

A GULLY OF VULTURES

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by

Bailey Lane Malone

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Thesis Supervisor:

John M. Blair, Ph.D.

Department of English

Second Reader:

Cecily G. Parks, Ph.D.

Department of English

Approved:

Heather C. Galloway, Ph.D.

Dean, Honors College

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BY
LANE MALONE

Abstract

Hugo Gonzales, a twenty-nothing who earns money on the side running errands for his shady friends, picks up an old west novel titled “A Gully of Vultures”. Looking for escape in a classic western story with plenty of shootouts and romance, Hugo is disappointed to find that the book centers around an old Postal Inspector, John Cooper, and an impulsive post office employee, Clint Bright. Hugo’s and Cooper’s paths gradually start to mirror each other’s as they both lose control over the direction their lives are heading. Hugo watches Cooper struggle with his reality and subconsciously starts to examine his life through a similar critical lens.

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Blue dripped from overhead and pooled on the pavement as Hugo whizzed over blurry reflections of the setting sun. His bicycle wheels splashed over the thin sheets of water as he rolled downhill, finding a

moment of peace as the wind blew through his hair. At the bottom of the hill, he rolled into the parking lot of the twenty-four-hour Shell. The doorbell chimed and the clerk, Mrs. Amy, looked up from a newspaper. She was in her late forties and had skinny arms and a thick gut. Her hair was thin and unnaturally red which matched the flush in her heavily freckled skin. Hugo passed the counter and Mrs. Amy returned her gaze to her paper and said in her low, smokers voice, "Hello, Mr. Hugo."

"Hello, Mrs. Amy," he said without slowing his pace. He poured coffee into a paper cup and left it at the counter while he walked through the tiny isles of the store to gather his own breakfast, and when he was out of sight of the register, bent over and pulled a few bills out of his shoe.

Hugo sat on the curb underneath the overhang of the gas station, a few feet outside the front door. It was still early; the sun was just starting to set in bleary streaks of reds and yellows over the foggy blue hills. He lit a cigarette while he waited for his coffee to cool and pulled a tattered paperback out of his backpack.

Nicotine fuzzed over the caffeine jitters—a balancing act, that—and he was able to hold the pages steady enough to read. The novel was a mid-century western; the protagonist, John Cooper, was a hardy old federal Postal Inspector with white hair and a handlebar mustache. On the page Hugo was reading, he was sitting in the back of a stagecoach, dropping .44's into the cylinder of his Colt Walker. Hugo took another sip

and burned his lip a little bit. Hugo checked his phone, but he hadn't received any texts yet, so he turned the page.

Cooper glanced down the sights of his revolver and tucked it into his jacket pocket, then stepped out of the stagecoach and walked down the street towards the St. Louis post office. The lobby was buzzing with activity and the line to the front desk wrapped around the edge of the room. Cooper took a place in line and stared into the bullpen at the mail sorters. The line moved at a snail's pace, and Cooper watched the sorters toss envelopes into big burlap sacks. After a while, He noticed one sorter who wasn't tossing any envelopes, hunched over a desk facing the corner of the room.

Cooper stepped out of line and slowly approached the man at the desk in the corner. Stacks of papers overflowed from the shelves around the desk and ink spills stained the desktop, which was littered with bent quills. Behind the desk sat a squat, early-thirties man with stringy brown hair that was receding quickly. He was scribbling on a sheet of stationary, envelopes in a pile before him.

"If you're here about the postmaster, I've already given my official statement," the man said without looking up.

"Pardon?" Cooper said.

The man sighed. "The doctor said it was a heart attack, everyone else had the coffee, and I don't even know where to find arsenic. Sheriff has a record of everything. Now go away."

"Well, that answers that." Cooper calmly pulled a chair out, sat down next to him, and folded his hands in his lap. "What's your name, son?"

"Clint," He said, finally looking away from his scribbling. He pushed his filmy spectacles back up on the bridge of his rounded nose and met Cooper's gaze.

"Your full name."

"Clinton James Bright. Did Sheriff send you?"

"I am Inspector John Cooper of the Federal Post Office Department, and I'm here from Washington DC." Cooper smiled and flashed his badge.

"You said 'inspector'?" Clint asked.

"Yes..." Cooper said.

"What are you here to inspect?"

"I was sent to find out why the postmaster never sent in his annual report, but that mystery seems solved. Now I'd like to talk about this stack of letters on your desk."

"What about them?"

"Why have they been opened?"

"They look sealed to me," Clint said.

“You can clearly see,” Cooper held up an envelope and tapped on a seal that was marred with two colors of wax. “This seal has been broken and repaired. I need to know who did it.”

“How should I know? I’m not known by anyone as a great *knower* of things.”

“Mhmm,” Cooper said. “What about these words: mail fraud and obstruction of correspondence,” Cooper said. “Sound familiar?”

“As vocabulary terms, yes.”

“What about that stack of letters?” Cooper nodded to the pile of letters on his desk. “Do those look familiar?”

“What kind of game is this?” Clint asked.

“Did you open those letters?”

“No.”

“Then why are they on your desk?”

“Because I work in a post office,” Clint said.

“Don’t get smart with me,” Cooper said.

“Okay, I know how this looks, but you have to believe me. I didn’t open those.” Clint said.

“From where I’m sitting, Mr. Bright, it looks like you’ve got your hand in a cookie jar.”

“That’s what I just said!”

“So, you admit it?”

“No! And shame on you for harassing a loyal employee in the wake of our postmaster’s passing.”

Cooper folded his arms and leaned back in his chair.

"I'm afraid I can't offer you any more help, as I am very busy. We can't afford to break ranks now," Clint said, shuffling papers around on his desk.

"I don't know what to make of you, Mr. Bright."

"An honest man? An innocent and honest man, Mr. Cooper."

"Then you must be telling me that someone is trying to frame you?"

"Yes, I think that's exactly what happened."

"Okay then, it had to be someone here. Who do you think it was?"

"I wouldn't besmirch any of my coworkers like that. They're all honorable men and women."

"So that leaves... no one. The letters just opened themselves?" Cooper asked.

Clint thought for a second. "That's absurd."

"More absurd than you telling me you didn't open them when they're sitting open right in front of you?" Cooper asked.

"Um... yes. What exactly are you trying to convince me of?" Clint asked.

"You've been opening mail that doesn't belong to you. And you clearly opened these letters here."

"Oh, okay. I get it. You come, you see, you inspect until you've got it *all* figured out. Well I've got a *real* mystery for you." Clint said, leaning in. "What's *inside* the envelopes?"

"Do you know what's in these envelopes?"

“Do *you?*” Clint said. “*Think* about it.. this country is full of people and connections. Each envelope could be anything, going anywhere.”

Cooper stared at him.

“A mother mails her son his father’s wristwatch with a note attached, a woman mails her childhood friend a description of a dream she had, a doctor mails his research to—”

“Okay,” Cooper nodded. “You can stop now.” He grabbed Clint by the wrist and cuffed a manacle on it.

“What’s this?” Clint balked.

“What’s it look like?” Cooper slapped the cuffs on the other hand and yanked Clint out of his chair.

“I haven’t confessed to anything!”

“In a way, you did.”

“That was all hypothetical!” Clint shouted as Cooper dragged him out the door.

Hugo had picked this book off the shelf because it sounded like an action-packed western, but only a couple of pages in, he realized that might not be the case. Hugo wasn’t impressed by John Cooper, who had used words instead of bullets to advance the narrative. Hugo wanted a protagonist who was a rough and tumble, Dirty Harry type, filling thugs with lead and drinking all the whiskey in the panhandle, the riding off into the sunset type. Instead he was getting post office drama.

Mrs. Amy stepped outside for a smoke. She leaned against the white brick wall and pinched a cigarette from the front pocket of her uniform polo. Hugo looked up at her and made puppy dog eyes at her.

“Aren’t you in high school?”

“I’m twenty-two,” Hugo said.

“Fine,” she said, handing him one.

“Thank you,” Hugo said. He took a puff and grimaced. “Menthols?”

“Beggars can’t be choosers.”

“I know,” Hugo sighed.

“You still staying up all night playing those video games?” Mrs. Amy asked.

“No... now I’m literally,” he waved his book hand around. “Going to the library and shit.”

“Well, you could stand to read a book or two,” Ms. Amy said.

“Ouch,” Hugo said, blowing on his coffee.

“Watcha reading?” She asked.

“A Gully of Vultures,” he said, flipping over the book and reading the cover.

“Never heard of it.”

“It’s a western.”

“I didn’t peg you for the cowboy type,” She said.

“Sometimes channel six plays old westerns at night.” Hugo said. “I like Clint Eastwood.”

She just laughed, looked down at the packages of food at Hugo's feet. "Coffee, beef jerky, sunflower seeds... You eat like a cowboy," she said.

"Cowboys don't smoke menthols."

"Right." Mrs. Amy chuckled.

Hugo yawned and took a tiny sip of coffee.

"You gonna get some sleep tonight, cowboy?"

"I reckon I'll try, but it's a long ride to Omaha." Hugo did his best southern accent and watched her smile joylessly at his joke.

"Is it any good?" She asked. "The book?"

"Eh," Hugo said.

"Just eh?"

"I thought it was about cowboys and bandits. So far, it's about the post office."

Mrs. Amy took a drag. "Hmm."

"Like, I can't think of two more boring things than history and the post office," Hugo said.

Mrs. Amy laughed. "Well it's still a western, so twenty bucks says it ends in a shootout."

"It better," said Hugo.

A black Mustang pulled up to the store and the engine drowned out their conversation. The finish was damaged around the hail pocked hood and the quarter panels sported huge, rusting dents. Bass thumped and rattled the windshields while the car idled next to a gas pump.

“I gotta run,” Hugo said. He stood up and dropped his cigarette, rubbing it out with his shoe. He started walking over to Mustang but stopped when he heard Mrs. Amy call after him.

“Hey jackass!” She shouted.

Hugo turned around and saw her pointing to his cigarette butt on the ground. He sighed and ran over to pick it up.

She nodded as Hugo tossed the butt in a trash can. “Adios, cowboy,” she said.

Hugo tipped his imaginary hat and jogged back to the Mustang.

Darius flicked a cigarillo butt out the window and leaned back in his seat, preoccupied with something in his phone. They had driven across town and now waited in the parking lot of a different gas station with an identical storefront. Darius was thirty, skinny and black, always buying Swishers and cutting them open with pocket knives. Hugo sat in the back seat and wafted the scent of all the weed in the car. He looked out the window, up at the neon sign depicting Aphrodite emerging from a clamshell, rotating in cheap splendor, bathing the fog around her in a halo of candy-red. Her dead, glowing eyes passed lazily over him again and again.

Shaz, Darius’ hired muscle, opened the door and sat in the front passenger seat, holding a brown paper bag in his lap. Shaz was three

hundred pounds under a black, loose fitting t-shirt, seemingly more fat than muscle. He pulled out a can of Red Bull, popped the tab and handed it to Darius, who accepted it without a word. Shaz used his teeth to tear the plastic off a new sleeve of rolling papers, licked a pudgy finger on the other hand, and popped the tab on a colorful can of Arizona tea he held with his thighs.

“Yo,” Hugo said. “What’s in the bag?”

“Uh... Red Bull, caffeine pills, and some gummy worms,” Shaz said.

“Dude get out of my brain,” Hugo said. “Gimme the worms.”

“Save it for the drive,” Shaz said.

“Ok fine, the pills then.”

“Dude,” Shaz said. “What is your problem right now?”

“I don’t know.” Hugo flopped his arms against the seat. “I just want a fucking Sprite.”

“You can go inside and get one,” Darius said.

“No...” Hugo said, laying down on his side.

Shaz leaned back in his seat and sipped his tea. Darius’ phone buzzed.

“Is that the guy?” Hugo asked, his face buried in the seat cushion.

“No, but he’ll be here. Relax,” Darius said. He typed forcefully on his phone.

“I thought you two just started up again,” Shaz said.

“She’s...” Darius flared his nostrils when he sighed. “I think we’re done, done. She's been on some weird shit. I tried to fix us up, get us back to

how we started. I said I'd give her anything she wanted so she says she wants a car. So, I buy her a car. Even got a baby seat for the kid, right? She acts all grateful and says we should have a date night, like we used to."

"Nice," Shaz said.

"Nah man, it got weird," Darius said. "We got in a fight over what movie to watch. She wanted to watch that one where the guy's in like... in a movie the whole time or something."

"A movie about a guy being in a movie?" Shaz asked.

"Truman Show," Hugo said from the floor of back seat.

"Yeah, so... she tells me we're gonna have a movie night, and you know me, that means head." Darius laughed. "At the very least." He laughed some more. "But for real though, I tell her I don't like that dude and that she can pick something else. Like I don't care what we watch long as it's not some dumb shit. So, we're just sitting on the couch scrolling through the movies and halfway into everything she starts crying, like really crying a lot... I don't even know what to say so I'm just nodding, going okay, lets watch that movie you wanted to watch. She kept on crying, so I'm like, baby you're alright, but she still won't shut up, so I say baby do you want me to rub your back? She says no, and I say, baby I can't give you what you want if I don't know what it is. Then she just goes cold, acts like a zombie the rest of the night. Then yesterday while I'm gone, she takes the new car and tells me she's starting a new life in New Orleans, just like that."

Shaz sipped his tea. "Damn."

"Yeah," Darius said. He looked in the rear-view mirror and spoke to Hugo. "Don't ever let a bitch play games with you, kid."

"Okay," Hugo said, not paying attention. He laid on his belly across the backseat, reading his book on the floor, trying to hold his phone flashlight steady with his chin.

Cooper sat across from Clint in a booth and stared out the window as the countryside passed by. They had boarded the train from St. Louis to DC and rain was slowing their progress. Clint had his hands cuffed to the leg of the table. The attendant came by and poured Cooper a cup of coffee. She dressed sharply in the trainline's blue and white uniform and wore her hair in a bun, held up by a polished silver pin. Cooper held her in polite conversation for several minutes but waved her off when she asked Clint if he'd like anything.

"Why don't we order a slice of cobbler?" Clint asked. "We can split it."

Cooper said nothing, his head in a newspaper.

"You've certainly earned it, Mr. Inspector," Clint said.

Cooper lowered the paper enough to glare at him. "Are you trying to bribe me, Mr. Bright?"

Clint scoffed. "I just want pie."

"You don't get pie," Cooper said.

"Don't *you* want pie?"

“Not particularly,” Cooper said.

“That’s insane. Who doesn’t want pie?” Clint said.

“I don’t have a sweet-tooth,” Cooper said.

“Come on, John.”

Cooper said nothing and turned the page of his newspaper.

“Fine, you don’t have to eat any pie. But consider it my dying wish that I get some.”

Cooper raised an eyebrow. “Dying wish?”

“I have Leukemia, Mr. Cooper. The doctors predict I’ll be dead in a matter of months.” Clint sighed. “And I wanted to do something meaningful in that time.”

“Everyone dies, that don’t make you special,” Cooper said.

“No,” Clint sighed. “But it usually gets a man his last meal.”

Cooper folded his paper and set it down. He put his elbows on the table and leaned in. “You’re telling me you want to cash that token in... right now?”

“Sure, why not? I could die at any moment,” Clint said.

“You know they’re not gonna execute you for this?”

“Says you! I’d like some pie while I’m still alive to enjoy it, you owe me that.”

“You’re a goddamn fool,” Cooper said, picking his paper back up.

A few minutes later, a silver Corolla came out from around the corner and rolled into a nearby parking space. Someone stepped out of the car and walked into the store, leaving the engine running.

“Ok, remember kid, all you gotta do is drive to the house,” Darius said, punching the address into Hugo’s phone. “Follow the GPS and stay under the speed limit. Don’t crash the car—”

“I’m not gonna crash it,” Hugo said.

Darius kept talking. “Text me every hour. When you get there, park the car in the garage and then close the garage door. Don’t go inside the house, and *don’t* open the trunk.”

“Why not? What’s in the trunk?”

“That’s not important.”

“Yes, it super-duper is.”

“You’re right Hugo, it’s important to *me* that you don’t open it.”

“Ok, fine.”

“Y—”

“I’m so glad you called me,” Hugo said. “I’ve been hella bored, man.”

“Yeah...” Darius said. “You’re an essential piece. The next dude is counting on you.”

“Next dude?” Hugo asked.

“What?”

“How many dudes are there?”

“Ah, shit. I don’t know, depends,” Darius said.

“On?”

“On how far the car goes, how many times it stops,” Darius shrugged.
“Depends.”

“Where does it end up?”

“Fuck, I don’t know man. You drive the car to one house, then someone else drives the car to the next house, and so on,” Darius said.

“Ok, I think I get it—it’s like a chain,” Hugo said.

“Uh... yeah. That silver car is your ride. Remember Hugo, don’t crash the car, don’t go in the house, don’t open the trunk. Got it?”

“You got it, boss.” Hugo scooted towards the door and started zipping up his hoodie. He paused. “One more thing,” Hugo said. “Who gets to open the trunk?”

“God dammit, Hugo.”

“Look—someone has to, or what’s the point?”

“It’s not you,” Darius said.

“Why not?” Hugo said.

“You are not that guy,” said Darius. “I need you to be the guy that *doesn’t* do anything. It’s so easy man, just don’t open the trunk and don’t talk big shit that gets people killed. Understand?”

“I did not know death was a possibility here,” Hugo said, dropping the hoodie zipper he was trying to get unstuck.

“That depends on you.”

“Um...*okay*,” Hugo said. “What if I get stopped?”

“That won’t happen if you stay under the speed limit,” Darius said. He handed Hugo his phone back. “There, it’s about twelve hours. Take the

back roads until you cross the state line, then you should be in the clear.”

“Twelve *hours*?” Hugo said, taking the phone.

“Yeah man, just listen to the radio or something.” Darius handed Hugo a wad of bills. “Here’s a hundred bucks for gas and the bus ticket home.”

“Okay, hell yeah,” Hugo said, taking the money.

“Hugo, what’s that money for?” Darius asked.

“Look, I brought a book for the ride home.” Hugo held up his copy of *A Gully of Vultures*.

“It’s for gas and a bus ticket,” Darius said. “I need to hear you say it.”

“Ok geez, it’s for gas and a bus ticket.”

“Good, good. Call me if you have any problems.”

“Okay,” Hugo hopped out and walked directly towards the store. “I’m getting a Sprite first though!”

Darius shook his head.

“What’s this guy’s problem, man?” Shaz said.

“Do you want to drive to Albuquerque?” Darius said. He worked a Swisher open with a pocket knife.

“Nah,” Shaz said.

“I didn’t think so.” Darius dumped the insides of the Swisher out the window.

Inside the Corolla, he was alone. The AC smelled like burning lint and the grey cloth interior made Hugo think of an ashtray. The radio was tuned to the hip-hop station. The gearbox squealed when he shifted into drive and the engine sounded like it was grinding itself into dust. Hugo stood his phone up in the cup holder and started the GPS route.

The repetitive yellow dots of street lamps moving past made the road look like a tunnel, and every passing pair of headlights made Hugo nervous—any one of them could suddenly burst into reds and blues. He turned the radio knob until he found some soothing R&B. The speedometer needle danced over 65 and Hugo nodded along, his thoughts in the groove. He drifted from one image to the next, until he was replaying the last scene he read in *A Gully of Vultures*.

A late afternoon sun and verdant hills lay out the window, and the smell of peach cobbler wafted through the train car as Clint lowered his head to his handcuffed wrists and slurped sugary peaches off his spoon. Cooper neatly scooped out little bites and leaned back in his seat, chewing and absent-mindedly nodding his head. The attendant walked past and was caught by a whiff of cobbler.

“Oh, that smells wonderful,” The attendant said, closing her eyes. “Doesn’t it remind you of a warm summer evening?”

“A wise man once said, all I need in this world is a pleasant view and a slice of pie,” Clint said. “That, and a pretty woman.”

The attendant blushed.

“I ain’t gonna argue that,” Cooper said.

Clint looked up at her and read her name tag. “What’s all you need, Ms. Nancy?”

“Oh gosh, if I had to choose... I’d say a warm day, a cold lake, and my golden retriever.”

“Delightful,” Clint said.

“And of course, pie!” she added.

“Of course, pie! And you, Mr. Cooper?”

“I suppose I’d be content with a campfire, the sky, and a glass of whiskey.”

“That sounds lovely,” Clint said. “And quite lonely.”

Cooper scoffed.

“I think it’s romantic, being out under the stars,” the attendant said.

“It’s peaceful,” Cooper said, nodding to her.

“Do you want to hear mine?” Clint asked.

“Not really.”

“Absolutely!”

“I’d have a compass, a journal, and an unfinished map,” Clint said.

“Oh, wow! Like a real explorer.”

“That man ain’t going anywhere,” Cooper interjected.

“Not quite, you see?” He smiled and held up his cuffed wrists. “But I’ve heard of a place far beyond the end of the rail... a mysterious place that has been unknown to the world for thousands of years.”

Cooper sighed and scooped another slice of pie onto his plate.

“Settlers have been traveling through Texas, past where the hills level out into chaparral, then thin into the New Mexico desert. Somewhere in the heart of the desert, there’s something magnificent. They say you have to get lost to find it, but those who have wandered off the trail have been writing home, talking about a hole in the ground the size of the sky!” Clint tried to wave his hand in the air, but the handcuffs held him back. “They say it’s a cliff so big, you’ll feel like you’re standing at the edge of the world!”

“Wow,” the attendant gasped. “That sounds amazing.”

“I think you just confessed to opening all that mail,” Cooper said.

“So? You’re not hearing me!”

“No, I heard you loud and clear. It’s a hole in the ground.”

“John, it’s a whole new *world*. And *nobody’s* dared to scale the canyon down into it! They’re all on their way to California, so they just go around. It might be the only great mystery left!”

“I don’t buy it.”

“It’s not for sale!” Clint beat his fist on the table. “It’s an idea! It’s, it’s... infinite possibilities! It’s plants and animals striped in colors you’ve never seen before! Or hot springs that contain the earth’s healing energy!”

“Or a type of cobbler you’ve never had before!” The attendant said.

“Yes, exactly! She gets it!”

“You’re using all this fiction to describe something that don’t exist.”

“Oh phooey, Mr. Cooper,” the attendant said.

“How would you know it doesn’t exist if you’ve never *seen* it?”

Cooper shook his head. “You’re just.. making illogical conclusions.”

“It’s a mystery! That’s what makes it exciting!” Clint said.

“But that’s my point; you can’t make things up and expect them to come true.” Cooper said.

Clint shook his head and looked up at the attendant. “Some people see only what they want to believe.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“What has this entire conversation been about?” Clint slammed his fist on the table. “Pie!”

“Pie?” Cooper balked.

“You’re afraid, John.”

“You’re right.” Cooper leaned over and flipped Clint’s plate, splattering cobbler onto his lap. “I’m afraid you’ve spilled your pie.”

Cooper looked smugly at Clint until the attendant gasped and grabbed the hem of her skirt. Red streaks of cobbler stained its neat white ridges.

“You got pie on my uniform!” she cried.

Cooper sat there stunned for a moment while she rubbed at the stain with a napkin. It only smudged into a larger stain. She scrubbed so furiously her face turned beet red and her hair fell out of its bun, but the

stain was set. She put her face in her hands to cry, then turned and ran out of the train car. Cooper gaped for a second then walked after her. Clint twisted his head to watch them, but a glint in the footpath of the isle caught his eye. Left alone in the booth, a mirthful calm crept across Clint's face as he stuck out his foot, covered the attendant's silver hair pin, and dragged it under the table.

Hugo was two hours into the drive when he decided he should stop. He was out of Sprite and had to pee. Everything beyond the yellow-lit highway was dark trees and fences; city lights glowed on the far horizon. Hugo took the next exit he saw and followed the access road as it spilt into winding roads that snaked through dark curves around stands of trees. His GPS lagged behind and tried to reroute him, telling him to pull a U turn every tenth of a mile. It didn't understand he was trying to avoid the highway. He held his phone in one hand, shaking it and punching refresh with his thumb, keeping the other hand on the wheel. Up ahead the road curved out of sight, and Hugo's phone dinged at him, telling him to turn around again. He glanced at his phone, and when he looked back up, he saw a man in the middle of the road pulling a rope tied around the neck of a giant brown animal. Hugo swerved off the road and into the dark stand of trees.

The next minutes were a blur. The conscious part of Hugo's brain was deep underwater, seeing only flashes of fragmented headlights, bent

images and compressed sounds. Something freed him from the car. His restless reptile brain kept the wheels turning, sending scattered impulses to his arms and legs. Kick, left, right, kick. Unknown to him, he stood up, took two steps and fell down again. Then he was hoisted by his arm pits, someone dragging him, his legs kicking like he was walking. He was laid down again, the ground now soft and vibrating. Hands came to his head, soft palms, rough fingers tracing out prayers, drawing circles on his temples. His conscious mind sloshed, dissolving in the dark, undefined space, and in the depths of a dream, Hugo allowed himself to be carried away by little waterfalls that fell off in every direction.

When he woke up again, it was to the gentle lapping of waves against his feet. The ringing in his ears had diminished to the dull wash of a seashell, and cotton sheets felt like warm sand under his fingertips. The room was lit by soft daylight glowing through the white linen curtains, and Hugo could hear sounds coming into focus, a conversation between two voices in his room.

“...circumstantial. Feds might not want it.” A man’s voice.

“What a mess.” A woman’s voice.

The man replied. “Funny.”

“What?” The woman asked.

“You’ve got horsey sauce on your face.”

“Fuck off,” the woman said. Hugo heard one of them crumple wax paper.

“You know what I like about you?” The man said.

“What?” The woman asked.

“You *go* for the horsey sauce. I fuckin’ hate that stuff but you go for it like it’s your last meal, like you got no regrets.”

The woman laughed.

“But big picture, you’ve got it, I can tell. We both do. Instinct, I mean... I’ve been doing this long enough to trust my gut. But I’m not even that old, you know? Forty-six, still got it. Haven’t lost a step. My abuelo? *Never* lost a step. Raised by fuckin’ wolves and lived to be a hundred. Lived on the edges of civilization, could smell blood on the wind. He was a *real* man. Me, I take a multivitamin every day, you know? Times change and you can’t be too careful. But still—when I’m out there, it’s me and him, him and me, me and the fuckin’ wolves. They got nothing but instinct. Nothing but teeth and blood and guts.”

The woman laughed again, spoke after she swallowed. “I remind you of snarling wolves when I eat?”

“I meant it as a compliment.”

Hugo squinted in the dim light. Two suit wearing adults sat in the chairs in the corner of the room eating fast food and talking. Hugo’s pulse pounded in his head and his lips felt dry. He saw a plastic cup of water on the nightstand and reached out for it but cringed when he felt

the IV tape pull against his skin. Then the adults were standing next to him, putting the cup of water in his hands. Hugo felt like he was floating underwater, staring up at blurry patches of color.

“Hey there, buddy,” the man said. “How are you feeling?”

“Peachy,” Hugo said.

“Glad to hear it. I’m detective Alejandro Minica. That’s my partner, detective Sandy Harper.”

“Hope you’re not in too much pain,” Harper said.

“Um...” Hugo thought for a second. “I’m good.”

“Good,” Harper said.

“Hugo Gonzales of Atlanta... *Texas?*” Minica asked.

“Yeaahh.”

“We found your wallet,” Minica said.

“Nice,” Hugo said.

“Hugo, do you mind if we ask you a few questions?”

Hugo nodded and saw Harper flip open a notepad.

“What do you remember about the accident?” Minica asked.

“I remember... Seal... on the radio...”

“Do you remember where you were going?” Minica asked.

“Um...”

“What about where you came from?”

Hugo shook his head. He did remember, but he wasn’t about to start spilling beans.

“Who’s car were you driving?” Minica asked.

"I don't remember," Hugo lied again.

"In what situation can you imagine you'd be driving someone else's car in a different state?" Harper asked.

"If there was like... Uber for... example," Hugo said.

Minica and Harper exchanged glances.

"Okay, last question. When the wrecker came to tow your car, they found the trunk jimmied open. Were you transporting anything valuable? Anything that someone would want to steal?" Minica asked.

"You mean... besides my library book?" Hugo smiled lazily.

"Thank you for your time, Mr. Gonzales. We'll be in touch when you are feeling better," Minica said, standing to leave.

"What does *that* mean?" Hugo said.

"That means there are some strange circumstances we'd like you to clear up for us, once you're lucid enough to have a conversation," Minica said.

"So you think I'm a criminal..." Hugo said.

"Feel better, Hugo," Minica said. They turned and walked away.

"Bye, bitch," Hugo mumbled.

His focus dissolved in the room—the wires and tubes attached to his skin, the machines with colorful blinking dials, the texture of the cloudy eggshell walls. He looked through the window at swarming rainclouds and imagined the sound of raindrops breaking against the glass. Fatigue entered the room as a diffuse lullaby of pitter-patter-patterns and raindrops started falling in waves—washing, curling, withdrawing, returning.

A beam of a million tiny impacts breaking against his arms and legs. He imagined raindrops beading on his eyelids and sleep dripped over him like someone had cracked a warm egg on his forehead.

Hugo woke up again, this time late in the afternoon. The nurse came in to remove his IV. The light in the room was on and Hugo felt like his body weighed a thousand pounds. He put his hands over his eyes. She explained to him he had a concussion and that he was severely dehydrated. Nausea, headaches, and light sensitivity for as long as three weeks. His collarbone was fractured, so a sling for eight weeks. Then she explained to him that since he didn't have insurance and was no longer in critical condition, he was being discharged immediately.

"When you're ready, get in this chair and I'll wheel you to the door." She motioned to a wheelchair next to the bed. The nurse unhooked the machines and collected a bundle of tubes in her hand. "We gave your prescriptions to your friend with instructions on how to take them." She nodded to the other side of the room and then left.

Hugo looked over to see a ruddy, bearded man sitting in the chair by the window. He had grey in his beard and deep-set wrinkles around his eyes. He was at least fifty and wore a camouflage hat and a long sleeve flannel shirt. The guy nodded to Hugo.

"Hey there," he said.

"Who are you?" Hugo said.

“I’m Guy. I called the ambulance when you went through the windshield.”

“I went through the windshield?”

“Oh big time, you was laying out like dry spaghetti when I got to you.”

“I... don’t know what that means...” Hugo moaned and closed his eyes and remembered flashes of being in the car and messing with his phone. “You were the guy...” Hugo asked.

“Yep, that’s my name.”

“Gotcha,” Hugo said.

“I brought you some snacks,” Guy said, showing him a plastic bag full of chips and candy. “It’s all from the vending machine downstairs, but I figure it’s better than nothing. I’ll just take what you don’t want.”

“Were you the guy in the street?”

“Oh, yeah. That was me. I saw you careen into those trees and figured it might’a had something to do with me dragging that damn dog ‘cross the road.”

“Shit, that was a dog?”

“Yeah, that’s Buster, he’s a stubborn sum’a bitch and don’t like it when we try and stop him from running off.”

“Oh,” Hugo said. “I’m Hugo, by the way.”

“Nice to meet you Mr. Hugo. How’re you feeling?” he asked.

“Like shit,” Hugo said.

“They said that’s just the shock you got from mild head trauma. You gotta be the luckiest kid alive to come out of all that the way you did. No brain damage or nothing.”

“Right...” Hugo said.

“Oh, and I got all your pills right here, and don’t worry ‘cuz I already popped this sucker open and counted ‘em. They ain’t gonna short you on my watch.” Guy tossed Hugo the translucent bottle of pills. “Just be careful about how many you take at once, they ain’t gonna refill it.”

“Good to know,” Hugo said.

“I also grabbed some stuff out of your car that I thought you might want. I got...” Guy turned around and picked up the plastic bag. “...a book, some sunflower seeds, and gummy worms.” He placed the bag at the foot of Hugo’s bed.

“Thanks...” Hugo said.

“Do you need anything else?”

Hugo nodded to the bag. “Gummy worms.”

“You got it, boss,” Guy said and tossed Hugo the bag of gummies.

Hugo held the bag under his chin and chewed slowly. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Shoot,” Guy said.

“Why are you still here?”

“Well, I did something stupid and made you hurt yourself, so I feel responsible for making sure you get where you were heading okay,” Guy said.

“It was an accident, man. Shit happens.” Hugo said.

“Naw, see, if I hadn’t left the front door open, Buster wouldn’t ‘a been able to run right through the screen door. I swear, every time a bitch goes into heat, I gotta spend a whole day tracking Buster down and fixin’ the screen door.”

“Dude... what?”

“Oh, right. It’s, um... what I was saying is, it’s my fault for leaving the front door open, you know? If I had just cracked a window instead, you probably wouldn’t ‘a totaled your car and smacked your head on a tree. But don’t worry, I’ll make it up to you. I got my truck all gassed up and I can take you to wherever it was you were heading.”

“That’s the thing...” Hugo trailed off. “Where’s my phone?”

“Beats me.”

Hugo looked up at the ceiling. “Oh no.”

“What’s the matter, you lose it?”

“I think the cops have it,” Hugo said.

“Say no more,” Guy said and slapped the seat of the wheelchair.

“Let’s go for a ride.”

Guy helped Hugo climb into the passenger seat of his pickup truck. It was an old crew cab Ford with off-road tires and a mud splattered bull bar. Inside, the seats were covered with camouflage seat covers. A

detached rifle scope sat on the dashboard and Hugo found a rifle bullet in his cup holder.

Guy tugged his jeans over his gut and hoisted himself into the driver's seat. He pulled out his keys and as soon as they jingled, a giant mastiff sat up in the bed and stuck his big furry head through the open hatch in the rear window. Guy patted the dog on the snout and stuck his keys in the ignition.

"This here is Buster," he said, starting the car. "He's friendly."

Buster panted in the window and side-eyed Hugo. He sat with his head in the cab and his rear in the bed. Hugo reached out slowly and touched Buster's ear. He didn't seem to mind. Hugo petting the darkened folds of skin hanging loose on his face.

"Alright cowboy, where to?"

Hugo laid his palm on Buster's head and pushed his scalp back, pulling his wrinkly skin taut. Buster just looked at him and panted.

"This dog is amazing," Hugo said.

"Yeah, he's my old buddy," Guy said.

Hugo put both hands on Buster's face and pinched and pulled his skin around like he was kneading dough, then looked in his eyes and stroked his head. Buster didn't seem at all bothered.

"He's so... tranquil," Hugo said.

"Just wait'll he catches a whiff 'a some tail. That dog turns into a lightning bolt."

"I bet you do," Hugo said to Buster, patting his jowls.

“So Hugo, where ‘ya headed?”

“I don’t know, dude.”

“I can take ‘ya home.” Guy said.

“No,” Hugo sighed. “That’s not a good idea.”

“Maybe a cousin’s house or something? You know, if you’re trying to lay low?”

“All my family are cops,” Hugo said.

“You got friends... roommates?”

“Just Buster,” Hugo said. He whispered into Buster’s ear. “*Isn’t that right?*”

“Okay, you call it then. Point me in the direction you want to go.”

“What?”

“Pick a direction and I’ll start driving.”

“Seriously?”

Guy raised his eyebrows and twisted the ignition.

“Fine, which way is Atlanta?” Hugo asked.

Guy thought for a second. “East.”

“Go west,” Hugo said.

Five minutes into the drive, Guy flipped on the radio in the middle of a Dave Matthews song. Hugo had his arms wrapped around Buster’s massive neck and was talking into his ear. Buster panted on.

“Buster, do you ever get hit by those moments that are like, this is fucking *it*. I’m in the *shit*. It’s fucking *go. time*. Because that’s what this song is about. You gotta look that girl in the eyes and just be like, *babe, crash into me*. There’s no way around it.”

Guy laughed. “I think Dave would approve of that statement.”

“I think Buster approves of it too,” Hugo said, rubbing his big floppy ear.

“You’ve really taken to him, huh?”

“Who wouldn’t? Just look at him! Such a good, big boy.”

“I can’t tell if you’re serious or not.”

“Dead ass.” Hugo said. “This song is his life. He’s living the fucking dream and he doesn’t know anything else. He smells dog heat on the wind and just *runs*. Like right now, he wants *one* thing in the world and it’s to stick his head through a window and be here.”

“Well, I’m glad you two hit it off,” Guy said. “Have you decided where you want to go yet?”

“No,” Hugo said.

“At some point, you gotta come up with a plan.”

“Not if I’m living in the moment, man.” Hugo squeezed Buster’s head and smooched his ear. “Buster gets it.”

“Okay, what happens when you run out of road?” Guy asked.

“Not my problem,” Hugo said.

“How do you figure?”

“Because I’m me, not future me.”

“Oh, to be young again,” Guy chuckled.

“Look, dude... just do the *default* thing here: drive until you feel like you’ve done your charity, then drop me at a bus stop,” Hugo said.

Guy frowned. “I ain’t doing this for charity. I said I’d take you where you needed to go.”

“Then I have an obvious question,” Hugo said, narrowing his eyes. “Why are you doing this?”

“It’s just being a good neighbor.”

“No, no, no. Neighbors water plants and lend each other flour. They don’t drop everything and drive strangers to the end of the earth. *This*,” Hugo drew a circle in the air. “Is not normal. It makes no sense.” Hugo said. “You don’t owe me anything.”

“Doesn’t need to make sense.”

Hugo squinted at him. “*How* do you figure that?”

“It feels like the right thing to do.”

“*Okay*, so if I said I wanted you to drive me all the way to, say... the Grand Canyon, you’d be fine with that?”

Guy thought for a second. “Ah, what the hell? Sure.”

“*Sure?* Just like that? You don’t have any yogurt that’s about to spoil in your fridge?”

“I’m taking a break from the routine. Trying to break free from unhealthy patterns, you know?”

“Oh my god, are you in a cult?”

“No...” Guy chuckled and trailed off. “My gal walked out on me, for real this time. It’s my fault, I can’t deny that, and I can’t predict if I’ll ever win her back, so I’m just trying to keep it all together, doing one good thing a day. Today, I’m driving you where you need to go.”

“Uhh...”

“Is that a worthy explanation?”

“Sure.” Hugo said. “So, you’re just living in the moment too.”

“I guess I am,” Guy laughed.

“Then just let me think. I’ll come up with something.”

“Okay, when would be a good time to check in on that?” Guy asked.

“Ask me when we pass the Grand friggin’ Canyon.”

“You got it, boss.”

Hugo watched the setting sun cast warm colors on the tips of hills in the distance. They were hours into the drive and the truck’s suspension was rattling his skull. His arm was restrained in the sling and he couldn’t find a way to sit comfortably. Guy was listening to a classic rock station and the same song had been playing for seven minutes and showed no signs of stopping. Hugo fished in his pockets for the painkillers he left the hospital with, then counted the pills by shaking the bottle. He took two, blinked what felt like two or three times, and saw the sun melt away completely behind hills that were bathed in the dark colors of a dream.

“Look at that sunset,” Hugo said.

Guy was in the driver’s seat looking at him strangely—smiling but his eyes were skeptical. Guy had just said something but Hugo couldn’t remember what it was.

The next moment was cold. The sun was gone and they were far from any city. Hugo sat on the hood of the truck and felt the chilly wind blow in from the dark plains that surrounded them. The heat from the engine stung him through his pants and he smelled burning lint from the dust choked air filter. The truck was parked on the side of the road and Guy had wandered off the shoulder and out of the cone of the headlights. Hugo could hear him calling for Buster, just shouting his name over and over. Hugo laid his head down on the windshield and stared up into the stars. He blinked again, maybe two or three times, and then he was back on the road, back in his own body.

“Hugo?”

“Huh?”

“I think you were talking in your sleep.”

“Oh... I’m asleep?”

“You tell me.”

“I feel like I’m awake, are you awake?”

“Yeah, doofus.”

“Where’s Buster?” Hugo asked.

“Sleeping in the back, don’t worry about him.”

“Good,” Hugo said. He felt soft, opioid cotton pressing against his face. He thought about his pillow back home and blinked, maybe once.

Hugo awoke in a sunbeam, rubbed his eyes and rolled some of the stiffness out of his neck. He was alone in the truck, parked in front an old motel. Hugo stepped out into the sunlight and his head felt like mush, like it was being crushed by gravity alone. A line of identical, faded blue doors stretched to the end of the building, then a staircase led up to another row of doors on the second floor. Hugo didn't bother knocking on any of them; he instead walked toward the street and sat down on a curb facing an empty lot across the street.

Hugo fished through his pockets for his pills but came up empty. Across the street, he saw an old lady sitting at a bus stop, wearing a white sun hat and smoking a cigarette. He crossed the street and asked her for a smoke. She held out a lighter and as Hugo cupped his hands around it and lit his cigarette, she told him she was waiting on the bus to take her to church. Hugo smiled back and told her to have a nice day, then walked away to avoid small talk.

He wandered to the edge of a square pit, ten feet deep, in the empty lot behind the bust stop. The lot had been excavated and lay ready for a foundation to be poured. CAT diggers sat unmanned and tools lay strewn about the dirt. Hugo stood at the edge of the pit and smoked his cigarette. He thought of Mrs. Amy and Darius and Shaz and Guy and

the cops in the hospital. He realized he wasn't even sure what day it was anymore.

He smoked his cigarette down to the butt, then tossed it in the pit, and in the back of his mind, he heard Mrs. Amy call him a jackass. Hugo balled his fists and sighed. He found a foot hold on a piece of exposed rebar and climbed the ten feet down to the bottom. The earth was hard, but Hugo felt a cool pocket of moisture inside the pit. Concrete pillars stood in the four corners, connected by grid laid rebar along the walls. Limestone dust collected in depressions in the clay floor. In one corner, he found an overturned plastic bucket and sat down. The pit was quiet—all wind and road noise died at the lip of the hole. He enjoyed the quiet for a moment, then got bored and pulled out his book.

Hugo was near the end of the book and for two years, John Cooper had pursued Clint, through Kansas, Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, Idaho, and down into Utah where Cooper was captured by some South Fork Shoshones. So there he was, blindfolded and wrists bound, being guided through red-rock canyons and ankle-high riverbeds. The Indians spoke in strange tongues and beat drums around a campfire at night. They gave Cooper berries and water from a calfskin, even force-fed him when he refused food and drink. After several days of travel, Cooper's wrists were bloody pulps and his lips and other areas of exposed skin were burnt from exposure. He had all but gone limp when they finally plopped him

on his knees in front of the chief and took the blindfold off. The chief stared at him for a moment with grave, sunken eyes. He waved his hand and the men carried Cooper off again.

When they removed Cooper's blindfold a second time, he was in a canyon with red walls of rock extending thirty feet above his head, a shoal of pebbles under his knees. Two Indians stood next to him and held the rope tied to his wrists. All around him, he saw people dressed in rough leather and moccasins, and in the center of the gully, men were laying wood for a bonfire. Two vertical X's made of thin tree trunks tied together with hemp rope stuck out of the ground on either side of the fire pit. Above their heads, along the edge of the canyon, vultures gathered and waited.

Cooper sat there in a daze, not realizing he was looking at his own spit roast until they started trying his wrists and ankles to a tree trunk. Once it clicked, Cooper started thrashing screaming. They hoisted him on their shoulders and mounted the spit on the wooden X's. Cooper hung upside down and cursed and spat at the Indians.

Then he saw a familiar face. Clint was wearing Indian leathers, his face was caked with mud and he had wildflowers tucked behind his ears. He had pushed to the front of the crowd was squinting at him.

"Clint!" Cooper yelled.

"Do I know you?" Clint asked.

"It's me, you idiot!" Cooper yelled. "John Cooper!"

Clint's eyes widened. "Cooper! From the train! I can't believe it!"

“Two years, you sonovabitch!”

“What?”

“You said you had months left to live and I’ve been chasing you for two years!”

Clint smiled. “Oh, right.”

“You goddamn sonovabitch!” Cooper howled.

“John, I’m so close! I’ve been living with the Shoshone’s, learning their language and I’ve almost convinced them to guide me to the great hole!”

“You’re *still* chasing that nonsense?”

“Of course!”

Cooper struggled with his bindings and gave up, letting his head hang down. Two Indian men were laying down hay and dry leaves as kindling for the fire. He looked at Clint upside down.

“I thought you kept changing directions because you were trying to lose me... but of course. You have no idea where you’re going.”

“Not true! I’ve been hunting for clues!” Clint said.

“It’s a hole, you idiot! It’s a goddamn hole in the ground!”

“*Still* seeing only what you want to see?”

“Goddamn you,” Cooper said.

“You know, I could ask them to untie you. Chief owes me a favor,” Clint said. “Just say the word.”

“Why would they listen to you? You’re insane!” Cooper said.

“Oh, that's right! *You've* got it all figured out! Tell me John, did you ever dream you would end up like this? As vulture food?”

“Goddamn you!” Cooper shouted.

“Really, now that you have some retrospect, tell me what's more insane! Me looking for a hole in the ground, or you trying to stop me!”

Cooper watched the Indian chief sprinkle red dirt in a line and dance over it, leading the tribe in a whooping chant. He sighed. “What do you want from me?”

“Here's an *insane* idea—come with me!” Clint said.

“What?”

“Just look at us! Two disconnected puzzle pieces! You're all head and I'm all heart. When we're alone, you self-destruct and I wander. But if we worked together, we'll cover each other's weaknesses! We'll be like Lewis and Clark!” Clint said. “Real adventurers!”

“You're asking me to join league with a criminal and a madman,” Cooper said.

Clint glanced around at the gathering crowd of Shoshone. “Unless you have a better idea?”

Cooper shook his head. “It's not right.”

“How do you *know* if you haven't tried it?” Clint asked.

“I've never poked a rattlesnake either!”

“Come on, you have to play to win! Take a leap of faith!”

“Okay, what happens when we find the hole? Then what?”

“Who knows!” Clint laughed out loud and hopped from foot to foot.
“We’re in the wilderness now, John!”
Cooper pulled against his bindings until his face turned red, then fell back and cursed at the top of his lungs.
“Just admit it, you need me!” Clint said.
Cooper noticed that all of the Indians were silently gathered around, watching him and Clint have it out.
“What are they staring at?” Cooper asked.
“They’re waiting for you to make up your mind,” Clint said.

Hugo closed the book. He could hear nothing but his own breathing and he sat in the cool pit with his eyes closed for a long time. Eventually, he heard the crunch of gravel and the jingle of a dog collar. Buster poked his furry head over the lip of the hole and barked. A minute later, Hugo heard more gravel crunching and Guy appeared next to Buster.

“Hey there,” Guy said raising his voice to match the distance between them.

“Hey,” Hugo said. His voice echoed off the walls. “I’m in the pit.”

“I can see that,” Guy said. He found a big block of concrete near the pit to sit on. “Whatcha doing down there?”

“Oh, you know, just... living in the moment. *Existing*. I’m here!” Hugo tossed a pebble against the wall. A straight-piped motorcycle rumbled

past and drowned out what Hugo was trying to say. Once it passed, Guy spoke.

“How long you gonna be ‘existing’ down there?” Guy asked.

“What does it matter?”

“The diner next door stops serving breakfast at ten.”

“What time is it now?” Hugo asked.

“Nine-twenty-six.”

“Okay,” Hugo said. “Hey Guy, I thought about it and... I don’t have a plan. You should just leave me here.”

“So, you’re just going to sit in the pit?”

“Maybe.”

“Forget later, what do you want to do right now?”

“I don’t know!”

“Okay, think of it like this: what’s something you could do that sounds better than moping around a construction site?”

“Uh... easy. I’d rather be drinking white wine on a Brazilian mountainside with my super model wife—*also Brazilian*—while swimming in an infinity pool and trading stocks on a satellite phone.”

“That’s... something,” Guy said.

“Right?” Hugo said.

“But that’s all fantasy if you can’t do anything for it,” Guy said.

“Yeah, so what? I just give up? Call it right here?” Hugo said, waving his arms to the dirt walls. “Leave all my dreams in the pit?”

“It’s not as dramatic as you think,” Guy said.

"I didn't realize I was being too *dramatic*."

"Uh-huh." Guy squinted and looked off toward something Hugo couldn't see from the pit. "Do you want to know a secret?"

"I know what you're going to say but go ahead."

"How do you know what I'm gonna say?"

"Because what could you say that hasn't already been printed on a Hallmark card?" Hugo gave Guy a big fake smile and bared his teeth. "How do you run a marathon? One step at a time! It's not about the journey, it's about the destination! I *get* it."

"You've got some imagination, kid."

"Sorry you're not entertained by my existential crisis."

"Okay, well I'll tell you what. I've been thinking too, and I decided I'm gonna keep on trucking. I'd like to see the Grand Canyon myself," Guy said. "But before I do any of that, I'm going to go inside and get some breakfast before the buffet closes." Guy stood up to leave and Buster jumped to his feet. "If you want some dessert, it's on me."

"Wait, what's the secret?" Hugo asked.

"You'll figure it out."

"Well that's fucking cryptic," Hugo said.

"Nine-thirty-four," Guy said as he walked away.

Buster stayed and looked down in the pit at Hugo.

"Hey buddy," Hugo said.

Buster panted and side-eyed Hugo until Guy whistled, then perked his ears up and trotted away.

Hugo sighed and threw another pebble against the wall, then wondered if the diner had any pies on the menu.