doing that, but she didn't know anyone who'd want to buy those things. In fact, she hardly knew anyone in town, despite having lived here for almost a year. She'd never

really made an effort to make friends, had never wanted to come here in the first place. But her fiancé – former fiancé – had promised that his job with the mining company would be worth it. Six months later when the mining company folded, she'd woken up one morning to an empty bed, an empty driveway, and an empty bank account, and she hadn't even been all that surprised.

A petite woman pushing a baby carriage had come over to click her manicured red fingernails over the row of Magic Pens. She looked at Esmeralda. "Want to see the magic?" Esmeralda asked quietly.

"Oh," said the woman. "I'm just looking." She picked up a marker that wrote in five different colors at once, and pretended to consider buying it before she set it back in its place and moved on.

Esmeralda wondered how long before she'd be fired from this job. She'd made less than fifty total sales in two weeks of working, and the orientation materials she'd been given said that a good salesperson would make about four sales per hour, which meant thirty-two sales in an eight-hour shift, and 160 sales in a full-time work week. Of course, every sale she didn't make also meant a lost commission, which started at \$1.00 per sale and went up the more you sold.

She got up from the stool, and pulled out a marker that could write on any surface and then just as easily erase itself with a second stroke. Maybe the most depressing thing was knowing that she didn't have the money to move out of this hick town and get back to Florida. This job was supposed to give her at least that.

“Feel the magic,” she said to the next passerby, a lady with a Brookstone nametag that said “Gina.” Even though she knew “Gina” wasn’t looking, Esmeralda drew a giant blue X on the top of the wooden stool where she’d been sitting. “Experience the magic,” she said as she erased her mark.

Uncovering the truth is no easy task I can tell you because there are trails of evidence and documentation that are unavailable to anyone but officials in the highest ranks of the U.S. government and with how the government is obscuring even the most mundane information these days it’s more important than ever that extraterrestrial researchers like myself remain vigilant in spreading the word. Like this afternoon I’ll be heading out to Founders’ Day and distributing literature because I’ve got some new copies of my brochure and this time they’re on hot pink paper so everyone will definitely take notice. And there’s the business of course The Outer Worlds museum where I’m open every day from 9:00 a.m. till 12:30 at 1482 Poplar Street and even though people don’t come by all that often when they do they leave a little wiser. For example just this morning a hippie couple walked in and they had no idea about how the government is embroiled in top-secret activities that prove the existence of alien life so I told them all about it the Roswell incident and the documented abductions in Northern California and the military research on alien spacecraft at Area 51 all of it because one thing my dad taught me was the importance of laying out all the evidence in support of our position.

The woman had silver rings in her ears and nose and all over the damn place and she said You really believe this shit? The evidence is right here I said and then I showed them a taped news interview with former Area 51 physicist Bob Lazar and the photographs of unidentified aircraft over our local airspace My dad took this one I said when we got to the last photo which is a black and white shot that I've enhanced with the software at the library and it shows the two metallic discs are *right there* and you can see the sun glinting off their flat ovals. The boyfriend said he could kind of see the spacecraft at least I assume he was the boyfriend because kept touching silver-ring woman while we talked and the only place she *didn't* have a ring was on her left ring finger where women wear rings when they're married. But couldn't those be sun spots from the camera the man asked and so I handed him the photo so he could get a closer look and after he tilted the photograph so that the light from the fluorescent bulb on the ceiling glinted off it he said Holy shit is this thing doctored and I said it was enhanced to bring out the detail and I took the photo back and looked at the woman without a ring on her ring finger who had wandered toward my display rack of space related novelties such as glow in the dark aliens you can stick on your bedroom walls and pencil erasers that look like spaceships. Then the boyfriend pointed at Bob Lazar's name in a headline and said I heard that guy's story is suspect no evidence of government employment no college graduation records and I cut him off right there and said What do you think they'd just keep that information lying around to be unearthed by people like me or do you think maybe they'd get rid of everything and make it like the guy never existed which the boyfriend admitted that they would probably get rid of it and I said goddamn right because another thing my dad

taught me was to always make our case in a forceful manner even if the evidence is light. My dad would tell me Of course the evidence is light we're talking about classified information here do you think they're publishing it in the daily news or do you think maybe they're destroying it so people like us won't find out what they don't want us to know but still in my mind I had to admit the hippie guy had a good point about Lazar. It was almost time for me to close up and head to Founders' Day so the couple left with a business card and one of the new pink "Don't Let the Truth Get Away From You" pamphlets that I made at Kinkos and when I offered to take down their information so I could call or email them with further developments they said they'd think about it but didn't give me their phone number or email address and also the woman bought a Moon Pie on their way out but I didn't tell her it had been there on the display rack since I opened last year because I think Moon Pies are like Twinkies in that they have a very long shelf life and stay fresh for decades.

Kathryn sat alone in the bleachers—the Fish and Game guys were still in the parking lot “getting ready”—and stared down at an unnaturally green playing field. According to Chad, the city had decided on artificial turf to conserve water and to make sure there was a durable playing surface year-round. She could feel the cold metal of the fairground bleachers through her cotton pants, even though it was only September.

Around her were families of four or five, the kids bundled up in coats that would be too warm by noon, and the parents wrapping their hands around steaming travel mugs.

In a few minutes, the dedication ceremony for the new sports field would kick off the day's festivities, such as they were. If she remembered right, the festivities basically consisted of some games and contests for the kids, and food and plenty of alcohol for the adults. Below her, one end of the field had been set up with orange traffic cones to mark out lanes for three-legged races and tricycle-riding contests, while the other was serving as a massing ground for the high school band. Just past the band, and right beyond fairgrounds property, a sign on a small white tent announced "Beer here!"

Kathryn was glad that no one had recognized her so far—maybe more people had left town than she thought—though she was sure she wouldn't get through the day without having to chat with a classmate's mom or a former teacher. She'd had a close call last week when she'd gone to buy a scarf at the mall. Just as she'd stepped out of the accessories store, she spotted a group that included not only a former neighbor known for his 24-hour prayer marathons, but also her old youth pastor and his wife. She'd darted around to the other side of the cart in time to avoid them, thank God, but she hadn't stopped making up answers to their inevitable questions since. *So where do you attend church now? What congregations have you visited? Have you met any interesting Christian men out there? If you're having trouble finding a congregation, we can help.*

This was just the type of conversation Kathryn wanted to avoid. She nuzzled her mouth and nose into the folds of her scarf as the first strains of "Home Means Nevada" wafted over from the band. While she considered other likely questions from different

members of her past—*What do you do for a living? Are you married? What are your plans for the future?*—Chad walked out onto the field with, indeed, a huge blue ribbon. He and the principal held the ribbon taut in front of a cheap wooden podium, and Mayor Marv approached them with a wave.

The speech was predictable and lifeless—“proud to unveil,” “our storied tradition,” “state-of-the-art,” etc. When a guy in an old miner’s costume brought out the huge scissors and handed them over to the mayor, Kathryn felt something she couldn’t quite place, though it seemed somehow akin to pity.

“Charity Mining Shuttters Operations”

After almost 140 years in business, Charity Mining closed its offices yesterday after a sixth straight year of operating losses. CEO Thad Walters cited dwindling ore output and increased competition from overseas corporations as the main reasons behind the Board of Directors’ final decision.

“It was a gut-wrenching decision,” Walters said. “We want to thank all of our employees and the entire community that has been so supportive for so many years. This corporation would never have been what it was without the support of the people of Charity.”

The company had 102 employees at the time of closing—down from a high of 480 in 1966—40 of whom had been recently hired to operate a new location which

turned out to be unprofitable. According to Walters, all employees who have been with Charity Mining for at least five years will receive a share of the company's liquidation. When asked about compensation for the 40 newer workers, Walters said, "Regrettably, we simply don't have the capital to be as generous with them as we can be with our long-term employees."

Charity Mining was the first incorporated business in Nye County and provided the main economic activity in Charity from its inception in 1865 through the mid-1960s, when the operation first began to contract.

"No question, the loss of Charity Mining is a significant loss for the community," said Mayor Marvin Chambers. "But we've been diversifying our economy for many years now, and we'll get through this together." Chambers added that the tourism and the service sector have shown growth over the last decade, and the city is in discussions with an undisclosed firm for the building of a resort-style hotel casino that could replace many of the jobs lost with Charity Mining's closure.

Workers who spent their last day at Charity Mining headquarters packing up their offices showed a range of emotions from sadness to optimism.

"We'll be okay," said administrative assistant Sherry Kohl, who had worked for Charity Mining for 14 years. "We'll have to make adjustments, sure, but I know that in the end everything will work out all right."

Charity News and Ledger

March 28th, 2006

Esmeralda checked her watch: almost 1:00 and the end of her shift. She circled the sales cart, aimlessly reordering and restacking the various pens. Today she'd sold only five, four of them to the same woman, who said they'd be perfect for her third grade class. That brought her sales up to a grand total of 52. She was definitely going to get fired soon.

A few minutes before one, Esmeralda's replacement arrived, an attractive blond girl from the high school with the improbable name Rain. "Hey," Rain said as she slipped her arms from her jacket sleeves. "Busy today?" she asked.

"Not really," Esmeralda answered. She stared at Rain's hands as they folded her jacket into a fluffy square. Rain turned away to set the jacket on top of the stool, and Esmeralda noticed how her waist was accentuated with a black patent belt, her legs shown off in clingy dark jeans. No kid, no matter how disrespectful, would call Rain fat.

"So how many sales?" Rain asked.

"About ten or fifteen," Esmeralda said, "I'm not sure."

"Wow, that's cool," Rain said. "I mean, cool that you don't know how many. I totally keep track of every single sale, for the commission thing."

"How many sales did you have last week?" Esmeralda ventured.

"142." Rain pulled her hair behind her head, twisted it a little, and let it fall back across her shoulders. "Not as many as we're supposed to have," she said. "I'm getting better, though."

“I’m sure you’ll be fine,” Esmeralda said.

“How about you?” Rain asked.

“About the same,” Esmeralda said. “Today was a slow one, though.”

Above her left breast, Rain wore a round blue sticker that said “Go Bobcats!”

“Where did you get that?” Esmeralda asked, pointing.

“Oh,” Rain said, “they unveiled the new stadium today.” She rubbed her fingers across the sticker. “It’s pretty awesome. You should stop by.”

“Mmm.” Esmeralda had no interest in watching a bunch of peppy little teenagers flirt with each other and sneak sips of beer when they thought no one was looking. “Are you a cheerleader?” she asked.

“Cheerleading’s lame,” Rain said.

Esmeralda crouched down and fished her own jacket from underneath the cart, wishing she’d thought to fold it and put it on the stool like Rain did. As she put it on, she was acutely aware that it didn’t have the right shape, and was printed with pastel flowers when it should’ve been a solid color like black or dark brown. “Anyway,” Rain said, “you should totally go down there. They’re giving out free Indian tacos.”

“What’s an Indian taco?”

“It’s like this taco, but on fried bread,” Rain said. “Hey, want to see the magic?” she asked a middle-aged man with a gray mustache who was passing by the cart. He came over and watched Rain demo several of the pens before trying one.

“See you later,” Esmeralda said. She wasn’t even sure Rain was listening. She was too busy being the successful salesperson that Esmeralda couldn’t be, at least not

here. “When Mr. Sherman comes to close up the cart,” Esmeralda added, “tell him I quit.”

Rain looked up from the demos with a frown that turned into a laugh. “You’re so funny,” she said to Esmeralda. “See you next weekend.”

As Esmeralda walked to the exit, she heard Rain saying, “No, like *this*,” and she could just imagine the man leaning a little too intently over the paper, with his head touching Rain’s hair, before he bought a three-pack of markers that would never be used. Maybe she’d go to the stupid track unveiling, or whatever the hell it was, and get some free lunch.

When I left Outer Worlds for the fairgrounds I folded up my card table and tied it to the top of my station wagon then put my weatherproof banner and a box of pamphlets in the back seat thinking I would start in the parking lot by leaving some pamphlets on people’s windshields or maybe in the cracks of the car doors near the handles then set up somewhere near the action where people can stop by and talk and I can connect with them on a personal level. Wouldn’t you know it the first person I see when I pull into the parking lot is State Senator John Carol who looks all casual in jeans and a corduroy jacket not like when I see him at the legislature where I went pretty often during the last few sessions to testify about unexplained activity at hearings and once I even got the legislators to name a highway in honor of extraterrestrial visitors down by Area 51 and

even though I suggested homage to specific alien races like The Embassy Saucerian Highway or The Alexandran Galaxy Highway in the end the lawmakers voted on The Extraterrestrial Highway which I guess is okay and may even be helpful in the sense that it's all-inclusive. I honk a couple times and Senator Carol waves and even though he's getting into his car I get out and catch him before the door closes and say Senator and hand him a pamphlet through the unclosed door then he asks me how I am and I tell him my name and say I'm fine. He says he remembers me from the legislature and asks me if I'm still fighting the good fight and he says Keeping us safe from ET which is kind of funny but I don't laugh too hard because I want to make my point which is that there's no evidence they want to harm us and that's what I tell him before I say that I'm more like an educator or maybe an ambassador not a fighter. Senator Carol nods and I remember that he voted for the Extraterrestrial Highway which I lobbied my ass off for that thing and passed out Moon Pies and UFO buttons and huge sunglasses that looked like alien eyes and you should've seen all those dudes in ties wandering around the halls with their buttons and sunglasses slapping each other's hands like mad. I tell Senator Carol that I'm still working on the runway and he says The runway as if he's asking a question so I remind him that it was from my testimony last year and it's the runway I'm building on my dad's land although I guess it's technically my land now. Senator Carol says Oh yeah for the aliens and I say it would be much better if we could just widen the Extraterrestrial Highway like I suggested last year since now we have it and Senator Carol says he'll keep it in mind then I lobby some more and say It would make a perfect landing strip which might bring economic benefits. While we're talking a man with a big beard comes

up to us and repeats what I just said Landing strip with economic benefits and looks at me with his eyes half closed and says You're that guy and then he lets out a sound that seems half like laughing and half like coughing. He's wearing a dirty white t-shirt and blue polyester pants that are too big and when he laughs or coughs or whatever I can see graying gums above his dentures even though he seems a little too young to have dentures. I hold out a pamphlet to him but he pushes my hand away and talks to Senator Carol and says This nut job bothering you Mr. Senator sir and the senator says that we're just talking then the bearded guy says I voted for you and I explain that the senator and I are talking about important legislation but the man laughs again and says I know who you are and I knew your dad and I know you're both crazier than shit then he repeats my words again Important legislation. I remember how my dad said the reason we didn't live in town and he educated me himself after my mom died was because people can't be trusted and they're all assholes like the people down at the hospital who wouldn't treat her right and they would never believe us about the aliens anyway even with all the persuasive techniques he taught me but I don't agree with all of that even though he's sometimes right about people like the man with the dentures. Senator Carol says Come on now to the man and opens his car door a little more and shifts around as if he's ready to get out of the car rather than get in which he doesn't have to do because I could take the little old bastard myself if it came to it even though another thing my dad taught me was to stay calm when you face opposition because people are more easily convinced when you retain your rationality. The bearded man says It's Founder's Day which we all already know but then he says Back in those days people were different and this place was

different and it was better but I don't know what he means so I say This brochure will show you the proof about extraterrestrial visitation and also shut the hell up about my dad. The man shakes his head and I can see his dentures again and he says Much better then makes a strange sort of bow toward the senator's car before he leaves and when I ask Senator Carol who the man was he says this place has all kinds which seems like a slippery politician thing to say but I don't mind because Senator Carol is a very nice man and one of the people that makes me think different from my dad. So instead of asking him more about the man with the dentures I say Thank you for being a steady supporter of the cause and I ask him if he wants to help me build awareness because I think it would be nice to get to know him better but he can't because he has to be somewhere. After he drives off I take the stack of pamphlets and start to make my way down the rows of cars and I decide it's a little breezy so I guess I better be safe and slip the brochures under wipers rather than stick them in doors and when I get to the end of the first row I look back to see a pleasant line of bright pink against the clear windshields and I believe even the drunkest of the fair-goers will be sure to take notice even though trust me I do not approve of drinking but I'm also not naïve.

“So how'd I look out there?” Chad asked. He rubbed his hands across the thighs of his jeans before resting them in his back pockets. He and Kathryn were at the “Beer here!” booth, nearing the front of a line that seemed ridiculously long for twelve o'clock.

“After that star performance, you’re sure to be popular with the ladies tonight,” Kathryn said.

“It’s hardly past noon. Think I’ll be popular this evening? Late afternoon, even?”

“Let me be the first to buy you a beer.” Kathryn held two fingers up to the bartender, who popped open two cans of Budweiser and pushed them across a folding cafeteria table. Chad led the way to a flat spot under a cottonwood, and they sat cross-legged in the shade.

“Cheers.” They clinked their cans against each other. Across the new sports field, kids in potato sacks propelled themselves through the maze of cones, while a thin line of parents clapped and yelled from the sidelines. Snippets of the announcer’s commentary floated over from a 1970s PA system: *here comes Charlie Thomas; two laps to go; oh, and Betsy Carlson gets tripped up.*

“Remember when we were in those races?” Chad asked.

“Vaguely,” Kathryn said.

“You kicked ass in the egg toss, if I remember right.”

“And you were the star of the Coke-chugging contest.”

Chad raised his can of Bud and guzzled it. “Just like the old days,” he said, and Kathryn smiled. Out on the field, at about the 50-yard line, a woman in a red cardigan was trotting in their direction. She was weaving a little, and Kathryn thought she’d probably veer back in the direction of the beer tent at some point, since nothing else was near where Kathryn and Chad sat. At about the 30-yard line, though, the woman started to wave sporadically.

“Holy shit,” Kathryn said. “Is that Miriam Becker?”

“Miriam Harris now.”

Kathryn sat up a little straighter. “As in, married to Jason Harris?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Chad said. “I thought you’d know.”

“Jason and I haven’t been in touch since high school,” Kathryn said. She thought that might be giving too much significance to her childish relationship with someone she now recognized as kind of a jerk, so she added, “I haven’t been in touch with anyone.”

Miriam was getting closer, and Kathryn could make out her gold-rimmed glasses, the same round style she’d worn since third grade. “Do you think she remembers me?” Kathryn asked.

Chad let out a little laugh. “What do you think?” he asked.

By this time, Miriam had almost reached them. At the edge of the field, she tripped, and ended up stretched out head to toe: half on the bright green turf, half on the dirt track that encircled it. Kathryn started to get up.

“Don’t bother,” Chad said. “She’s used to it.”

Miriam pushed herself up and stumbled the rest of the distance to the cottonwood.

“I remember you,” she said, pointing at Kathryn. “You were a bitch in high school.”

And you’re a raging alcoholic at age 28, thought Kathryn.

“Well,” Miriam continued, “bygones and all that, right?” She swayed in front of them, but shook her head when Chad patted the dirt on the side opposite Kathryn.

“How have you been?” Kathryn asked.

“I’m married,” Miriam said. “But you probably already know that.” She held out her left hand to display a ridiculously large stone that couldn’t have been a real diamond.

“Jason and I have two kids,” Miriam said. “And we own a business.”

“A hair salon,” Chad added.

“How about you, Katie?” Miriam asked. “Are you married? Kids?”

“No,” Kathryn said. “I live in D.C.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” Miriam replied. “These days it’s never too late.”

“And never too early, apparently,” Chad said quietly to Kathryn, making a drinking motion with his left hand.

“What do you do out there?” Miriam asked. “In D.C.?” She made air quotes when she said the name of the city.

“I’m a political organizer. I work on campaigns,” Kathryn said.

“Like who? Senators and stuff? George Bush?”

“The last campaign I worked on was a D.C. Council race,” Kathryn said. She looked at Miriam squarely and smiled. “For Mark Killsen.”

Miriam let out a kind of squawking sound. “You mean that gay guy who threw a lawn chair at a reporter?” she asked. And it was true. Mark had been running almost even with the incumbent before an incident with a Fox News reporter at a fundraising picnic. The clip made national headlines and had become somewhat of a rallying point for conservatives around the nation, especially after Mark lost the race.

“That reporter was an asshole,” Kathryn said. “A closed-minded bigot like all his little Fox News followers. Anyway, I’m on a break now.”

“Well,” Miriam said.

“So, where are the kids?” Chad asked.

Miriam turned to him. “In the races,” she said. She almost fell over again when she swiveled back to face Kathryn. “I better get back,” she said. “So good to see you.”

“A pleasure,” Kathryn said after Miriam was out of earshot.

Chad picked up his empty beer can from where he’s set it near the tree. “Want to get out of here?” he asked.

Kathryn nodded and finished off her drink. “Some things never change,” she said.

“We’re not all like that, Katie,” Chad said.

Esmeralda locked up her bike on one of the racks near the fairgrounds parking lot. Since her fiancé had left with the car, she’d gotten used to biking through town, using side roads so as to avoid the main street which had no marked bike lanes and barely enough room for two lanes of traffic and two rows of parking. The side roads didn’t have bike lanes either, but they seemed roomier because traffic was light.

Esmeralda looked around for the free Indian tacos, but didn’t see anything promising. The only structures appeared to be a beer tent, a hotdog stand, and the announcing booth above the bleachers. A bright green football field was swarming with kids, no doubt all hyped up on sugar from candy or sodas or baked goods. A knot of adults stood over by the beer tent, so Esmeralda made her way that direction. As she got

closer, she saw several people negotiating what must have been Indian tacos: pale dough folded into unwieldy crescent shapes, with meat and vegetables inside.

She saw a shiny corner of something sticking out from behind the beer tent and went to investigate. It was a converted Airstream trailer with “Indian Tacos” painted in red and yellow letters on the side. A line of at least 20 people streamed from the service window, and Esmeralda took her place at the end of the line. The two men in front of her held beers in both hands and were talking loudly about last year’s high school football team, which had come in last in 1-A play. One of them was dark-skinned, the other white.

“Got to teach those boys how to *run*,” the white guy said. “Maybe put some cops on their ass and see if they pick up the pace!”

Both men whooped with laughter, and the man with dark skin turned backward toward Esmeralda.

“Pretty ironic, eh?” he said. “Here before you is a bonafide Indian waiting in line with all these white folks for an Indian taco.”

Esmeralda smiled without encouragement.

The man turned back to his buddy. “Or wait, would that be not ironic at all?” He used his elbow to nudge the white man’s arm, and both of them started laughing again.

“You look thirsty,” the man said to Esmeralda after they’d quieted down. He lifted an unopened beer can in her direction.

“No, thanks,” Esmeralda said.

“You sure? Don’t have to be an Indian to enjoy the ol’ firewater.” The man and his buddy started laughing again and hit their beer cans against each other.

“No, thanks,” Esmeralda said.

“I bet some of these dumbasses around here think you *are* Indian,” the man said.

“Am I right?”

“Actually, yeah,” Esmeralda said.

“You don’t look anything like an Indian,” he said, then added, “No offense,” with a smile. By this time, they’d moved up about halfway in line. “Change your mind about that beer?”

Esmeralda shook her head.

“More for me, I guess.” The man turned back toward his friend, and soon they were back on the topic of high school football, this time discussing how the team would do in the fall.

When Esmeralda got to the service window, the woman inside was yelling back toward the cooking area. “We’ve still got a line!” she said. “Keep ‘em coming!”

Esmeralda rested her hands on the edge of the window. “How many?” the woman asked.

“One, please.”

The woman reached back to a mound of wrapped food packets. “That’ll be \$4.50,” she said.

“Sorry?”

“\$4.50.”

Do I even have \$4.50? Esmeralda thought. She took her wallet out of her jeans pocket. “Someone told me they were free today,” she explained.

“Free for the first 25 customers,” the woman said. “Regular price \$4.50.”

Esmeralda took out four wrinkled one-dollar bills. “I have \$4.00,” she said.

The woman leaned toward the window and got quieter. “I think we can work with that,” she said. “In fact, I forgot. Half-price for the 100th customer, and you’re the lucky one.”

Esmeralda felt her face get warm like when the teacher used to call on her in elementary school. “Maybe the rest can be tip then,” she mumbled and handed across her four dollars.

“Well, that’s generous of you,” the woman said.

Esmeralda took the taco, wrapped in oily waxed paper. “Thank you,” she said, and walked in the opposite direction from the playing field and the crowds. She heard a man’s voice yell “Enjoy!” after her—probably the Indian man from the line, she thought—but she didn’t turn around.

“Charity Loses Part of Its Past, Gains a Road to the Future”

The groundbreaking for a new mall on Larsen Street was bittersweet yesterday, as across town a Charity historical icon was set for demolition. The train roundhouse at the corner of Main and Charles streets has been a familiar presence here for more than 100 years. Even after the Virginia Truckee railroad stopped running through Charity in the early 1940s, the roundhouse didn’t go vacant, but rather served as a social gathering place

during World War II and through the 60s. After the roundhouse fell out of use, its tall arching windows and magnificently large wooden doors provided a visual anchor that reminded us of our community's history and the practical beauty of a simpler time.

But tomorrow, with no one willing to pay for renovations or repairs, Charity's historical roundhouse will be reduced to a pile of wood splinters and rubble. In a series of editorials last year, the *News and Ledger* argued that the city should purchase the roundhouse and preserve it for the good of our community. Even though many people rallied to our cause, the city council voted against the proposal, to what we still believe will be the detriment of our once-vibrant downtown.

On the other hand, the council did something right recently when it partnered with J & L Developers to break ground on the new mall on Larsen. The mall, scheduled for completion next spring, will provide a much needed retail center, as well as create new jobs and stimulate the local economy.

The council acted wisely when it voted to provide tax incentives and land considerations to advance the establishment of this important new venture. We only wish our councilmen had been as astute when considering a venture from the past.

Editorial, Charity News and Ledger

October 8, 1984

“So where to?” Chad asked as he and Kathryn made their way to the school parking lot.

“I don’t know,” Kathryn said. “I wouldn’t mind getting out of town.”

“Like driving in to Fallon?” Chad asked.

“God, no,” Kathryn said. “That’s like two hours away. More like going out to Cave Rock or something.” Kathryn hadn’t been back to Cave Rock since high school. Back then, it was a place where things happened: some good, like playing truth or dare around the fire; some bad, like the time Joe Thomas punched Greg Miller so hard that Greg cracked his head open against a boulder; and some neither particularly good nor bad, like getting drunk for the first time, or giving her first blow job.

“So the big city girl wants to revisit our old stomping grounds,” Chad said. He tried to grab her hand, but Kathryn pretended not to notice. “Sure,” Chad said. “I’m game.”

When they got to the parking lot, Chad stopped in front of a dusty white pickup that took up more than its allotted space. Kathryn thought her hesitation must’ve been obvious, because he quickly said, “Don’t worry. She’s in better shape than she looks.” He tapped on the tailgate. “We’ll just gas her up, maybe get some food, and head out.”

Chad unlocked the passenger door and left it ajar for Kathryn to climb in. One parking spot over, a tall man was slipping a pink piece of paper underneath the windshield wiper of a Ford Taurus. He wore a brown three-piece suit that appeared to be from the 70s, and Kathryn couldn’t be sure whether the greasy shine in his dark hair was from a styling product or a lack of hygiene.

“How’s it going, man?” Chad asked as he made his way around the truck to the driver’s side.

“Very well,” the man said. “I am spreading the good word as always.” He held out one of the flyers, and Chad took it.

“I know you don’t mean any of that religious bullshit,” Chad said. “Just pure science, right?”

“Science and a very little investigative speculation which can be important,” the man said.

“We’re actually headed out toward Cave Rock,” Chad said. “We’ll keep our eyes open, huh?”

“Some highly irregular events have been reported out that way,” the man said.

“You’re telling me.” Chad shook the man’s hand before he moved on to the next vehicle.

When Chad got in the truck, he handed the brochure to Kathryn. “You should read it,” he said. “Some crazy-ass shit.” A quick glance at the text revealed the bolded words “kidnapped,” “master plan,” “massive cover-up,” and “Agency for Intergalactic Research.” A poorly reproduced photo showed a light blob on a dark gray background.

“Sounds like a nutcase,” Kathryn said.

“Derrick’s all right,” Chad said. “Lived out in the middle of nowhere with his dad for like 30 years.”

“Are there more of him still out there?” Kathryn asked.

“He’s harmless,” Chad said.

Kathryn decided they wouldn't stay out in the desert past dark. She felt sure she wouldn't want to be out there too long anyway.

Pamphleting the cars was definitely a good idea I must have distributed about a hundred brochures already and that's not even counting what I'll give away once I have my table set up which then I'll also get to talk to people face to face which is always better. At my car I undo the hitch knots in my nylon cord and lift the card table off the roof and then I walk over to where the party seems to be happening which is not far away and I decide to set up a few paces away from the beer vendors. There are a bunch of kids over on the other end of the football field doing some thing where they put their heads on the end of a baseball bat that's standing upright in the ground then rotate around the bat a few times then try to run over to some other kids and back after they're good and dizzy and the way they're weaving and falling all over themselves it's hard to tell them from all the adults around here who've had who knows how many beers and who are probably the kids' parents. I never did anything like that when I was a kid though a few times I played wiffleball and kick the can with the neighborhood kids when I visited my grandma in town and that was pretty fun I guess whenever the other kids would let me play. A couple of women stop near my booth just far enough away that I wonder if I should say hello and hold out some pamphlets for them but I decide not to and instead I look at them until I catch their eyes and then I wave and point down to my banner which says Covert

Information You Need to Know and the Outer Worlds Museum. One of the women waves back and the other grabs her elbow because I guess they need to go over to the kids which is where they head next and I can see that asshole from the parking lot over by the bleachers cheering on what appears to be a hammering contest and let me tell you what I'll keep my eye on him today. Three teenagers dressed in black walk by so I yell Hey are you interested in knowing the truth and one of them turns around and looks back at my table for a few seconds and says Yeah man but his friends don't follow him when he walks over. I tell him It's all laid out here in this pamphlet which he unfolds the pamphlet and reads some of the section titles aloud like Unidentified spacecraft and The conspiracy of Area 51 and Have you been abducted. Then he folds the paper back into thirds and says Cool and asks me if I've been abducted which I don't think I have so that's what I tell him but I also tell him that my dad was abducted in December 1982 for almost a week which was right before my mom died from her cancer and since I was only eight I don't remember much of it except that he was gone but I don't tell him that last part just the part where my dad was taken from our outer fields by an ET named Mycephon who'd traveled from five light years away and who erased Dad's memory for most of what happened though he remembered a large open room where the light seemed to come from behind the white walls and a warm gooey liquid covered his torso and always when he told this story he told me not to be afraid of them. The teenager takes the pamphlet and goes back to his friends and while he's walking away I say My museum's at the corner of Seventh and Poplar if you want to know more then when he gets back to

the other kids the three of them bend over the brochure together and I wish I'd told him that one thing my dad is not is a liar.

Esmeralda ate lunch on a granite bench in a park next to the fairgrounds. There had been an attempt at creating an area with real grass for games and picnics, but the sod had gone unwatered and patchy until it became a smattering of brittle yellow spikes. What a difference from Florida, where swamp ferns and sweet acacias grew thick on the ground, and wisteria vines dripped from the palmetto trees. She had loved hiking through the marshes and camping in the lush jungle. People camped here, too, she guessed, but she couldn't really understand why.

By the time Esmeralda finished lunch, her hands were slimy with grease. The fry bread that served as the taco shell had torn at the bottom, and juices from the meat, beans and tomatoes ran down her forearms. She wished she'd grabbed some napkins from the window ledge of the Airstream, but it was too late now. Instead, she rubbed the outside of the waxed paper over her wrists and up to her elbows, which only smeared around the oily residue. Still, the taco had been spicy and tangy, definitely worth the mess and maybe even worth her last four bucks in cash.

She'd meant it when she said she was quitting her job. Rain wouldn't tell Mr. Sherman, but that didn't matter. Esmeralda would tell him herself later. He'd call when she didn't show up to work in the morning, and she'd tell him. She'd get her last

paycheck in the mail a few days later, unless Mr. Sherman decided to be an asshole about it. Tomorrow afternoon she'd start going out with her resume, wearing her nicest skirt and the pair of black pumps she'd bought last year at JC Penney. She'd politely ask receptionists and floor managers whether there were any job openings for someone with administrative and retail experience, and if they said no, she'd leave a resume for their files. She'd smile always, and someone would recognize her courtesy and potential, and she'd land a job with a decent paycheck. Then she'd save up, pay her back rent, get a car, and drive out of Charity without looking back.

Esmeralda almost convinced herself that this was a possibility. But she knew what would really happen is that she'd show up to work at the Magic Pen cart tomorrow and every day after that, until Mr. Sherman called her into his downtown office and told her she was fired, which couldn't be long now.

She grabbed some paper towels from the park bathroom and headed back toward the fairgrounds and her bike. As she neared the new playing field, she heard kids screeching and laughing from far away, as well as a semi-rhythmic pounding that came from somewhere closer. She passed by the Airstream and rounded the beer tent to see eight men lined up in two rows, their backs to each other. In front of each row was a long gray board that looked like a railroad tie. The men were picking iron nails out of plastic cups, and hammering them into the tie one by one.

A thin circle of onlookers surrounded the men and cheered them on. To her left, Esmeralda recognized the white guy who'd been in front of her in the taco line. He was

yelling, "Get 'em in there, Richie! Show those nails who's boss!" His Indian friend was at the end of one row, working up a sweat as he pounded nails into the board.

A few seconds later, Richie dropped his hammer and held his hands up over his head. "Done!" he said. A man in a miner's costume went over and put his eyes close to Richie's section of board. He ran his hand over the top of the plank to make sure the nails were flush.

"Winner!" the miner announced. "Four minutes, thirty-three seconds."

"And still champion," Richie added, pumping his fists in the air. "Three years running, folks."

Several men in the contest continued to hammer away, while the others set down their tools and clapped. The man in the miner's costume handed Richie an envelope. "Hundred bucks to the winner," he announced. Richie turned to his friend and lifted the envelope in the air.

"Buy us some drinks there, Geronimo?" one of the other contestants yelled. He had a full gray beard, and the area around his pupils was pink instead of white. His smile revealed ill-fitting dentures and the tip of a red tongue.

"Watch it, Milt," Richie said without turning around.

The man took a few steps toward Richie. He said, "Didn't mean nothing by it," then paused before adding, "chief."

Richie turned now and walked over to the man slow. He stood so close that Esmeralda thought he must be able to smell the man's rancid breath coming out of his half-open mouth. "Anything else you want to say?" Richie asked.

Esmeralda instinctively shrank back from the group. Richie had a good five inches and fifty pounds on the little man with the pink eyes, but there were probably plenty of drunken idiots around who would side with the bearded man out of some misguided sense of loyalty. She didn't need to be around for this.

“Anything else you want to say?” Richie asked again.

The man's bloodshot eyes stared up into Richie's. “Nah, man,” he said. “Just kidding around.” He gave the same grotesque smile and continued to stare.

“You're a fucking asshole,” Richie said.

“You got that fucking right,” one of the other contestants added. Several men sniggered.

The white guy who'd been with Richie in the taco line stepped forward. “A drink doesn't sound so bad, eh?” he said.

Richie turned his back to the man with the bloodshot eyes. “Not bad at all,” he said, and started walking with his friend toward the parking lot. When they were a few paces away, Esmeralda turned to follow them.

Recipe for Indian tacos

1.5 lbs. hamburger

1.5 lbs. pinto beans

1 head lettuce, shredded

3 tomatoes

2 onions

8 oz. cheddar cheese (or other cheese), grated

Salsa

Fry bread:

1.5 c flour

2 tsp salt

½ c warm water

1 Tbsp baking powder

Cook pinto beans until soft. In a separate pan, brown hamburger meat. Mix together browned meat and pinto beans.

Place fry bread on plate (see recipe below). Next add beans and hamburger mixture, then lettuce, tomatoes and onions. Sprinkle with cheese, and cover with salsa.

For fry bread: Mix flour, salt and baking powder in medium bowl. Add water. Form dough into palm-sized balls, and roll each out to 1/2 inch thick. Fry in deep fat until golden brown.

The roads into the desert were more like wide trails, and Kathryn braced herself against the door as Chad negotiated the deep ruts and occasional rocks. Between her feet,

she propped the bag of groceries they'd bought at Smith's: grapes, a chocolate bar, a bag of ranch-flavored corn chips, two turkey sandwiches, and a bottle of wine. "This section here," Chad said as they made a sharp right and kicked up a spray of dust, "was part of the Pony Express route."

It was warm enough that their long-sleeved shirts were too much, but Kathryn had convinced Chad to turn the air conditioner on low rather than let the fine dirt come in through the open windows to settle on their clothes and hair. "I have allergies," she'd said, which was partially true.

As they drove, Chad told Kathryn about his work. How he went out into the field four days a week to monitor hunting and fishing, sometimes in his truck, sometimes on horseback into the wilderness areas. "Fishing?" Kathryn asked. "Yes, there's fishing here, Katie," he said. "You just have to get a little farther out." How he'd gone through training to learn strategies for dealing with angry, armed hunters who trespass on private land or don't have the proper tags. How once he'd had to shoot an entire pack of wolves that had been preying on endangered pygmy rabbits near the base of the hills. Kathryn wondered what the world stood to lose if the pygmy rabbits of Charity, Nevada, went extinct, but she didn't say anything.

"Sometimes I camp out for a week at a time," Chad said.

"Alone?"

"Mostly. Except for Marlow."

"Marlow the horse."

"Exactamundo."

“How can you stand it?” Kathryn asked. “It’s all dusty and dirty. Freezing at night, scorching hot in the day. It’s completely fucking barren.”

“It’s not barren,” Chad said. “You’re the one who wanted to come out here. You must have some feelings for it.” He kept on talking as they drove, pointing out landmarks and telling stories about what had happened to him right by this boulder grouping or over beyond that ridge. It wasn’t as if Kathryn had never driven this same route—she’d come out here dozens of times in high school—but she’d never stopped along the way. To her, it all looked the same: sagebrush, dusty road, large rock, more sagebrush.

“We’re almost there,” Chad said as they rounded a hairpin turn that started the truck up a low rise.

“I know,” Kathryn said. “I remember.”

“Jesus, Katie.” Chad laughed. “You sound like you’re going to a sacred memorial, not a place we used to get wasted and act like idiots.”

Kathryn hoped her smile was convincing, but the truth was, she felt nervous. She was anxious about seeing the big rocks covered with years of graffiti, the little cave inside the rocks where they used to make fires, the condemned mining entrance they’d dare each other to go inside until someone was drunk enough to actually do it. It wasn’t much of a dare, really, since just about everyone had been in there at one point or another and no one she knew of had been hurt. Her high school boyfriend, Jason, told her she’d even been in there a few times, with him, but she must have been too messed up to remember it. In fact, Jason hadn’t just said they’d gone into the mine together. He said they’d gone into the mine and fucked. Blackouts had happened a lot in those days.

The truck made its way around the last curve before Cave Rock, and Kathryn saw that this place, too, was just like she'd left it. There were the rocks, the cave, the mine, and all around them the same desert as always. Completely fucking barren.

It's true that I myself have never been abducted by aliens though I've witnessed several incidents of interest like the UFO sighting out by Eureka plus that time the sky lit up all red after that one thunderstorm when I was doing research out in the central desert which I know that particular incident was localized because no one else reported anything here in town or in any of the surrounding areas so apparently it was only visible to me and whoever else might've been out in the middle of nowhere that afternoon which is highly suspicious and just the kind of thing that indicates a singular incident such as the taking off or landing of a spacecraft. Obviously it's highly possible that I *have* in fact been abducted and I just don't know it since extraterrestrials are experts when it comes to the human brain given all the testing and research they've done on human subjects which is documented by several firsthand accounts and so of course they could easily wipe my memory clean if they wanted to and I'd never know anything about it which is something to think about and something everyone should think about really I mean we all could've been abducted implanted altered probed you name it. I'm telling all this to a blond woman who's stopped by the table and I can tell she's interested because she keeps nodding and saying Uh-huh at everything and then sucking on the straw of a giant soda

from the gas station down the street and making a gurgling sound each time. So I ask if she's ever been abducted and she says I guess I don't know is what you're telling me which is exactly right and she completely has understood what I said so I tell her Well you can look right here to find out and then I open up a pamphlet and show her the list of unexplained experiences that may indicate alien abduction such as memory loss disorientation and feelings of déjà vu. The woman takes the pamphlet from my hand and her red fingernail polish is all chipped up and her nails are bitten right down to the quick and she says Yeah maybe and I'm glad when she asks How come I haven't heard about this before because I want to talk to her more. I say It's not exactly information the feds promote and I explain that the federal government has its own agenda with the ETs and maybe even diplomatic relationships with them or maybe antagonistic ones and she says Sounds like a movie which makes me think maybe she'd like to watch a movie about this subject so I tell her I have lots more information at my business including movies and documentaries and interviews and maybe we could watch one sometime if she stops by. But then a man walking toward us says I want a brochure too and he's talking too loud and walking too deliberately with big heavy steps and I recognize him from the group of men over by the jerk with the dentures which group has been over there all afternoon staring and snickering between their stupid games and rounds of beer. The man says Can I have one and grabs a pamphlet from the table before I answer then says Looks like some highly interesting shit but he doesn't even look at the brochure and stuffs the paper into his pocket then gestures toward the blond woman and says maybe he's interrupting because maybe Edie here is making a love match with UFO guy which is me and the

blond woman tells him to shut up and calls him Ray then he says You know she's just being nice right she's always real nice and I think how another thing I learned from my dad is that if you feel like there's trouble especially in front of a lady then you should present yourself as invulnerable and authoritative so I say Just go back and then I say Go back to your cocksucker friends and leave us the hell alone because I want him to feel scared but he doesn't seem scared and he says Sure thing tough guy just wanted to pick up some of your fine literature and then after he walks away the blond woman says I should probably go it was nice to meet you and when she's gone I think about how if the ETs ever abduct that jerk with the dentures or any of his friends I hope they probe the hell out of them.

Esmeralda passed by the rack where she'd locked up her bike. The two men she'd met in the Indian taco line were still ahead of her. When they got to the end of the parking lot, they kept on walking, but Esmeralda stopped.

"Hey!" she yelled.

The men turned around. The Indian man—the one everyone at the new field called Richie—broke into a slow smile.

"I saw you at the contest," he said, and held up his envelope full of cash. Esmeralda walked toward them. "We're headed out for a beer," he added. "And just for you, that drink offer from before is still on the table."

Esmeralda reached them, and the three stood in a sort of triangle. She looked down at her jacket that was the wrong cut, her jeans that were maybe a little too tight, the orthopedic shoes she wore when she had to work. There was nothing she could do about any of it at the moment.

“All right,” she said, looking up.

“Well, all right,” Richie’s friend said and clapped Richie on the back.

A few minutes later they were walking through the door of the Silver Tavern.

“So a white guy, an Indian guy, and a Latina walk into a bar,” Richie said to the bartender. “Ever heard that one?”

“How’s it going, Richie?” the bartender asked. “Dale?” he said, acknowledging Richie’s friend. Then he turned to Esmeralda. “And I don’t think I’ve had the pleasure,” he said, sticking out his hand.

“Come to think of it,” Dale said, “neither have we.”

“I’m Esmeralda.” She shook hands with the bartender, then with Richie and Dale.

The bartender took their orders: a whiskey for Dale, a Coors for Richie, and a ginger ale for Esmeralda. Richie led them to a corner table festooned with blue and white crepe paper and a yellowing “Founders’ Day” banner that looked to be at least 10 years old.

“Thank you,” Esmeralda said, “for the drink.”

“You’re welcome.” Richie adjusted the brim of his baseball hat.

Dale said, “Might just as well thank Evan at the bar. Non-alcoholic beverages are on the house.”

Richie leaned over toward Esmeralda. “I would’ve bought you one, though,” he said. “Anything you like.”

“I don’t drink,” Esmeralda said. She swirled her straw around and made the ice rattle in her glass. “You were good in that contest,” she said.

“Champion for the third year in a row,” Dale said.

“That old guy?” Esmeralda asked. “With the dentures? He’s an asshole.”

“That he is,” Richie said. “Sometimes shit like that happens. Occupational hazard.”

“Occupational hazard?” Dale asked.

Richie turned to Esmeralda. “I don’t know about you,” he said, “but I’m in the business of not being white.”

“Shit,” Dale said. “I would’ve backed you. Me and Schmitt and Carver, lots of guys.”

“Just as many would’ve backed that shitwad,” said Richie.

“Probably,” Dale admitted.

Richie held up his empty beer glass and raised his eyebrows at Esmeralda and Dale in turn. Esmeralda excused herself for the bathroom while Richie went to the bar for another round.

“Pygmy Rabbit (*brachylagus idahoensis*)”

Brachylagus idahoensis, commonly known as the pygmy rabbit, can be found in the Great Basin and Columbia Basin regions of the United States. With an average adult weight of 0.93 pounds and an average body length of 10 inches, pygmy rabbits are the smallest species of rabbit in North America. They are gray in color, with small hind legs and short ears. Pygmy rabbits typically make their homes in areas of thick sagebrush and, unlike most rabbits, dig their own burrows. Their diet consists primarily of sagebrush, along with other native grasses and shrubs.

The scarcity of several subspecies of *brachylagus idahoensis* has led to the pygmy rabbit's inclusion on certain endangered species lists. Within these subspecies, only a handful of pure-bred rabbits survive in captivity. Scientists are attempting to preserve these genetic lines through breeding and reintegration programs. The pygmy rabbit's declining population is a result of habitat loss, introduced disease, and predation. Natural predators of *brachylagus idahoensis* include owls, coyotes, and golden eagles.

Western Encyclopedia, 2007

Kathryn watched as Chad unloaded the grocery bag from the truck and set it down inside the small cave. When he came back out, he aimed his closed eyes at the sun and held his hands palms-up near his sides. “Yeahoww!” he yelled into the desert. He smiled at Kathryn expectantly, but she just grinned and shook her head. She felt the same strange

half-pity, half-embarrassed feeling that she'd felt for the man in the miner costume back at the fairgrounds, but she knew she shouldn't. Or rather, she wished she didn't. She wished she could be more like Chad, embracing the emptiness of this place and finding beauty in it. Feeling as comfortable and confident as she used to, whether here or anywhere else.

To their left was a shallow pit full of empty cans and bottles. "Looks like this is still a popular place," Kathryn said.

"That's what I hear." Chad ducked back into the cave and brought out the wine. He opened it with the corkscrew tool on his Leatherman. "Forgot about glasses," he said, and passed the bottle to Kathryn.

She took a sip and kept the bottle in her hand. Some of the graffiti on the rocks was new and brightly-colored, but other parts looked old and faded. She walked around to the other side of the rock, and Chad followed.

"There it is," she said, pointing upward.

"K. loves J.?" Chad asked.

"I was young and stupid," Kathryn said. "I'd write something much better now."

"Yeah, well, this was my only contribution," Chad said, walking them to a spot on the rock that read *Charity High Soccer rules!* "We were all young and stupid."

"What is this place, anyway, Mr. Fish and Game?" Kathryn asked. "Is it public property, or what? Should you even be here?"

"Well, technically, I should bust us both for vandalizing public lands," Chad said. "But I'll let it go this time."

Kathryn looked over at the abandoned mine shaft that led into a hill about 50 yards away. Despite the “Danger!” and “Do Not Enter!” signs posted on either side, the mine appeared to be as easy to get into as always. All but two of the boards that had been nailed across the entrance were gone, and Kathryn knew even these were loose and could be rotated upright.

“Shouldn’t you at least do something about that?” she asked, indicating the mine with a nod of her head. “Someone could get hurt.”

“There are abandoned mine shafts all over,” Chad said. “People barely ever get hurt. And besides, we’ve posted the signs. We can’t help it if people are idiots.”

“That’s a nice way to look at it,” Kathryn said.

“How about this. We go check it out, and if it looks unsafe, I’ll say something at the office.”

Kathryn looked at the dark gaping hole and the smooth rock surrounding it. “Let’s eat first,” she said. “I’m starving.” She followed Chad back to the shady section underneath the rocks, and they spread out their food on a blanket from his truck.

After a couple rounds of drinks, talk turned to jobs. Esmeralda found out that Dale was a manager at the local supermarket, and Richie worked construction on and off the reservation. They both had plenty to complain about, and before she knew it, she was joining in by telling them all about her own crappy job at the Magic Pen cart.

“Magic pens,” Richie attempted. “Sounds kinda cool.”

“It sucks,” Esmeralda said. “But who cares? I’ll get fired soon enough. I sell, like, nothing. Plus, they’re *magic pens*. Who needs that shit?”

“I’d buy a pen from you,” Richie said.

“Yeah, me too,” Dale chimed in. “I know where you’re talking about. That place at the mall where the hot blond chick works.”

“I should quit,” Esmeralda said. Her glass was empty, and she slurped at the melting ice with her straw.

“So do it,” Richie said. “Why wait around to get fired?”

“Money,” Esmeralda said. “I need money to get back home. Not to mention pay my rent from last month.”

“Home?” Richie asked.

“Florida.” Esmeralda swirled the straw around in her glass.

“Florida?” Dale asked. “How the hell did you...”

“It’s a long story,” Esmeralda said.

“But you’re not making any money anyway,” Richie said.

“Yeah. You should quit right now,” Dale said, slurring a little. “Just go over there and tell your boss to fuck off.”

“It’s 5:15,” Esmeralda said. “The mall just closed.”

“Yeah, we should do it right now,” Richie said. “Just go fucking quit.”

Esmeralda allowed herself a smile. “Thanks for the support,” she said, “but there’s no way.”

“I thought you Latin women were supposed to be all fiery and sanguine,” Richie said. He was slurring a bit, too. “Not defeatist.”

“Sanguine?” Esmeralda asked.

“Make you a deal,” Richie said. “We help you quit your job, you hang out with us tonight.”

Esmeralda frowned.

“Not *that* way,” Richie said. “Like friends. Like three friends hanging out. Or maybe like two friends hanging out, if Dale should graciously decide to stop cockblocking me. But no funny business, I swear.”

“What if I don’t want to quit my job?” Esmeralda asked.

“You *do* want to quit your job,” Dale said.

“Come on,” Richie added.

Esmeralda looked around the dark bar. Founders’ Day festivities must’ve been drawing to a close—the tavern was starting to fill up with people who were talking too loud and stumbling into chairs. “Help me quit my job,” she said, “and I’ll hang out with you tonight.”

Abandoned Mines in Nevada

COUNTY	SITES DISCOVERED	SITES SECURED	PERCENT SECURED
CARSON	74	72	97.3%
CHURCHILL	475	380	80.0%
CLARK	2049	1379	67.3%
DOUGLAS	178	140	78.7%
ELKO	382	296	77.5%
ESMERALDA	1889	1338	70.8%
EUREKA	675	583	86.4%
HUMBOLDT	596	467	78.4%
LANDER	446	314	70.4%
LINCOLN	599	473	79.0%
LYON	868	662	76.3%
MINERAL	1165	1027	88.2%
NYE	1749	1111	63.5%
PERSHING	1071	705	65.8%
STOREY	172	144	83.7%
WASHOE	378	340	90.0%
WHITE PINE	1010	423	41.9%
TOTAL (Since 1987)	13,776	9,854	71.5%

Source: Nevada Division of Minerals

Foot traffic has been pretty heavy by the table all afternoon and I have to say I've done a fair bit of education as I've talked to several people personally and given out maybe thirty pamphlets so all in all a productive afternoon even though no one has signed up for my weekly email newsletter. I still don't know many people around town but some of them are pretty nice for instance Senator Carol and the blond woman with the giant soda and Officer Nivens who stopped by a couple of times to make sure things were going well even though the first time he asked all serious if I had a permit and I got a little flustered but then he said he was just kidding and to have a nice day. Then later he came by and brought me a corndog from one of the food stands and said Thought you might be hungry and handed me the paper sleeve covered in grease which was especially nice of him because it meant I didn't have to leave my table unmanned and I didn't have to walk by the guy with the dentures and his little crew which last time they were all in the beer line they were talking about me I know it and they must have wanted me to know too because they were talking loud and saying things like I don't know about you but I've wasted at least six aliens in my time and Guess that's what happens when you live in the desert like a hermit your whole life the only friends you have are from outer space. But just before I was about to go over and say something Officer Nivens walked by and they shut up. The crowd is starting to dwindle and even though there are still a few people at the beer tent there's no line anymore and I hear one of the bartenders say they'll be closing up in about fifteen minutes so it's probably time for me to pack up too

since the hotdog stand has already closed and the trailer that sells Indian tacos ran out of stock and left a while ago. I start to untape the banner from the front of the table and just as I free the banner and start to roll it up I see the guy with the dentures making his way over.

Kathryn and Chad finished off the wine along with their sandwiches. It was late afternoon now, and even in the shade of the rocks, Kathryn was sweating beneath her long-sleeved blouse. She wished she'd worn more layers like Chad, who was now leaning against the rocks in a thin white t-shirt with his eyes closed. She ate slowly and stared out at the parched land. The sun had bleached away all the color—what there was of it to begin with, anyway—and the only movements were curls of dust and dirt that were periodically swept up by wind gusts. A brownish snake slid past the truck tires, and Kathryn wondered if it was a rattler like the ones her dad had warned her about when she was little.

“Where do rattlesnakes live?” Kathryn asked.

“You mean, like where are their dens?” Chad said.

“Sure, I guess.”

“Usually cool, dry areas that are dark and kind of enclosed.”

“So, like, abandoned mines?”

Chad opened his eyes and leaned forward. "You're afraid of snakes?" he said.
"That's why you won't go to the mine."

"Not really," Kathryn said.

"Okay, that's it." Chad pushed himself up and dusted off his jeans. "We're going in," he said in a mock serious voice. Kathryn looked up at him. "Seriously," he said.
"Let's go."

Chad got a headlamp from his truck, and they walked across the flat land to the mine entrance. Holding the headlamp in his hands, he shined a light into the mine shaft and stuck it in his head. "See?" he said. "No snakes."

Kathryn took his hand and let him lead her a little way past the entrance. The daylight came in a little for the first few feet, but beyond that, all she could see was the distant circle of light from the headlamp. "You've been in here, before, right?" Chad asked.

"Just a few times."

"Like how many?"

"I don't really remember," Kathryn said. She tried to imagine being in there ten years ago, with Jason. Maybe she'd lain with her back on the cold floor of packed dirt, or maybe she was pinned up against one of the hard granite walls. They must have had a flashlight. Was she holding it, or was he? Maybe it was lying on the ground, throwing a thin streak of light toward the wall. Had they been the only ones in there?

The mining shaft had a dank, metallic smell. As Kathryn followed Chad farther inside, she thought she heard water dripping. But that couldn't be right.

“You okay?” Chad asked, turning the headlamp her way.

“Fine. Keep going.”

Who had she been? A stupid teenager who’d drink herself blind and then allow herself to be led into a dirty, cold, black room and fucked. It wasn’t something to be proud of. She should’ve felt ashamed back then, but she hadn’t. She’d felt right somehow. Connected. No self-doubt, no embarrassed pity, no distance.

Chad stopped in front of her, and Kathryn ran into his back. “I’ve been in here lots of times,” he was saying. “But you know what I’ve never done?”

Kathryn squeezed his fingers and didn’t step back. She put her free hand on his thigh and slid it over until it rested against his zipper. “Jesus, Katie,” he said. “I was just going to say I’ve never kissed a beautiful woman in here.”

Kathryn took the headlamp from Chad’s hand and put it on the ground, shining straight up. She led him over to the wall and pulled off her jeans. The wall felt hard and rough against her back just like she’d imagined, and she thought about favorite rocks, the old lace curtains that were still up in her room at her parents’, nights around the fire when she didn’t have to worry about where she was, or who she was, or what would happen in the future.

Minutes: Meeting of the Nevada State Senate Committee on Transportation [*excerpt*]

May 23, 1996

Chairman Richard Cox opened discussion on SB 482.

SB 482: Directs Department of Transportation to designate a portion of Highway 382 as The Extraterrestrial Highway.

Senator Betsy Allen introduced SB 482, which would result in the designation of a portion of Highway 382 as “The Extraterrestrial Highway.” Senator Allen testified that this designation would capitalize on Nevada’s unique history and reputation, as well as boost tourism to the area. She noted that the designated stretch of highway would be near Area 51, which has long been a subject of local and national folklore regarding unidentified flying objects. Senator Carol asked if there would be a cost associated with SB 482, and Senator Allen answered the cost would be minimal. She said the cost would be made up many times over due to increased tourism revenue.

Marcia Call, owner of the Alien Lounge in Rachel, Nevada, testified in favor of the bill. Ms. Call noted that Rachel is on the portion of Highway 382 that would be designated as The Extraterrestrial Highway. She claimed that the designation would bring new tourists to the area, and thus be beneficial to local businesses. In response to a question from Senator Williams, Ms. Call said that current customers often say they are visiting because of the area’s reputation, but the proposed re-naming of the highway would bring in even more patrons.

Mr. Derrick Olson, resident of Charity, Nevada, testified in support of SB 482. He indicated that the name change would encourage visitation from extraterrestrials, who would in turn share their technology “for the betterment of humanity.” He also proposed

amending the bill to provide for a more specific highway name. Mr. Olson said his support showed that even Nevadans who do not live in the affected area support the bill.

Testifying against SB 482 was Assemblyman Charlie Grayson, who called the bill “frivolous and unnecessary.” He added that there is a cost associated with SB 482, with no promise of future revenues.

With no further questions from the committee, Chairman Cox called for a vote. Senator Fitzgerald moved that the committee send SB 482 to the Senate floor with a DO PASS recommendation. Senator Carol seconded the motion. There was no discussion. Motion carried: 6 in favor (Carol, Cox, Fitzgerald, Miller, Phynteras, White) and 3 against (Baumgartner, Davis, Williams).

“Dale and I are problem-solvers,” Richie said. Esmeralda was driving Dale’s ’89 Oldsmobile along Larsen Street, with Richie riding shotgun and Dale in the backseat.

“Among other things,” Esmeralda said without taking her eyes off the road.

“Whoa-ho!” Richie craned his neck back toward Dale. “Did you hear that, man?”

“I can’t hear shit back here,” Dale said.

“When we get to the mall,” Richie said to Esmeralda, “I’ll be the lookout at the door. Dale can man the getaway car.”

“I’d love to see him drive anywhere in his condition,” Esmeralda said.

“He won’t be driving,” Richie said. “Just manning.”

They'd stopped by Dale's place a few minutes earlier to get a key that supposedly unlocked the main delivery doors at the mall. It was a convoluted story, but Dale's roommate used to work at the locksmith's, and his brother used to work at the only security firm in town, and some way or another they'd together amassed a drawerful of access to the city.

"Don't worry," Dale had said. "We only use our powers for good."

"Yeah, like TPing the coffee shop and going out on midnight runs for beef jerky," Richie mumbled to Esmeralda.

"We left money on the counter," Dale had insisted.

Esmeralda pulled into the rear part of the mall parking lot and turned off the headlights. It was only dusk, and she hardly needed the floodlights along the back alley to guide her. About 200 feet from the delivery entrance, she stopped in case there were cameras.

"Ready?" Richie asked. He held out two Mexican wrestling masks. Esmeralda grabbed one, and they pulled the masks over their heads until they could see through the eyeholes.

"Just like in the movies," Esmeralda said through the cheap, stretchy fabric. She smoothed down the dark sweatsuit she'd borrowed at Dale's.

"Let's go," Richie said. In the backseat, Dale was faintly snoring.

When Esmeralda and Richie got to the delivery doors, Richie pulled Dale's roommate's key out from his pocket and slipped it into the lock. The key fit, and when he

turned it, Esmeralda heard an echoing click. Richie pulled the handle, and the door swung open into the alley.

He gestured with his arm as if ushering Esmeralda into an overpriced restaurant or a gaudy wedding. When she slid past him, he remained at the door and gave a thumbs-up. It was a small shopping center—little more than a strip mall, really—and Dale had assured her that there were no security guards actually on duty at the mall when it was closed. Still, Esmeralda wanted to be careful. She tiptoed through a cavernous holding area, filled with cartons and boxes that must have been supplies for the various shops, until she reached another set of metal doors.

These doors were unlocked from the storage room, and she inched open the door on the right. She set her cheek against the cool metal so she could see as much as possible through the small opening. A grayish light suffused the interior space, though she couldn't find a specific light source. The storefronts facing the main mall area were shuttered with cage-like bars that had been rolled down like garage doors at closing time. Everything was motionless.

The carts in the middle of the large open area had been covered with their custom-fitted tarps, their merchandise locked away underneath. Esmeralda opened the door another few inches. There, across the way, was her own cart, with its taupe canvas cover that said "Magic Pens" in broad purple script. She grabbed a small box by her feet to prop open the door, and stepped into the grayness.

It was eerie to be here alone, and she found herself shuffling along the dingy carpet without sound, even as she half-wished for some kind of noise to break the

stillness. She was afraid to touch anything—what if they had security systems?—but she knew from helping Mr. Sherman close up several times that the Magic Pens cart was unsecured.

When she got to the cart, she lifted up the left corner of the canvas tarp to access the locked cabinet beneath. She shook her employee key loose on her key ring, and turned it in the lock. Inside the cabinet were the writing implements she couldn't sell: markers that wrote in invisible ink, highlighters that could erase their own marks, felt tips that wrote in multiple colors at once, pens that wrote upside-down. She hated all of them.

It was a minor victory to be breaking the rules like this, being here when she wasn't supposed to be, shuffling through the pens that were supposed to be safe in their locked cabinet. It was almost enough, but not quite. She uncapped the fattest marker she could find and let the tarp fall back over the cabinet. Under the purple "Magic Pens" logo, she wrote "sucks" and underlined it. Below that, she added, "I quit" in all capital letters as tall as her forearm.

Esmeralda stepped back to admire her work in the dim light. She stared for a few seconds, surprised that she didn't feel fear or remorse or even anxiety. Instead, she felt relief, and more than a little pride. She pulled up the corner of the tarp again, put the marker back in its place, locked the cabinet, and walked back toward the delivery doors where Richie would be waiting for her.

When she got to the storage room, she turned back for one more look. The cart looked just as it had when she got there, and unless someone randomly decided to swipe

over the fabric with a particular marker or a phenolphthalein solution, only she would know the defiant words that were scrawled across it.

The man with the dentures is talking to me and he says Calling it a day alien boy but I try to be diplomatic and say If you'd like a brochure they're on the table then he calls over to his friends Hey Don you said you wanted a brochure too right and Billy you too but he doesn't pronounce the word brochure correctly because he puts the accent on the first syllable. Then he says I think we might just need all of them and takes the entire stack which is probably about 100 pamphlets so I say Those aren't cheap and he says You can't possibly believe all this stupid shit but then I tell him it's documented and then he says I know your dad was batshit loony tunes and he calls me a sad lonely motherfucker and says The worst thing is I think you know it don't you you know this shit is crazy. I am getting hotter and starting to sweat and I say It's not crazy my dad was not fucking crazy and I think about how I've never been in a fistfight but my dad taught me how to punch and showed me some combat moves just in case and I notice that the asshole's friends have moved closer to us and he says If you're not crazy then what's wrong with you and I say Nothing what's wrong with you and he steps toward me and says What's wrong with me is I don't like fucking head cases wandering around my town talking your crazy shit and making everyone feel uncomfortable and then he says something ridiculous which is For all I know someday you'll decide we're all aliens and

pull out a shotgun and go on a little spree before you blow your own head off which is probably what your old man would've done if he didn't live all by himself out in the middle of shitass nowhere he probably would've taken a few of us with him when he offed himself then before I know what's happening my fist is cracking against the asshole's jaw and I feel his wiry hair against the flat of my knuckles and I think my dad must've done a good job teaching me because the man falls down on his side and there are drops of blood on the ground from somewhere then I feel something hit me in the back of the head and then something hits my stomach and when I double over my forehead hits the edge of the card table and there's a sharp pain in the backs of my knees which I don't know what is causing the pain and I hear people yelling and Officer Nivens above all the other voices saying Police stop right now stop it right now then I feel one more stab of pain in my lower back and Officer Nivens is here pulling off the man's friends and telling them to stay put which they do and so does the man with the dentures who's sitting up now and his top lip is curved into the hollow place where his fake teeth should be and I should feel proud but I just feel sad. Officer Nivens says Am I going to have to arrest someone here today but he only says it to the other men and to me he says Are you okay do you need medical attention but I can hardly hear him because my ears are ringing still I shake my head no and he asks if I'm sure and bends down and puts his hand on my shoulder and tells me You can press charges and then another officer I don't know comes over and is watching the man and his friends and when the asshole says That lunatic attacked me *I* want to press charges Officer Nivens doesn't even look at him and says What I witnessed was a lone man being beaten by three other men and then says his

report will reflect that fact and also the fact that those three men and their companion had been drinking all afternoon and were being a public nuisance and last he says to them If you like I can take you in for drunk and disorderly again and the man mumbles Fucking lunatic which I'm sure he's still talking about me but I guess it could also be Officer Nivens but it's probably about me. The blond woman that had come by my booth earlier is standing off to the side with some other people and I try to smile at her to show her I'm okay but she doesn't smile back so I say loud that I'm okay and then I ask when she's going to come to my store and watch a movie but she doesn't say anything which I assume that if she was going to come watch a movie she would say something. Officer Nivens holds out his hand to me and says Let me help you up and then says The rest of you should probably get the hell out of here so the asshole and his friends shuffle off and I can hear one of them murmuring that he'd rather be at the Silver Tavern anyway and the other officer trails them and Officer Nivens calls after them If you know what's best for you you won't be drinking another drop today but I'm sure they won't listen and the blond woman didn't answer when I asked about the movie and I didn't get anyone's phone numbers today and no one hurt the man and his friends when they were hurting me and even Officer Nivens is just doing his job he's not my friend and the pain where I was hit isn't going away like I thought it would and I say I need to fold up my table and Officer Nivens starts to turn the table on its side and says Let me help but I say No that's okay I can do it even though I would've been happy to accept his help before then he asks if he can help me carry the table somewhere but I say I can do it alone and then he asks

again and says to be careful and he can help me but I say I can take care of it by myself and I also say thank you.

“Beautiful Nevada”

by Kathryn Gross

3rd grade

Mrs. Jonas

May 17, 1987

Mrs. Jonas said we are supposed to write about Nevada and talk about a book from our class. There are a lot of different lands in Nevada. I live in Charity and, by my house there is trees and brushes where a family of quail live inside. There is also a lot of deserts in Nevada and, mountains too. Bernard Pruitt was a man who lived in Charity from 1920 to 1984. In his book Land of Contrast he talked about Charity, which Mrs. Jonas read to us. She said don't we think his descriptions are beautiful.

Bernard Pruitt said, “There aren't just the hills to the east. To the west, there are mountains. But the mountains are distant, and seem nothing more than a jagged blue line at the horizon.” The horizon is where the land and the sky touch. Bernard Pruitt said he likes Charity and, he talked about how pretty it is here. He said, “On clear days, the mountains glow gold when the sun rises, and on rare days of rain, they disappear behind the dull gray water.” Next he said, “In the winter, heavy white clouds grow above the

Western range, then obscure it with snowfall that will travel across the high desert overnight.”

Obscure means to cover so that you can't see. I like the mountains too and, I like the snow, also I like Charity. I think it is pretty just like Bernard Pruitt. I like my mom and dad and my friends and, the quail that live by my house. When I grow up, I want to live in Charity.

Making her way across the mall's storage room, Esmeralda noticed that the outside door where she'd come in was fully closed. She'd somehow expected Richie to wait in the open doorway for her, but of course that would be ridiculous if they were trying to be as unnoticeable as they could.

As she neared the doors, her shoe scraped against something on the floor and kicked it forward with a scratchy tinkling sound. Looking down, Esmeralda saw two loose keys. She picked them up and turned them over in her palm. At the top of one, the word "mall" was written on a small strip of white tape. The other looked like the key she'd been using to drive Dale's car.

Something must be wrong. Why weren't the keys outside with Richie? Had Dale and Richie ditched her? But they would've needed the car key. Had they been caught, and tried to get rid of the evidence? Was a cop going to burst through the door any second with his gun drawn?

Esmeralda jogged over to the far end of the storage room and shrank into a corner. She'd be caught. She'd go to jail. She'd lose her job. She'd have a record. She'd be stuck here forever. Alone. No one would want to be with a convicted felon. Would she be a felon? All for the stupidest, most useless thing she'd ever been talked into. Why had she agreed to this? It didn't even mean anything.

She waited several minutes, trying to decide what to do. She wanted to get out. Every second she was in the mall meant a bigger chance of getting caught. She needed to look outside, but there were no windows. She needed to know if she could escape.

After a few more minutes had passed, Esmeralda decided she had to try to get out. If she stayed here, they would find her for sure. She put the keys in her pocket, and walked over to the outside doors. Very, very slowly, she pressed her thumb down on the lock mechanism above the door handle. When she'd pressed it almost all the way down, she heard a muted click and froze. Nothing seemed to change over the next few minutes, though, so she inched the door toward her until she could see through a tiny crack into the alley.

The first thing she saw was the flashing red and blue light of a cop car. Someone—it must've been Dale—was slouched over in the backseat of the patrol car.

“Officer, I am telling you,” Richie was saying. He'd taken off his wrestling mask. “I do not know where the keys are.”

“Then how the hell did you drive here?”

“I lost the keys.”

Esmeralda pushed the door forward until it was almost fully closed, leaving just enough space to hear the conversation outside.

“But when you drove here, you were intoxicated,” the cop said. “This isn’t the first time, according to your driving record, or his.”

“Officer, I didn’t drive here intoxicated and neither did Dale.”

“Then how did the car get here?”

“We drove it here a while ago, then we had some beers.”

“In the alley behind the mall.”

“Yes.”

“And you still want me to believe you were here with no further purpose.”

“Just celebrating Founders’ Day in our own special way.”

“So when we look at the security footage, we won’t see anything more than two guys drinking beer in their car.”

“When will you look at the security tape?”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

“Look,” Richie said. “Officer. Dale’s gonna wake up in a few minutes and be sick as hell all over your car.”

“Are you going to tell me the truth before I drive you and your friend in to the station?”

“For what? I didn’t drive while under the influence.”

“Public intoxication, then,” the officer said. “Trespassing. Resisting arrest.”

“Resisting arrest?”

“It would be nice if you’d tell the truth and not get yourself in any more trouble.”

“I am telling the truth.”

Esmeralda heard the snap of the officer’s shoes against the blacktop.

“You don’t have to cuff me,” Richie said.

“Protocol.”

“I’m telling the truth.”

“If that’s the case, then you and your buddy can pick up his car tomorrow at the tow lot out on Parker.”

Esmeralda heard more footsteps. A car door shut, then another. Then the engine started, and tires crunched across the pavement. As the sound got fainter, Esmeralda cracked open the door again to look outside. The blue and red lights kept blinking in the distance, but there were no sirens.

“We could hang out for a while,” Chad said. “Watch out for some of those famous UFOs.” The sun had gone behind the hills, but the sky was still light. Kathryn sat on the lowered tailgate of Chad’s truck while Chad hunched near the rocks, rolling up the blanket from lunch.

“We should get back,” Kathryn said. The temperature had dropped as soon as the sun was gone, and she had her jacket back on. “Isn’t there still some stuff going on tonight, for Founders’ Day?”

“Nothing as good as sitting in the middle of the desert and watching the stars,” Chad said.

“It’s getting cold. And we’re out of wine.”

“Come on, just for a little while. Until the stars come out.” Chad had set the blanket in the cab of his pickup, and Kathryn let him put his arm around her.

“Look,” Kathryn said. She pointed at a pair of headlights that were winding up the hill. “There’s a UFO now.”

“Shit,” Chad said. “And we didn’t even have to wait till night.”

Kathryn leaned into his arm. She wouldn’t stay in touch with him when she got back to D.C. “We can stay until they get here, at least,” she said.

“So now you want to hang out?”

“Maybe.”

The headlights continued their steady crawl, and Kathryn heard the low rumble of a diesel engine. As the truck got closer, she could also hear the horn honking, and the sporadic whooping of teenage boys.

“You seriously want to stay here?” Chad asked. “I know lots of other places.”

“Here’s good,” Kathryn said. She could make out the truck’s shape in the weakening light. It was a red full-size with two sets of wheels on the rear axle, what people in high school used to call a “dual-y.”

The driver pulled up next to them too fast and slammed on the breaks so that the truck skidded several feet. He was wearing a yellow baseball hat that said “I Ain’t Yo

Mama!” Two other kids were in the cab with him, and two more rode in the bed of the truck.

“Hey, hey,” one of the guys in back yelled. He waved in Kathryn and Chad’s direction before hopping over the side of the truckbed. Kathryn held her hand up quickly and sat up straight so that Chad’s arm fell off her shoulders.

The kid in the passenger seat yelled through the open window. “You guys partying up here?” he asked.

“We used to,” Kathryn said.

The kid slammed his palm against the outside of the passenger door twice. “Well all right!” he said. The two kids who’d been in back unloaded a couple of cases of beer and headed for the graffitied rocks.

“Where’s your booze, then?” the driver asked.

“Ran out,” Chad said. “We were just getting ready to go.”

“Shit, man,” the driver said, unfolding himself from his seat. “You want a beer?”

“Sure,” Kathryn said.

Chad lowered his voice and looked down at where his knees bent around the open tailgate of his pickup. “Katie,” he said.

“Oh, please,” Kathryn said. “One beer.” She elbowed him in the side. “It’ll be just like old times.”

She hopped off the tailgate and followed the other truck’s driver to the rocks, where one of his buddies held out two cans of Keystone Light. The driver took both and handed them to Kathryn. “For you guys,” he said.

“Thanks.” Kathryn popped open her can. “Nice hat.” She held up one of the beers in Chad’s direction and motioned him over.

“I’m Bill,” the driver said.

“Katie,” Kathryn said. She handed Chad a beer and shook the guy’s hand. “And this is Chad.”

“Well,” the driver said, nodding to both of them. “Cheers.”

Above the hills, Kathryn could already make out more stars than she could ever see in D.C., as well as a stream of light that seemed to come from the other side of the hills and point straight upwards.

“What’s that?” she asked.

Chad shrugged and the kid in the hat said, “Beats me. Some crazy dude out in the desert.”

“Beam me up, Scottie,” Kathryn said. “Yet another phenomenon that you can only see here.”

“Like grown men in miner’s costumes and the ‘dirty, barren desert’ you love so much?” Chad asked.

“I meant it in a good way,” Kathryn said. “Sometimes I miss that shit.”

Two of the kids from the truck were starting a fire over near the rocks, and one of them kept yelling “Firestarter!” every time he lit a match. As the fire crackled to life, Kathryn wondered if they’d brought hot dogs and marshmallows like she and her friends used to, or if that was completely uncool. She distinctly remembered that Chad was the

one who always had Hershey's bars for s'mores. He'd pass them out to everyone, Kathryn first.

She climbed up on a rock for a better view. Across the darkened desert, traffic on the far off highway appeared to be as sparse as usual. She only saw one pair of headlights driving eastward away from town, and she wondered if it was someone leaving for a short trip, or leaving for good, or someone just passing through.

"You said you used to come up here," the kid in the hat said from below her. "How long ago?"

Kathryn smiled. "Long enough that I don't want to tell you," she said.

Esmeralda hesitated in the doorway. There were security tapes, she knew. But they couldn't tell who she was, not with the mask. Dale and Richie would probably have to identify her at some point. Dale might do it whenever he sobered up. But if she was already gone, how much effort would anyone really put into finding her? Nothing was missing from the mall; no property was destroyed; no one was hurt.

She walked outside, letting the heavy door close behind her. It was okay to take the car; it must have been. Richie threw the keys inside the mall for her. And in the car, underneath the radio, he'd left the envelope with the rest of his \$100.

The car started on the second crank of the key. She'd need more money at some point. That was a problem. And they'd be looking for the car. A tow truck was probably

on its way right now. Most likely, Dale's bucket of bolts wouldn't make it to the Utah border, much less Florida. But if she ditched it, got some money somehow, bought a bus ticket...

Esmeralda wanted to press her foot down hard until the gas pedal reached the floor, but instead she forced herself to pull out of the alley slowly. She steered the old Cadillac onto Main Street, and when the buildings and businesses ended, she didn't stop. She allowed herself to press down on the pedal more firmly. Soon she was flashing past the scrubby ranches outside of town, then there was nothing but sagebrush and the dark, unlit strip of highway. There were no other cars, and she could barely make out the black of the hills against the black of the sky.

A few miles out of town, she spotted a faint glow coming from the hills to the northeast. Maybe a fire. Campers, or hunters, or a group of kids up by the old mines like she'd heard about. Kids who'd grown up here and probably felt about the desert what she felt about the Florida jungle. A little ways farther, a beam of light pointed up toward the sky, almost like a spotlight cutting through the darkness. She didn't have time to wonder what it was, and she didn't really care. She was going home. She drove toward the light, then passed it, and continued on.

When I dropped off the table at Outer Worlds I made a little sign with some of the leftover pink brochure paper that said Closed for maintenance and then I taped the sign to

the door right under where it says Open Mon. – Sat., 9:00 – 12:30 and then I drove through the desert to my dad’s land which is now my land and I thought about how I’ve been neglecting the landing strip lately and it’s time I get back to work on it it’s going to be a great strip perfect for whatever kind of spacecraft needs to land because it’s as long and flat as an airport runway and also has circular landing pads periodically all along the way in case the craft is of the point-landing variety. Our trailer is a whitish color outside but I need to repaint it and the first thing I do when I get there is flip on the generator and unlock the door and see how the inside is just the way I left it with the efficiency kitchen and the two easy chairs and the foldout sofa and the bedroom area where my dad used to sleep and where I can sleep now when I’m out here which I think I’ll be out here much more often maybe even though my dad won’t be here to talk to because this place is safe like my dad said and maybe he was right that we should focus on the aliens because they’re better than humans anyway but I don’t want to think about that right now so I head out for the landing strip and since it’s dark I take a flashlight with me even though there’s a portable worklight out there that I can use to work by at night and all I can hear as I walk are my own footsteps in the sand. When I get to the strip it looks impressive even though there are a few places where tumbleweeds have piled up along the embankments at the edges but other than that it looks just like it should wide and straight and with the beginnings of several circles bulging out every so often at the sides tonight my plan is to clean up the tumbleweeds and start clearing off a wider circle for the first point-landing pad but I’m going to need more light so I wheel over the work light which is almost as wide across as my arm and very powerful and I think about when my dad

was abducted and if I ever will be and I look over at the hills and see a faint light like from a fire which must be from the high school kids who go up near one of the old abandoned mines and I think that what they're doing right now is probably drinking beer and telling jokes to each other and maybe some of the boys are making out with some of the girls and they're all laughing together and I wonder what that feels like to be around the fire like that and what they think about aliens because most people are afraid of life forms they don't understand but if I was around the fire I'd say that one thing my dad always taught me is we can be friends with the extraterrestrials and I hope I get the opportunity because I think I'm the perfect candidate for abduction and in fact I *want* to be abducted and am willing to work with alien visitors in an understanding reciprocal manner and sometimes I used to think about how it would happen and now I do again. How it would happen would be that some ETs who typically travel in groups of one to three would land their spaceship on the landing strip I've been making maybe even on the very circle I work on tonight in fact maybe I'll turn the worklight toward the sky tonight so they'll know I'm here and they can see where to land yes I think I'll do that tonight and in the future I can leave it on while I'm sleeping and then when the ETs come I'll wake up and then they'll see me emerge from my trailer in a nonthreatening manner with my hands up and they'll either come up to me or more likely use an energy beam to guide me over to their ship so as not to expose themselves to the harsh environment of the earth desert and then I'll be on board and I'll be able to see which accounts of an alien spaceship are right the ones that say the ships are light and spare or the ones that say they're dark and crowded with instruments or the ones that say they're shiny and thin-

aired even though maybe all of these things are true for the different alien races. But anyway I'd be on board and the ETs would probably talk with me telepathically since they have that ability unlike humans and then they'd know that I'm on their side and we'd exchange information and after I'd earned their trust for a few months or maybe even a year they'd know I was a friend yes I should definitely start turning the worklight toward the sky at night to help guide them in so that they'll know right away that I want to be helpful and look out on the highway there's a lone car driving fast and I pretend like I used to when I was growing up that it's a spacecraft coming to get me and that maybe after I've proven my friendship to the aliens on board they'll take me to their home planet where I'll be the first human to live in another world altogether and then after I'm with them on their planet for a while they'll give me the choice of having my memory wiped and returning to Earth or remembering everything and staying with them and I wouldn't hesitate I'd choose the second option and become the first human to live among extraterrestrials even though it might be generations before that information came out to the people of Earth or maybe they'd never even know.

“44th Annual Founders' Day a Success”

The 44th Annual Founders' Day celebration drew record crowds, with organizers estimating attendance at 500 to 700 people. The day's festivities were primarily held at Charity Fairgrounds, where Mayor Marvin Chambers started off the celebration by

dedicating a new state-of-the-art sports field that will be used for community sports as well as high-school football, soccer and track events.

“This field represents the efforts of not only our community partners, but also individual fundraisers and taxpayer dollars,” Mayor Chamber said. “We have come together to establish a resource that will serve as a centerpiece of our city, and of which we can all be proud.”

Following the dedication, organizers provided activities for children and adults alike, including everything from tricycle races for the kids to the traditional rock-drilling contest for adults, which is as old as the festival itself.

“It was fun,” said eight-year-old Mark Schorr who won the three-legged race with teammate Ali Green. “I want to come here every day.”

Though the day went smoothly overall, the police force had its hands full monitoring the crowd and providing first aid assistance.

“We had to break up a couple of fights, but nothing major,” said police lieutenant Roger Nivens. Nivens also reported six arrests for public intoxication and four arrests on suspicion of driving under the influence. “More than we’d have liked, of course,” he said. “But at least we got them down to the station before anything happened.” Nivens said police also arrested two men on suspicion of trespassing at Sierra Mesa Mall, though it was unclear whether those arrests were connected to the Founders’ Day events.

“All in all, it was a great success,” said Marcia Coleman, president of this year’s Founders’ Day committee. “We got a good crowd out here, everyone had a good time, and we’ll be planning for the same come next fall.”

The committee will begin its nomination process for next year's members in October. Interested parties should contact the mayor's office for details.

Charity News and Ledger

September 9th, 2006

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