

Village Governments

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The shot sounded throughout the white gathered below the green, condensed mat. The green itself hovered hard up into a white crown of greater space above, capped off only by the field of vision. The field of vision belonged to a man lying prone, in a field, with a video camera behind him on a tripod and his daughter by his side. Standing up, she had a different field of vision, too. The green was a belt of trees dividing the white and the white. The white was the snow and the sky. The girl was hungry.

“That kicked hard, but not as hard as I thought it would,” the man said. “Just a reminder that this is the +P ammunition. We got the 230-grain Doubletap-brand ammunition loaded up here in this little Glock 29. It’s got a lot in it for a gun its size. And I could definitely see my hand getting tired if I shot forty, fifty rounds or so through this at the range. Still, I’m going to give you ten more rounds of the heavy stuff. Then I’m switching over to the 180-grain Federal brand for comparison.”

The man switched out his magazine and began aiming toward one of the steel targets he’d set up on hay bales dotting the field. He twitched and slipped from a solid hold on the weapon when Claire spoke up.

“Dad, how much longer?”

“Uch.”

“Seriously.”

“You can go inside if you’re getting cold. I’ll make up some cocoa after I finish shooting this. Sound good?”

“No I want to stay with you. It’s just getting kind of late.”

“Alright. Then, no more ‘How long, Dad? Or ‘Dad, I’m bored.’”

“Ok.”

“Or ‘Dad, my friends at school say I’m weird for talking about concealed-carry permits. And for knowing what the word Kruger-rand means.’ Ok?”

“Uh.”

“Rewind the tape to after the part when I reload the pistol and then I’m going to start from there again. I can do the comparison with the Glock 20 after Cameron makes supper and while you’re doing your homework. I want some coffee, so let’s just get this next part done.”

“Yeah. For sure, Dad.”

The camera was from four or five years ago, and made of a weird purple-blue plastic. Using it for digital video required a tape to be converted to a laptop for edits and uploading because of the camera’s age. Claire had once appropriated it for videoing things she liked around the house, back in elementary school, before losing interest, just at the same time as when her father began “borrowing” the camera for his gun demonstrations. She screwed the camera back on the tripod when she was done with what her father had asked, and waited for him to take his shots. His groupings weren’t very good. In fact, Claire noted that somehow his aim was getting worse as every month went by. Maybe this time it was 10 mm ammunition. There was the unfamiliar kick it produced.

“You know, why don’t you just go inside and see if your sister needs some help with dinner? I think I’m going to try a couple more takes and waste some more bullets.”

“That actually sounds pretty good to me. I’ll see you in a few, Dad.”

Claire’s father picked up a pair of bright red safety earmuffs and put them on, took them off again because they would have ruined the continuity of his video, and Claire turned and started walking back toward the paint-peeled old house. Her sister only visited once a week. Claire knew it would be a good idea to spend some time with Cameron or else she would get aggravated after making the trip out from downtown. Cameron lived with her boyfriend there and commuted over to Fitchburg State for her master’s degree coursework when she didn’t have to work at a pub near her apartment in Madding. The name of the pub was Ned Kelly’s. After hearing about the pub, her father had

learned about who Kelly was. The Irish-Australian outlaw had become a constant obsession, along with the broadening constellation of related topics about which he never stopped proselytizing.

These topics included: the gatekeeper proxy academics who controlled knowledge about the government and how people thought of it; how the two-party system was dying spectacularly and why it needed to; how prisons were secretly training militiamen who were prepared to fight alongside the U.S. armed forces on a local level, and for the installation of controlled-puppet technocracies. According to their father, the new powers—former CEOs and federal economists—would strongarm the regulation of the people’s access to oil and food resources. As climate change stressed the infrastructure, private industry would buy up any surplus in staple commodities. He saw secret communications all around but could not always decipher them. It was all just like the Business Plot of 1933, he said. Except the operation would result in unshakable success, with the end of the relative public order and moral security of the pre-Rapture era that the people now enjoyed. The girls had learned to tune their father out, or else talk him down when necessary. The hallucinatory theories were unsettling to everyone, but they upset him the most.

The house did not feel warm. Claire supposed that it was objectively more comfortable than the ice and wind and white outside surrounding her father, but the woodstove had gone out for certain and her sister was either asleep on the couch or upstairs doing some of her social work homework. So, the mudroom was all cold and weary-feeling, and Claire didn’t want to think about the whole host of things she normally thought about when the house was empty and her father was outside, when she had already done her eighth-grade Spanish assignments and wanted to save the rest of her homework for just before falling asleep. The possibility of loneliness tinged the dead air like an unclean metallic taste, or like the smell of a forgotten piece of overripe fruit left in a bowl in the sun by a window. She wanted to cook dinner.

Claire lingered at the fridge. It bordered a long marble countertop under the glow of bright, clean cherry wood. Inside the refrigerator, ridges of intense, primary-colored bell peppers ran along the door and heads of garlic rested in between each of the individual bright bulbs. Two perfectly aligned half-gallon jugs of yogurt stood as sentries in front of a supermarket-brand gallon of milk, its soothing ivory watching out through translucent high-density polyethylene. Bushes of cilantro hung down over eggs that boxed in, against the refrigerator wall, a packaged ring of kielbasa like a coiled spine, a grotesque and meaty spiral safely surrounded with cardboard carton fences. Covering the kielbasa, a row of peaked, Saran-wrapped cheeses stood like houses along a knoll overlooking an ocean of white plastic waters, sea-foam buoying cold salsa jars and an island quart of cream. In the mornings when Cameron came, all three in the family went shopping together. Cameron arranged the groceries after Claire and their father went outside to film the gun reviews.

Claire found the slow cooker in the cabinets above the refrigerator and put it next to the stove. She then took out a cutting board from beneath the oven and started crushing heads of garlic with a chef's knife so she could mince them up with onion and shallot for making chicken tortilla soup. She relaxed and the act was all she wanted to do. Her father didn't cook and didn't care about food unless Claire presented it to him in between his cups of coffee, or when he mentioned supper after whole days of nothing consumed. She'd taken up all of the cooking for the past three years— it felt perfect for her— learning most of what she did through online recipes and old Julia Child hardcovers gathering dust on the rough-sawn mantelpiece. Next, she browned the garlic and onion and shallot in a saucepan, then added the mixture and a can of stewed adobo chipotles to the slow cooker. Claire realized that she should have cut up all of her chicken first and was tearing open its packaging when Cameron walked in. Tall and long-haired and wearing a baggy turtleneck sweater that made her upper torso look like a worn-down

woolen mountain face with two arms cresting down from either side. Carpathian, Claire thought. Carpathian and beautiful and with bad timing.

“Hey, Lady of Shallot. Why are you putting shallots into tortilla soup? I was going to make it. Remember?”

“What are you even talking about, Cam? I got this.”

“Well, you’re doing it wrong. And I guess you don’t like Tenyson.” Cameron made a sarcastic squint at her sister through the glasses on the tip of her nose.

“I think you should stop watching *Downtown Abbey* is all I’m getting from this conversation.”

“Let me help prep. Seriously, learn about England, though. They only once conquered like, twenty percent of the global population.”

“Well, I’m one hundred percent certain that you only got into the Anglo trivia to piss off Dad.”

“Why else do you think I majored in English and want to work in geriatric care and voted for Elizabeth Warren?”

“Okay.”

The sisters found the chili powder, cumin, hominy. They found everything that they could remember they needed from an old recipe printout, which neither of them wanted to look at, both as a challenge toward their ability to extemporize and for the sake of feeling the happy shock of accidental success after their own experiment.

“We should write this shit down.”

“Or take a picture. You can do it. My hands are pretty dirty right now.” Neither of them moved away from adding red pepper flakes to roasting tomatoes or selecting the appropriate ration of Monterey Jack.

In the middle of her thoughts about how to make the soup faster the next time in a big ten-quart pot, Claire noticed that Cam’s eyeliner had been running and her cheeks scrubbed clean of tearlines.

“Wait, were you crying?”

“I’m fine. Something just came up and some stuff happened with August.”

August was the man Cameron had met during her undergrad years at Brown, who was also from near Madding, and who had also been a transfer student. They fought sometimes.

“Stuff? You’re kidding.”

“Stuff.”

“You know I know you better than that, Cam. Whenever August acts like a dick you want nothing more than to talk about it with me, and yell out about him, and tell me never to date ever and to go into a cloister. And then you go ahead and actually talk to him, because you love the dude.”

“I imagine that’s got some truth to it, yeah.”

“So what’s up? You were acting super strange and fake-happy and I didn’t like it.”

Cameron sat down at the heavy oak table next to the window where a band of sun shone through. It settled onto her forehead to illuminate her heavy green irises, and then it touched a strand of black hair that matched the broken black make-up scheme around her eyes. She tapped on the oak of the chair next to her for Claire to sit right there.

“So, I love you, Claire, but I don’t really know what to do. And I’m not sure if you’ll know what to do either. But you’re smarter and stronger than I was when I was fourteen so maybe that’ll help or something.”

“I don’t have anything to say to that because I don’t know what’s going on.”

Claire’s voice was flat. Cameron sighed and gave her a sharp look that was stern and beyond tired, and moved on.

“Look, don’t be logical about this, because you can’t be logical about this. Mom called on the landline.”

“Jesus. Wait, why?”

“She said she’s going to come here.”

“Wait—”

“Hold on. Please don’t interrupt me. I tried to tell her that it was a terrible fucking idea to do that but she kept talking over me and saying how she had nowhere else to go. Stuff about how Ezra said he wanted her out. All these other things.”

The sisters stared at each other. Cameron tried to smile but looked like she was going to cry, which made Claire scrunch up her face into a hard, glowering expression of thought.

“We can’t tell Dad,” Claire said. “We really can’t tell him. And we definitely can’t let her come.”

“I know that. But it’s Mom.” Cameron was practically whispering, and she’d gripped Claire’s hand in her own thin fingers.

But suddenly there was anger. Claire was up and yelling at Cameron, at the walls, before the room became a blur beyond the emptied pots of food, and Cameron’s pained expression, and the yelling receded even while it was happening itself. Their mother had been willfully gone and living with a diesel mechanic named Ezra several miles away for over three years without contact. She’d gotten into such a fight about the marriage, the house, the direction of things— and in front of Claire, too— that she and her husband had started to come to blows and Claire was forced to leap between them and push her parents apart. Claire and Cameron’s mother was the reason why their father had lost himself. She was the reason why their father had lost his job at the machine shop after breaking down and howling in loud anguish about how fearful he was that his boss would kill and eat him as retribution for his extensive knowledge of The Rapture. She was the reason why they were living off of disability and the fumes of a small inheritance, and the reason why they still lived in the same decayed house in which they always had, that had once belonged to Claire’s great-grandmother. The reason why spare money went toward canned food, gasoline, and weaponry. The reason why both sisters had found their father sobbing and hiding in the basement. Reason for everything that shouldn’t have been.

Their father crossed into the kitchen from the living room. He

saw. Cameron had gathered Claire up in her arms while her sister heaved with grief.

“Sweetie, what’s wrong? It’s okay, Claire. Nothing’s going to go wrong. Everything’s okay.”

Claire calmed in a small way but continued to choke and cry and kept gasping again and again.

“What’s wrong?” He said it a little more firmly now.

“Dad, just let her be,” Cameron said.

“Dad...” Claire said.

“Sweetie, tell me now. What happened?”

“Dad.” Claire’s words cracked out.

A strong pause allowed for Cameron to start getting up so she could put the teakettle on for everyone.

“Dad, Mom’s coming...” Claire said.

The man’s hands went slack on the shoulders. His face drained and settled into the kind of tension that looked like it was strong enough to break tendons, to pop open cracks in his wind-burned skin. He fell down on his knees, and then his daughters grabbed his underarms and tried to drag him up onto a chair. A single-letter sibilant noise escaped from the roof of his mouth, and his eyes dilated and looked up toward the window.

Now Claire was scared. Their father had started swerving his head to the left and right, snakelike, in a way that seemed deeply chemical and body-produced, and his daughters held him down. They told him to be calm. That their mother wasn’t coming and that he needed to go into a dark room and lie down.

When he let himself go limp Claire and Cameron loosened their grips. They didn’t expect him to snap up standing as soon as they had let go, and push them hard toward the floor, and bark.

“It’s that Bastard, kids. The time is now, the time is now, the time is now. Go into the cellar and guard. Go into the cellar and guard.”

His hands were over his forehead and eyes and he looked down into his fingers as he paced from corner to corner of the kitchen with

flawlessly repeated precision. Cameron made a move to take hold of his arm, but he shook her off.

The girls froze.

“What’s wrong with you?” their father said. “We have to go we have to move or else this fucking character is going to get away with it, but I know how to stop him and I think we can stop him but I need your help to stay at home and guard. Get moving.”

Claire couldn’t even feel her own lips but felt herself speak anyway. She felt herself telling him that things didn’t need to be like this, that nothing bad was happening, and if something were to happen they could figure it out together.

“You’ll know what to do,” he replied. “I’m sorry. I love you. I’m going to try and make it back alive but everything’s prepared if I don’t.” His eyes glittered bloodshot and strong.

“Dad. Don’t do this,” Claire said. “You need to sit back down and we can talk about your plan, okay? Okay, Dad? Just please come, sit back here.” Claire elbowed Cameron and tapped on her phone in her pocket, mouthing 9-1-1. She nodded to the door to the basement stairway. She was shaking.

“Cam’s going to go guard now,” she said. “But I’m going to stay with you before you go.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t do this when I should have,” their father said.

He turned and ran and slammed the door, locking it behind him on his way out to the truck, leaving behind a puddle of grainy water where his boots had been. The girls followed from the back door, but Cameron had to return to the house and take her keys from the hook in the kitchen and slipped coming back down the steps. They watched the truck speed out of the long driveway, and they got into Cameron’s car. Neither of them wore coats or boots or gloves and it was cold. After heading a few miles in either direction, into neighborhoods, pharmacy parking lots, the chain-linked sand and salt warehouse for roadway maintenance, it was clear that he was gone. Claire felt that she knew what was going to happen but

parts of thoughts only scattered into smaller pieces inside the thickness of her headache.

The cops had found the red, capped truck driven into an overgrown logging road and underneath a halfhearted covering of pine boughs and hardened snow. Their father had doubled back into and throughout the dirt roads that webbed out in the woods bordering the house's field. The field of white and green, where a tripod was still set up next to a wooden sawhorse and an empty thermos. The house cast a shadow down onto the flat plane of snow extending away from its patched foundation, epoxied boards, and warped lattice. The shadow was shaped like a tower, set in fuzzy relief to the adjacent driveway in black and white. Patrolmen who were ready and able had come from the neighboring town, and the chief of police had called the county sheriff to see what he could do with regard to talking to the state commissioner's office. The man was purported to be armed. His daughters described him as unstable, but harmless. The police chief did not know how to proceed, or if to proceed, with a press release and or a wider search.

Cameron remained at home in case their father came back after finding some clarity of mind. Claire searched alongside the police. They'd told her to stay at home with Cameron, and that he was probably in the woods near enough to the house. But Claire went out with a flashlight and an officer who didn't know the property as well as she did. When some officers went home to their families, and others went out to search further, she waited for their headlights to dissolve into the night. A dark parade of cruisers left a single car at the end of the driveway to stay and watch out for the girls, just in case. The last car stayed dark, apart, when Claire slipped outside, leaving Cameron cleaning dishes in the kitchen.

Looking into the woods at night was an unfamiliar field of vision. The nacre of the moonlit terrain by the house gave way to a mixture of dirt and snow and orange pine needles hugging tree trunks past the forest's edge. There was no clear path into the trees

but sections had been cut years before to make it at least somewhat easier to walk through. Claire navigated by what she felt, by where they'd last been together. After over an hour and a half of switchback searching up and down the hill where saplings had taken over old space, and where the brush got thicker, she sat down. Nauseated and lying against the frost of a fallen log, she looked through the stretch of woods leading to the light of the house. It was not far. A drop of liquid hit her on the forehead.

There was a man in the tree.

Claire's father crept down branch by branch and jumped to position himself in front of her.

"I knew you'd find me."

Claire stood up and put her arm out to his silhouette. After taking half a step she stopped. He was covered, the right portion of his face, his coat, his jeans, in blood.

He took off running toward the house.

"I took out the heart!" he screamed, "I took out the heart! That Bastard..."

Claire stumbled and fell headlong into the snow before forcing herself up to make chase.

She couldn't feel herself, anything at all, apart from her body. The running, the cold sweat and sensation of not being able to breathe. She felt built for running forward and reaching the house before he could get there, nothing else but adrenaline and slim branches whipping into her coat and face as she pushed herself forward. Anything could happen, to Cameron or the policeman who stayed behind or to her father.

"I'm so proud!" He shouted, ragged. "I knew you wouldn't betray me. I—"

The words trailed off as he ripped open the front door and scuttled into the house with Claire a few feet behind. He fell into the kitchen, Claire stood over him. Steaming bowls sat on the table, and the scent of cilantro emanated from them. Cameron sat at the table with their mother.

“You see...” he rasped.

Cameron leapt to put her arms around him and smeared blood onto her sweater and into the sand grains on the floor.

“Dad, what the fuck, they’ve been looking all over for you.”

“Ben...” Their mother’s eyes went wide. He produced a jagged piece of steel, shining red in the overhead light. “You see, Lorraine. You knew that I knew the kids would never betray me. But I knew about you, too. I knew you were a spy. The fact that you would do that for me. Living with him, for everyone—you’re the hero. You’re the one who made me know for sure he was the heart of the operation. But he’s gone now. I think it’s going to be good for everyone from now on. I took out the heart.”

Cameron edged toward the back door. “Girls, that soup smells delicious. What in the hell did you even put in it?”

